

# KAZAKHSTAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion. The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), part of the Ministry of Religious and Civil Society Affairs (MRCSA), is responsible for religious issues. According to local and international observers, authorities imposed restrictions and heightened scrutiny on so-called “nontraditional” religious groups, including Muslims who practice a version of Islam other than the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and Protestant Christians. Authorities continued to arrest, detain, and imprison members of religious groups, criminalize speech “inciting religious discord,” raid believers’ homes to stop the practice of religious activities by those lacking formal registration with the government, question congregation members about their choice of faith, prosecute individuals for “illegal missionary activity,” and label “nontraditional” religious groups as “destructive sects” in the media. In June, the president signed a strategy document outlining the government’s religion policy for the 2017-20 period, affirming the country’s secular orientation, and stating the government would focus on the prevention of “destructive” religious teachings and tighten control over religious activity. During the year, the MRCSA and police closely monitored all religious activities and proceeded with legal and administrative actions against individuals and groups for actions considered illegal under the law. Such actions included unauthorized gatherings, distribution of unapproved religious materials, involvement of minors in religious services, attendance at unsanctioned religious services, religious school outfits deemed inappropriate in a secular society by the government, and the alleged failures of religious organizations to secure their buildings of worship against potential terrorist attacks. According to the Karaganda Region Department of Internal Affairs, on October 30, authorities detained six members of the banned Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement in Karaganda for the alleged recruitment of members. According to Forum 18 – a Norwegian human rights organization that promotes religious freedom – during the year, authorities brought administrative charges against 279 individuals, religious communities, charities, and companies for attending worship meetings, offering or importing religious literature and pictures, sharing or teaching faith, posting religious material online, praying in an unapproved manner in mosques, bringing a child to a religious meeting, maintaining inadequate security measures at places of worship, or failing to pay earlier fines. Of these, 259 received punishments that included fines, jail terms, bans on religious activity, deportations, and seizure of religious literature. During

the year, the government convicted 23 individuals for practicing their religion. Of these, 20 were Sunni Muslims, two Jehovah's Witnesses, and one Baptist. Authorities incarcerated 20 of these persons, and the remaining three received restricted freedom sentences, under which they lived at home under restrictions. The government fined and/or detained others for several days. In January, authorities arrested two members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Teymur Akhmedov and Asaf Guliyev, in Astana and charged them with incitement of religious discord through conversations with university students. Authorities sentenced Akhmedov to five years' imprisonment and Guliyev to five years' probation after he agreed to testify against Akhmedov. The only Muslim groups able to register were those affiliated with the Sunni Hanafi Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SAMK). The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community remained unable to reregister despite numerous attempts; a 2011 law resulted in the group's deregistration. The government launched at least 22 administrative cases against Muslims for praying in mosques in a manner not in accordance with the state-backed Muslim Board's rules. The MRCSA monitored the internet and blocked 1,500 websites having what authorities deemed as illegal and harmful extremist content. In April and May, several national TV broadcasts ran thematic programs on "destructive sects," among them "destructive" Islamic movements, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientologists.

Negative media coverage and societal discrimination remained concerns for the so-called "nontraditional" religious groups.

The Ambassador and other senior U.S. officials engaged in private and public dialogue with the government to urge respect for religious freedom, both in general and with regard to specific cases, including a regular and recurring dialogue with the MRCSA and CRA. This dialogue included raising concerns over the restrictive effects on religious freedom of the government's implementation of both the religion law and the criminal and administrative codes, especially concerning criminal penalties for peaceful religious speech, praying without registration, and censorship of religious literature. U.S. diplomatic officials visited various houses of worship and maintained contact with a wide range of religious communities and religious freedom advocates. In addition, embassy officials participated in roundtable discussions and speaker series dealing with religious freedom. They underscored the importance freedom of religion plays in countering violent extremism, expressed concern about further restrictions on religious freedom, and encouraged the reform of relevant laws and guidelines so all citizens could conduct peaceful religious activities freely, whether or not they were part of registered religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.5 million (July 2017 estimate). The national census reports approximately 70 percent of the population is Muslim, most of whom adhere to the Sunni Hanafi school. Other Islamic groups include Shafi'i Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and Ahmadi Muslims.

The CRA estimates 26 percent of the population is Christian, the majority of whom are Russian Orthodox, but which also includes Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Christian Scientists.

Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jews, Buddhists, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Bahais, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and Scientologists.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion and belief, as well as for the freedom to decline religious affiliation. These rights may be limited only by laws and only to the extent necessary for protection of the constitutional system, public order, human rights and freedoms, and the health and morality of the population.

The MRCSA is in charge of religious issues for the government, facilitating government and civil society engagement, as well as overseeing religious issues. It implements its responsibilities for religious issues via the CRA.

According to law, the MRCSA is responsible for the formulation and implementation of state policy on religious freedom. It also considers issues of potential violations of the laws on religious activity and extremism. The MRCSA drafts legislation and regulations, conducts analysis of religious materials, and makes decisions on censorship. All religious groups are required to submit all religious materials for approval before dissemination. The MRCSA cooperates with law enforcement to ban religious groups and sanction individuals who violate

the religion law, coordinates actions of local government to regulate religious issues, and provides the official interpretation of the religion law.

Under the constitution, everyone has the right to follow their religious or other convictions, take part in religious activities, and disseminate their beliefs. These rights, however, are in practice limited to “traditional” or registered religious groups. The counterterrorism law requires religious organizations to secure their buildings of worship against potential terrorist attacks; the government may take action against religious organizations for failure to do so. The law states the government shall not interfere with the choice of religious beliefs or affiliation of citizens or residents, unless those beliefs are directed against the country’s constitutional framework, sovereignty, or territorial integrity.

The law prohibits coercion to force a person’s conversion to any religion or to force a person’s participation in a religious group’s activities or in religious rites.

The criminal and administrative codes include additional penalties for unauthorized religious activity, which includes the arrangement of and participation in activities of unregistered religious groups, participation in religious activities outside permitted areas, unlicensed distribution of religious materials or training of clergy, sale of religious literature without government approval or in places not approved by the government, and discussion of religion for the purpose of proselytization without the required missionary registration.

The criminal code prohibits the “incitement of interreligious discord,” which includes “propaganda of exclusivity, superiority, or inferiority of citizens according to their relation to religion [and other] origin.” It also criminalizes the creation and leadership of social institutions that proclaim religious intolerance or exclusivity, which is punishable with imprisonment from three to seven years.

The extremism law, which applies to religious groups and other organizations, gives the government discretion to identify and designate a group as an “extremist organization,” ban a designated group’s activities, and criminalize membership in a banned organization. The law defines “extremism” as the organization and/or commission of acts in pursuit of violent change of the constitutional system; violation of the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the country; undermining national security; violent seizure or retention of power; armed rebellion; incitement of ethnic, religious, or other forms of social discord that are accompanied by calls to violence; or the use of any religious practice that causes a security or health risk. An extremist organization is a “legal entity, association of individuals and (or)

legal entities engaged in extremism, and recognized by the court as extremist.” The law provides streamlined court procedures for identifying a group as “terrorist or extremist,” reducing the time necessary for a court to render and act on a decision to 72 hours. After a legal finding of a violation, the law authorizes officials to revoke immediately the organization’s registration, thus ending its legal existence, and to seize its property. Prosecutors have the right to inspect annually all groups registered with state bodies.

The administrative code prohibits “spreading the creed of religious groups unregistered” in the country, an offense punishable by a fine of 226,900 tenge (\$680). A foreigner or stateless person found guilty may also be deported.

A religious organization may be designated “national,” “regional,” or “local.” In order to register at the local level, religious groups must submit an application to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), listing the names and addresses of at least 50 founding members. Communities may only be active within the geographic limits of the locality in which they register, unless they have sufficient numbers to register at the regional or national level. Regional registration requires at least two local organizations, each located within a different oblast (province), and each local group must have at least 250 members. National registration requires at least 5,000 total members and at least 300 members in each of the country’s 14 oblasts and the cities of Astana and Almaty. Only groups registered at the national or regional level have the right to open educational institutions for training clergy.

The law allows the government to deny registration to religious groups based on an insufficient number of adherents or inconsistencies between the religious group’s charter and any national law, as determined by an analysis conducted by the CRA. According to the administrative code, individuals participating in, leading, or financing an unregistered, suspended, or banned religious group may be fined between 113,450 tenge (\$340) and 453,800 tenge (\$1,400).

The administrative code mandates a 453,800 tenge (\$1,400) fine and a three-month suspension from conducting any religious activities for registered groups holding religious gatherings in buildings that are not approved for that purpose; importing, producing, or disseminating religious materials not approved by the CRA; systemically pursuing activities that contradict the charter and bylaws of the group as registered; constructing religious facilities without a permit; holding gatherings or conducting charity events in violation of the law; or otherwise defying the constitution or laws. Private persons engaged in these activities are subject to a

fine of 113,450 tenge (\$340). Police may impose these fines without first going to court. The fines may be appealed to a court.

If an organization, its leaders, or its members engage in activities not specified in its charter, it is subject to a warning and/or a fine of 226,900 tenge (\$680). Under the administrative code, if the same violation is repeated within a year, the legal entity is subject to a fine of 340,350 tenge (\$1,000) and a three- to six-month suspension of activities.

According to the administrative code, if a religious group engages in a prohibited activity or fails to rectify violations resulting in a suspension, an official or the organization's leader is subject to a fine of 453,800 tenge (\$1,400), the entity is subject to a fine of 1,134,500 tenge (\$3,400), and its activities are banned.

The law prohibits coercive religious activities that harm the health or morality of citizens, residents, force them to end marriages, or family relations, violate human rights and freedoms, or force citizens to evade performance of duties specified in the constitution and legislation. The law prohibits methods of proselytizing that take advantage of a potential convert's dependence on charity. The law also prohibits blackmail, violence or the threat of violence, or the use of material threats to coerce participation in religious activities.

The law states in cases when a prisoner seeks the help of an imam, pastor, or other clergy to perform a religious rite, he or she may invite a clergy member of a formally registered religious group to a detention facility, as long as this access complies with the internal regulations of the prison. The law bans construction of places of worship within prison territory. Pursuant to the law, religious organizations may participate in monitoring prisons, including creating and implementing programs to improve the correctional system and developing and publicly discussing draft laws and regulations as they relate to the prison system. Religious groups may identify, provide, distribute, and monitor the use of humanitarian, social, legal, and charitable assistance to prisoners. They may provide other forms of assistance to penitentiary system bodies, as long as they do not contradict the law. According to the law, prisoners may possess religious literature, but only if approved after a religious expert analysis conducted by the CRA.

The law defines "religious tourism" as a "type of tourism where people travel for performance of religious rites in a country (place) of temporary residence" and

requires the MRCSA to regulate it and oversee the process by which individuals participate in the Hajj.

The law prohibits religious ceremonies in government buildings, including those belonging to the military or law enforcement.

The law states production, publication, and dissemination of religious literature and information materials of religious content is allowed only after receiving a positive expert opinion from the CRA. The law limits to one copy per publication an exemption from expert review for importing religious materials for personal use.

The law states the government shall not interfere with the rights of parents to raise their children consistent with their religious convictions, unless such an upbringing harms the child's health or infringes upon the child's rights.

The law requires organizations to "take steps to prevent involvement or participation of anyone under the age of 18 in the activities of a religious association," if one of the parents or other legal guardians have objections. The law bans religious activities, including proselytizing, in children's holiday, sport, creative or other leisure organizations, camps, or sanatoria. The extent to which organizations must prevent underage persons' involvement in religious activity is not specifically outlined and has not been further defined by authorities.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools, colleges, or universities. Homeschooling for religious reasons is also prohibited. The law allows for after-school and other supplemental religious instruction as long as it is provided by a registered religious group. A decree mandates that schoolchildren wear school uniforms that comply with the secular nature of education and prohibits inclusion of any elements that could indicate religious affiliation, such as head coverings.

The election law prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation.

The criminal code prohibits creating, leading, or actively participating in a religious or public association whose activities involve committing acts of "violence against citizens or the causing of other harm to their health or the incitement of citizens to refuse to carry out their civil obligations, as well as the creation or leadership of parties on a religious basis." The code punishes such acts with a fine of up to 12.7 million tenge (\$38,300) or up to six years' imprisonment.

In order to perform missionary or other religious activity in the country, a foreigner must obtain a missionary or religious visa. These visas allow a person to stay for a maximum of six months with the possibility to apply to extend the stay for another six months. To obtain missionary visas, applicants must be invited by a religious group formally registered in the country. The letter of invitation must be approved by the CRA. Applicants must obtain consent from the CRA each time they apply. The CRA may reject missionary visa applications based on a negative assessment from CRA religious experts, or if it deems the missionaries represent a danger to the country's constitutional framework, citizens' rights and freedoms, or any person's health or morals. The constitution requires foreign religious groups to conduct their activities, including appointing the heads of local congregations, "in coordination with appropriate state institutions," notably the CRA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Foreigners may not register religious groups.

Local and foreign missionaries are required to register annually with the local executive body of an oblast or the cities of Astana and Almaty and provide information on their religious affiliation, intended territory of missionary work, and time period for conducting that work. Missionaries must submit all literature and other materials intended to support their missionary work together with their registration application. Use of materials not vetted during the registration process is illegal. A missionary must produce registration documents and a power of attorney from the sponsoring religious organization in order to work on its behalf. The local executive body of an oblast or the cities of Astana and Almaty may refuse registration to missionaries whose work "constitutes a threat to the constitutional order, social order, the rights, and freedoms of individuals, or the health and morals of the population."

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

*Summary Paragraph:* The government continued punitive actions against members of "nontraditional" faiths, including Muslims who practiced a version of Islam different from the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, and Protestant groups. Authorities continued to arrest, detain, and imprison members of religious groups, criminalize speech "inciting religious discord," raid believers' private homes to stop unregistered religious activities, question congregation members about their choice of faith, punish individuals for "illegal missionary activity," and label "nontraditional" religious groups as "destructive sects" in the media. In June the president signed a strategy document outlining government



religion policy for the 2017-20 period, affirming the country's secular orientation, and stating the government would focus on the prevention of "destructive" religious teachings and tighten control over religious activity.

According to Forum 18, authorities brought administrative charges against 279 individuals, religious communities, charities, and companies during the year for attending worship meetings, offering or importing religious literature and pictures, sharing or teaching faith, posting religious material online, praying in mosques, bringing a child to a religious meeting, maintaining inadequate security measures at places of worship or failing to pay earlier fines. Of these, authorities sanctioned 259 individuals with punishments including fines, jail terms, bans on religious activity, deportations, and religious literature seizures. During the year, authorities convicted 23 individuals for practicing their religion: 20 Sunni Muslims, two Jehovah's Witnesses, and one Baptist. Of these, courts sentenced 20 to prison terms and three to house arrest.

On January 18, authorities arrested two members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Teymur Akhmedov and Asaf Guliyev, in Astana and charged them with incitement of religious discord. The men met with a group of young men who presented themselves as university students and participated in discussions about their faith. The conversations were recorded and later used as evidence against the defendants. Guliyev reached a plea bargain, admitted his involvement, and testified against Akhmedov. On February 24, the court sentenced Guliyev to five years' probation for his cooperation in the case. The 60-year-old Akhmedov, however, refused to admit to wrongdoing. On May 2, a court found him guilty of "incitement of religious discord and propaganda of one faith's superiority over the others" and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment. The court also banned him from any form of religious preaching. On June 20, the Astana city court rejected his appeal.

According to local and international observers such as the NGO Association for Religious Organizations of Kazakhstan (AROK) and Forum 18, the authorities intensified punitive actions against any Muslims who professed forms of Islam different from the officially recognized Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Forum 18 reported that courts convicted 20 Sunni Muslims of such offenses during the first nine months of the year and sentenced 19 to prison terms and one to probation.

Authorities of the Kyrgyz Republic detained Nariman Seitzhanov, a graduate of the Medina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia in December 2016 and deported him to Kazakhstan, where police opened a criminal investigation on charges of incitement of religious discord. According to investigators, Seitzhanov

accompanied Kazakh pilgrims to Mecca in October 2016. His preaching and discussions about Islam were recorded and posted on social media, and authorities used the recordings as evidence against him. On June 9, a court in Kokshetau sentenced him to five years' imprisonment.

According to the Karaganda Region Department of Internal Affairs, on October 30, authorities detained six members of the banned Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement in Karaganda for alleged recruitment of members. Authorities directed three of them to sign a written pledge agreeing to halt recruitment activities and instructed them not to leave the area. Authorities placed the remaining three in a pretrial detention facility.

On May 11, an Almaty district court found Muslim preacher Denis Korzhavin guilty of incitement of religious discord. Korzhavin, an ethnic Russian who converted to Islam, studied in Saudi Arabia. Upon his return to the country in 2011, authorities alleged he engaged in the active dissemination of Salafism. Despite a court ban in 2014 of certain religious books, he posted a Russian translation of the banned "The Three Fundamentals" on social media. Korzhavin reached a plea bargain and the court sentenced him to five years' probation.

In April police arrested Shukhrat Kibirov in Almaty and charged him with incitement of religious discord. According to his attorney, several social media posts with Arabic language religious songs allegedly posted from Kibirov's phone served as grounds for the criminal case. Government religious experts who analyzed the songs said they contained elements of incitement of religious discord. A number of media sources, including Radio Azattyk, Vlast, and Today.kz reported on Kibirov's case. On November 27, a court in Almaty sentenced him to six years and eight months in prison for incitement of religious discord and terrorist propaganda.

On June 28, the president signed a strategy document outlining government religion policy for the 2017-20 period. The document affirmed the country's secular orientation, and stated the government would focus on the prevention of "destructive" religious teachings and tighten government control over religious activity. At an August 28 press briefing, Minister of Religious Affairs and Civil Society Nurlan Yermekbayev stated that the new strategy would strengthen control over "religious propaganda" and expand government oversight of the activities of religious organizations. Government representatives stated the new strategy was driven by security concerns over "religious extremism." The government stated implementation of the new strategy would involve amendments to existing

legislation on religion. The proposed amendments would establish new controls on religious teaching, religious literature, religious speech, and worship. Civil society representatives and religious experts, however, stated they feared the government's efforts to more closely police religious activity would further infringe on religious freedom, including through prohibition of religious symbols and attire and a further crackdown on religious literature.

The Council of Baptist Churches stated it continued to refuse on principle to register under the law. Baptists reported several police raids on adherents' residences and churches during the year. Community representatives reported 55 police incidents involving Baptists during the year, most of which resulted in administrative fines. In January police raided an Almaty pastor's house and allegedly made threats to hold him criminally liable for holding religious services without proper documentation, since his religious community is not registered.

On January 23, police raided a local Baptist community leader's house in Urdzha in the eastern part of the country, videotaped all participants who attended the service, detained several individuals (mainly elderly women), and took them to the police station with the alleged intent to intimidate them. Community members reported police subsequently fined and released the women.

Police charged two members of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians – Baptists Mikhail Milkin and Alexander Ventsel – with illegal dissemination of religious literature in a shopping center in the town of Stepnyak in the Akmola Region. On June 27, the court convicted them of illegal dissemination of religious literature outside of specifically designated places of worship and imposed administrative fines of 108,000 tenge (\$330) on each of them.

In March a court in Uralsk imposed an administrative fine of 108,000 tenge (\$330) on Serkali Kumargaliev of the unregistered Council of Baptist Churches for illegally distributing religious booklets in front of West Kazakhstan State University. The booklets also contained the address where followers of the religious group gathered for prayer services. Some of the students to whom Kumargaliev distributed the booklets allegedly reported him to authorities, who then took action.

In January authorities searched the office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Astana and confiscated approximately 15 books. On October 3, the specialized interdistrict administrative court of Astana initiated a case against Dmitry Bukin, leader of Jehovah's Witnesses in Astana, for possessing nonapproved literature. Following

“expert analysis” by CRA officials of the seized literature, authorities also charged him with incitement of religious discord and superiority of one faith over another. On October 17, the judge dismissed the case.

On April 25, authorities in Yesil detained several members of the Evangelical Baptist Christian Church for singing songs and illegally distributing religious literature at the local cemetery. Police warned the individuals they were violating the law and allegedly made two of them – Victor Leven and Andrei Block – write statements explaining their actions. Authorities also seized copies of the religious books for “expert analysis.” On July 25, a court in Yesil imposed an administrative fine of 108,000 tenge (\$330) on Block for the illegal distribution of religious literature.

On March 4, authorities fined four Muslims in Zhanaozen in the western part of the country for breaking the rules regarding religious services in mosques issued by the SAMK, considered mandatory for all worshipers. Galym Nurpeisov, the attorney for the four men, said that they were punished for saying the word “Amen” aloud, which is banned under the SAMK rules. The court convicted the four men of disrupting religious services and imposed administrative fines of 108,000 tenge (\$330) on each.

Courts continued to fine individuals convicted of illegal missionary activity. According to AROK, local law enforcement continued to interpret and label any religious discussions that took place outside of a registered religious building as “illegal missionary activity,” including invitations to religious services and discussions, especially by “nontraditional” groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and evangelical Christians. During the year, there were 608 missionaries officially registered in the country – 290 Catholic, 105 Russian Orthodox, 42 Mormon, 40 Muslim, 35 New Apostolic Church, 34 Pentecostal Church, 25 Presbyterian Church, 14 Baptist, 7 Seventh Day Adventist, 5 Jehovah’s Witness, 4 Society of Krishna Consciousness, 3 Jewish, 2 Buddhist, and 2 Lutheran – including 491 foreigners and 117 citizens.

In February police detained two Jehovah’s Witnesses, Karlygash Zholomanova and Fariza Iskakova, in Satpayev for talking about their faith to another woman. The women were charged and subsequently found guilty of conducting religious activity without registration as missionaries. On February 27 and March 9, in two separate hearings, the local court imposed fines of 226,900 tenge (\$680) on each.

A court fined a Jehovah's Witness approximately 198,000 tenge (\$600) for illegal missionary activity in the Mangistau Region. The woman was not officially registered as a missionary and was walking through the neighborhood, proselytizing door-to-door.

In June a court in Shakhtinsk fined the leader of the local Jehovah's Witnesses community for failure to prevent the involvement of children in religious services without parental permission. The court imposed an administrative fine of approximately 108,000 tenge (\$330).

Jehovah's Witnesses held a large convention in Almaty June 23-25, which drew nearly 4,500 participants from a number of countries. Although the convention was able to proceed, there were some reports of police delaying some attendees en route to the convention on the first two days.

On October 3, the Astana specialized interdistrict administrative court began a hearing on Oleg Bondarenko, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor charged with failure to prevent the involvement of a minor in the group's religious activities over a parent's objection. According to Radio Azattyk, Aizhan Abzhanova submitted a complaint to the local authorities that her husband took their son Medet to the Seventh-day Adventist church without her permission – she said the father tried to convert the child to Christianity. The husband stated that he attended the church only twice and did so out of curiosity. Bondarenko explained to the court that he did not know the Abzhanovs and thus could not take any actions with regard to their family or child. He further stated that the church services were open to anyone, including those who attended simply out of curiosity once or twice. On October 18, the administrative court in Astana dismissed the case against Bondarenko.

The government launched at least 22 administrative cases against Muslims for praying in mosques in a manner not in accordance with the state-backed Muslim Board's rules. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community remained unregistered, after authorities denied the group reregistration in 2016, when CRA experts concluded the community's teaching was not Islamic and needed to remove the word "Muslim" from its registration materials. Community members reported that, due to lack of registration, they had to cease all official religious activity but pledged to continue efforts to obtain reregistration.

The Church of Scientology continued to function as a registered public association rather than as a religious organization. The government allowed the church, as a

public association, to maintain resource centers/libraries where members may read or borrow books and host discussions or meetings, but did not allow the church to engage in religious activity.

Government-controlled media continued to depict “nontraditional” religions as disruptive to society. In April and May, several national TV broadcasts ran thematic programs on “destructive sects,” among them Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists. In an April 30 “Portrait of the Week” program hosted by Artur Platonov on private broadcaster KTK, a segment from then-acting CRA chairman Bakhytzhon Kulekeyev discussed an alleged “26 complaints against Jehovah’s Witnesses” received by the CRA from ordinary concerned citizens. In an April 30 “Analytics” news show on 1st Channel “Eurasia,” the program addressed multiple complaints the CRA allegedly received from citizens about Jehovah’s Witnesses. A May 12 talk show on “Eurasia” devoted 40 minutes to “destructive sects,” concentrating mainly on “destructive Islamic movements” and Scientology. Another May 12 talk show on “Khabar” included a similar 40-minute program concentrating on Jehovah’s Witnesses, in which Yulia Denisenko, the head of the government-affiliated Association of Centers for Religious Studies, made a number of accusations against Jehovah’s Witnesses.

According to reports, the government continued to recognize as legitimate and legal only those mosques registered with the SAMK. The MRCSA and the SAMK maintained an official agreement on cooperation, and NGOs noted this led to the government effectively exercising control over the nominally independent SAMK. By joining the SAMK, Muslim communities relinquished the right to appoint their own imams, subjected themselves to SAMK approval over any property actions (such as sales, transfers, or improvements), and were required to pay 30 percent of the mosque’s income to the SAMK.

According to the CRA, there were 3,692 registered religious associations or branches thereof in the country during the year, compared to 3,636 in 2016. The SAMK continued to control the activities of all 2,591 formally registered Muslim groups affiliated with the Sunni Hanafi school and had authority over construction of new mosques, appointment of imams, and administration of examinations and background checks for aspiring imams. The SAMK was responsible for authorizing travel agencies to provide Hajj travel services to citizens. According to the SAMK, Saudi Arabian authorities allocated a quota of 2,500 spots for the Hajj, and 2,450 pilgrims made the Hajj. The MRCSA worked closely with the SAMK on the training of imams, upgrading madrasahs to the status of degree-granting colleges, and controlling Hajj pilgrimages. The SAMK permitted imams to enroll

in baccalaureate, Masters, or PhD programs offered at Nur Mubarak University's Islamic Studies and Religious Studies departments based on their prior education levels. Overall, sources reported that the MRCSA supported 11 schools for Sunni Hanafi imams, one school for Roman Catholic clergy, and one school for Russian Orthodox clergy.

The Ministry of Education continued enforcement of its ban on headscarves in schools. On September 9, the Atyrau regional department of education reported a significant increase in the number of schoolgirls wearing hijabs to school compared to the previous year. Media also reported a number of incidents in other regions and school districts in which school administrators and local authorities sent girls home because they refused to take off their headscarves. Several parents who supported their daughters wearing headscarves stated local authorities pressured them to remove the headscarves or risk large fines and possible termination of parental rights.

MRCSA Minister Yermekbayev stated the ministry trained and guided teams of religious experts and clergymen to work with individuals they said were vulnerable to radical religious teachings. According to Yermekbayev, the government facilitated the "conversion" of approximately 300 individuals back to more "traditional" forms of faith.

MRCSA officials continued to monitor the internet, collecting information on internet sites with "destructive" content, applying expedited procedures for the evaluation of such materials by religious experts, and obtaining court authorizations for immediate closures of internet sites it deemed unacceptable. During the first seven months of the year, the MRCSA examined 3,000 websites and blocked 1,500 for containing what it concluded was illegal and harmful information. The MRCSA also worked with the Ministry of Information and Communication to identify which individuals posted the content in question.

The MRCSA and other authorities regularly inspected religious facilities to review compliance with security requirements as mandated by the counterterrorism law. Several religious groups said they considered this harassment. On January 24, the Almaty interdistrict specialized court ruled the Christian Center of Jehovah's Witnesses violated the requirements of the counterterrorism law on securing its premises and imposed an administrative fine of 453,800 tenge (\$1,400). On June 5, local authorities executed a follow-up inspection and found the center still failed to comply with security requirements. On June 29, the court issued more

severe penalties, imposing an administrative fine of 680,700 tenge (\$2,100) and a three-month suspension of the center's activities.

In September local authorities in Astana conducted a surprise inspection of the grounds of Grace Presbyterian Church, and found violations related to the antiterrorism law. On October 18, an Astana court imposed an administrative fine of 429,000 tenge (\$1,300) on the church for failure to abide by the technical requirements of the antiterrorism law: lack of approval for its antiterrorist plan; lack of training for staff; and failure to maintain surveillance camera records as required by the law.

An AROK representative said the government continued to seek to control religious expression and proselytizing in what the organization said were efforts to counter Islamic radicalism.

In June the minister of internal affairs issued an order adding a position of "religious specialist" to prison staff as part of the State Program for Counteraction against Terrorism and Religious Extremism. According to the Penitentiary Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the new staff would work with prisoners to prevent their radicalization.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to the Association of Centers for Religious Studies in Astana, a growing number of individuals made complaints on its hotline against Jehovah's Witnesses, especially after the Russian government banned the group in the spring. Complainants reportedly requested the country also adopt such a ban.

Several media outlets published articles about a female Jehovah's Witness who refused a blood transfusion for her four-year-old daughter because of her faith. The girl, who suffered from liver cancer, died on July 16. The articles quoted an official of the National Maternity and Children's Center who blamed the mother for the girl's death and accused Jehovah's Witnesses representatives of pressuring doctors to replace blood transfusions with less effective alternatives.

NGOs continued to report individuals were wary of "nontraditional" religious groups, particularly those that proselytized or whose dress indicated "nontraditional" beliefs.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**



The U.S. Ambassador, other senior U.S. government officials, and embassy officers met with senior government officials in the MFA, the MRCSA, and the CRA, and advocated the importance of respecting religious freedom, underscoring that bilateral cooperation on economic and security issues was a complement to, not a substitute for, meaningful progress on religious freedom. In a regular and recurring dialogue with the ministry and CRA, U.S. officials raised concerns over the restrictive effects of the government's implementation of the religion law and criminal and administrative codes on religious freedom. They also raised concerns about the inconsistent application of the religion law and the criminal and administrative codes with regard to "nontraditional" versus "traditional" religious groups.

U.S. officials continued to encourage the government to respect individuals' rights to peaceful expression of religious belief and practice. They expressed concern about vaguely written laws that were broad in scope and lacked specific definition of legal terms, enabling authorities, particularly at the local level, to apply them in an arbitrary manner. They also stated that any amendments to the law on religions must not constrain the ability of believers to practice their faith. They underscored the importance freedom of religion plays in countering violent extremism and expressed concern about further restrictions on religious freedom. The Ambassador and other U.S. officials met with the MRSCA to reiterate the importance of enabling all citizens to worship freely, regardless of registration status.

U.S. diplomatic officials visited houses of worship in several regions of the country and maintained contact with a wide range of religious communities, their leaders, and religious freedom advocates. In addition, embassy officials participated in roundtable discussions and speaker series dealing with religious freedom. They underscored the importance freedom of religion plays in countering violent extremism, expressed concern about further restrictions on religious freedom, and encouraged reform of relevant laws and guidelines so all citizens could conduct peaceful religious activities freely, whether or not they are part of registered religious groups.