

UZBEKISTAN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. A religious freedom “roadmap” approved by parliament in 2018 to implement all 12 of the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur on Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed simplified rules for registering religious organizations and their reporting requirements, but the underlying law on religion continued to make it difficult for groups to register, according to religious groups. The government announced it released or reduced the sentences of 575 prisoners charged with religious extremism or related crimes during the year; however, some nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives said the government continued torture of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or of participating in underground Islamic activity. The government did not provide the number of individuals arrested during the year and how many were in custody at year’s end. The government registered eight churches; according to religious groups, there were 20 known churches that still wished to register. According to religious groups, there were no police raids of unregistered religious group meetings during the year, compared with 114 in 2018 and 240 in 2017. Members of religious groups whose registration applications the government denied remained unable to practice their religious beliefs without risking criminal prosecution. According to media reports, public controversy over government policies on beards and the wearing of hijabs continued, including reports of police forcibly shaving the beards of men in Tashkent. The Ministry of Education maintained a dress code prohibiting the wearing of religious garments and symbols, such as skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs in schools. In reaction to social media outcry following the expulsion of two female university students wearing hijabs, in April the government agreed to allow female students to wear headscarves in the traditional Uzbek *ikat* style with a knot tied behind their heads. Police detained two bloggers who called for the government to allow girls to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to attend mosques, although reportedly other bloggers who criticized the government faced no backlash. According to press reports, the Tashkent District Department of Public Education continued to instruct educators to schedule school activities on Fridays to prevent the release of pupils for prayers. According to Roman Catholic leaders, the government allowed the Church to hold a summer camp for Catholic youth in the Fergana Valley, and Church leaders noted that surveillance of Catholic masses had stopped. Media reported the government continued to block access to some websites containing religious content, including Christian and Islamic-related news. The government

published a list of illegal websites it stated were linked to Islamic extremist activity. According to the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, it remained difficult for some individuals to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts or bribery, and religious authorities continued generally to limit access to the Hajj to persons older than age 45. Other sources, including religious activists, reported no difficulties in going on the Hajj and said there were no age limits. The government maintained a consultative body – the Council of Faiths – as a platform for discussing issues with 16 recognized religious groups. In an October report for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Jehovah’s Witnesses stated, “After many years of religious freedom violations and outright persecution, the Government of Uzbekistan has recently made significant progress in improving its treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses.” The report cited the cessation of police raids, permission granted to a Jehovah’s Witnesses delegation to travel from the United States to Uzbekistan, and permission to conduct a “memorial service of the death of Jesus Christ” in rented premises in Fergana, Karshi, and Urgench.

NGOs and private persons continued to report social pressure – but not government harassment – on individuals, particularly among the members of the majority Muslim population, against religious conversion. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity reportedly suffered continued harassment and discrimination, including family pressure to repudiate their new faith. Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, said they continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination. Some religious minorities said social stigma for conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials, forcing them to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or to conduct funerals with Islamic religious rites.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with senior government officials to raise concerns about imprisonment and mistreatment of individuals for their religious beliefs, bureaucratic impediments to the registration of religious minority groups, and allowing children to participate in religious activities. Embassy officials continued to urge the government to ensure that changes to the draft law on religion should follow the recommendations of international experts as well as take into account public views. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom held a series of engagements with senior government officials, raising the status of the country’s draft religion law and the registration of religious organizations and places of worship, as well as the need for the government to allow children to participate in religious activities and

release individuals charged and detained for exercising their faith peacefully. In July he met with Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and again on the margins of the UN General Assembly High-Levels Week in September. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials met frequently with representatives of both registered and unregistered religious groups, including with religious minorities. Embassy officials also routinely met with religious groups, human rights activists, and other civil society representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics included problems associated with the registration of minority religious groups, the issue of religious education for children, and concerns about the wearing of hijabs and beards for Muslims.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State renewed Uzbekistan's place on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 93-94 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi school. The government states approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari school, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 3.5 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, according to reports, and statistics suggest this number continues to decline with ethnic Russian and other Orthodox emigration. The government states the remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. According to members of the Jewish community, the population, a mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic (Bukharian) Jews, numbers fewer than 10,000. Of those, approximately 6,000 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharian Jews, are concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley. The Jewish population continues to decline because of emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. According to the constitution, these rights may not encroach on lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society. The law allows for restricting religious activities when necessary to maintain national security, the social order, or morality. The constitution establishes a secular framework providing for noninterference by the state in the affairs of religious communities, separates the state and religion from each other, and prohibits political parties based on religious principles.

The law on religion details the scope of and limitations on the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities.

Various provisions of the law on countering violent extremism deal with individuals' security, protection of society and the state, preservation of constitutional order and the territorial integrity of the country, keeping peace, and multiethnic and multireligious harmony. The law provides a framework of basic concepts, principles, and directions for countering extremism as well as extremist activities. By law, extremism is defined as the "expression of extreme forms of actions, focused on destabilizing social and political situations, a violent change in the constitutional order in Uzbekistan, a violent seizure of power and usurping its authority, inciting national, ethnic or religious hatred."

According to regulations, a website or blog may be blocked for: calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order and territorial integrity of the country; spreading ideas of war, violence, and terrorism, as well as religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; disclosing information that is a state secret or protected by law; or disseminating information that could lead to national, ethnic, or religious enmity or involves pornography or promoting narcotic usage. According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the government may block websites or blogs without a court order.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. The criminal code distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are unregistered groups, and "prohibited" groups viewed as "extremist." It criminalizes membership in organizations banned as terrorist groups. It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four to eight

million som (\$420-\$840) to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. The law also specifically prohibits persuading others to join illegal religious groups, with penalties of up to three years in prison. The criminal code provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. Charges against alleged members of religious extremist groups may include the stated offenses of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and terrorism.

By law, all religious groups must register with the MOJ. The law states a religious group may carry out its activities only after the MOJ registers it. The law lists a series of requirements, including having a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units for central registration; presenting a membership list of at least 100 citizens ages 18 years or older belonging to the group; and providing a charter with a legal, physical address to the local MOJ branch.

Religious groups applying to register in a specific locality require the concurrence of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), which reports to the Cabinet of Ministers, and the neighborhood (*mahalla*) committee. They must submit "letters of guarantee" from the regional branches of the Ministry of Construction, the State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service, and the Department of the State Fire Safety Service under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The law requires notarized documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith, the group's sources of income, and CRA concurrence to register. The law also requires that local governments (*khokimiyats*) concur with the registration of groups in their areas and that the group presents notification from *khokimiyat* authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements, including obtaining authorization certificates from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and locally selected *mahalla* committees. After checking the submitted certificates, *khokimiyats* grant registration permission and then send the documents to the CRA for review. By law, the MOJ may take one to three months to review a registration application. The MOJ may approve or deny the registration or cease review without issuing a decision.

The law states registered religious groups may expand throughout the country and have appropriate buildings, organize religious teaching, and possess religious literature.

The law limits the operations of a registered group to those areas where it is registered. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy. Individual clergy members receive accreditation from the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan.

The CRA oversees registered religious activity. The Council for Confessions, under the CRA, includes ex-officio representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups. It discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion.

The government must approve religious activities outside of formal worship, as well as religious activities intended for children younger than age 16 without parental permission.

The law requires registered religious organizations to inform authorities 30 days in advance of holding religious meetings and other religious ceremonies at the group's registered address(es). The administrative code requires all registered religious organizations to seek permission from local authorities and then inform the CRA and MOJ representative 30 days before holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies to occur outside of a group's registered building(s), including those activities involving foreign individuals or worshippers from another region. Unregistered groups are prohibited from organizing any religious activity.

The law punishes private entities for leasing premises or other property to, or facilitating gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations of religious groups without state permission. The law also criminalizes unauthorized facilitation of children's and youth meetings, as well as literary and other study groups related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 9,215,000 to 18,430,000 som (\$970-\$1,900) or up to 15 days' imprisonment.

Under the law, state bodies, including *mahalla* committees, as well as nonstate and noncommercial public organizations, have wide ranging powers to combat suspected "antisocial activity" in cooperation with police. These powers include preventing the activity of unregistered religious organizations, ensuring observance of rights of citizens to religious freedom, prohibiting propagation of religious views, and considering other questions related to observance of the law.

The law prohibits all individuals, except clergy and individuals serving in leadership positions of officially recognized religious organizations, from wearing religious attire in public places. The government does not generally enforce this section of law; individuals may appear in public places in religious attire, with the exception of schools at all levels, both public and private.

The law prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities. The criminal code punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison and proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without parental permission.

The law requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute religious materials. The law requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications. Such materials include books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, leaflets, audiovisual items including CDs and DVDs, and materials posted to the internet describing the origins, history, ideology, teachings, commentaries, and rituals of various religions of the world.

The administrative code punishes “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20-100 times the minimum monthly wage (3,686,000 to 18,430,000 som – \$390-\$1,900) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage (9,215,000 som to 27,645,000 som – \$970-\$2,900). The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” Courts issue fines under the administrative code. In instances where an individual is unable to pay the fine, courts will issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (18,430,000 to 36,860,000 som – \$1,900-\$3,900) or “corrective labor” of up to three years for individuals who commit these acts subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code. In practice, criminal code violations for religious literature are rarely applied.

The state forbids banned “extremist religious groups” from distributing any type of publications. Individuals who distribute leaflets or literature deemed extremist via social networks are subject to criminal prosecution and face prison terms ranging from five to 20 years. According to the law, individuals in possession of literature by authors the government deems to be extremist, or of any literature illegally imported or produced, are subject to arrest and prosecution.

The law provides for a commission, entitled The Special Commission for Preparation of Materials on Clemency, to review the prison profiles of convicts sentenced on charges of religious extremism. Another commission, The Commission on Clemency, reviews the petitions of persons who “mistakenly became members of banned organizations.” This commission may exonerate citizens from all criminal liability. Citizens are exempted from criminal liability if they had not undergone military training, did not participate in terrorism financing, or did not distribute information promoting terrorism.

The law prohibits private teaching of religion. It limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. Children may not receive optional religious education in public schools, except for some classes providing basic information on world religions or “lessons of enlightenment” (the study of national culture) in the curriculum.

Religious education establishments acquire the right to operate after registering with the MOJ and receiving the appropriate license. Individuals teaching religious subjects at religious educational establishments must have a religious education recognized by the state and authorization to teach. These provisions make it illegal for laypersons to teach others any form of religion, or for government-approved religious instructors to teach others outside the confines of an approved educational institution.

The law permits only religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel and conduct religious instruction. Nine madrassahs, including one for women, and a Russian Orthodox and a Protestant seminary have official approval to train religious personnel and provide secondary education. The Cabinet of Ministers considers madrassah-granted diplomas equivalent to other diplomas, enabling madrassah graduates to continue to university-level education.

The law requires imams to have graduated from a recognized religious education facility and registered for a license with the government. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan assigns a graduate to a particular mosque as a deputy imam before he may subsequently become an imam. According to government officials, clerics from various religious groups who obtained their qualifications abroad may officiate within licensed premises.

The law allows individuals objecting to military service based on their religious beliefs to perform alternative civilian service.

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

Government Practices

Some NGO representatives said the government continued torture of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of “religious extremism” or of participating in underground Islamic activity. According to Forum 18, on April 17, authorities tortured Khayrullo Tursunov, a Muslim prisoner at a labor camp in Bukhara Region. The government extradited Tursunov from Kazakhstan in 2013 and sentenced him to 16 years for meeting with other Muslims and engaging in religious activities without state permission. A relative told Forum 18 that authorities beat Tursunov and pressured him to sign statements against his distant relative, Kadyr Yusupov, in exile since 2006 after the government charged him with attending a Turkish-run school and being active in mosques. A relative also told Forum 18 that officials threatened to extend Tursunov’s sentence unless he signed the prepared statements, but Tursunov did not sign. According to Forum 18, authorities refused to grant Tursunov’s relatives’ permission to visit during the year.

Civil society groups continued to express concern that the law’s definition of extremism remained too broad and failed to distinguish between nonviolent religious beliefs and ideologies supporting violence.

The government did not provide information regarding the number of persons convicted of engaging in terrorist and extremist activities, or those belonging to what the government called religious fundamentalist organizations, who were serving sentences in the country’s detention facilities. In 2018, the most recent year for which the government provided information, 1,503 prisoners remained in detention for these crimes. NGO representatives said they could not independently verify these numbers.

In June President Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced he had granted amnesty or reduced the sentences of 575 prisoners charged with religious extremism or related crimes. The release was timed to coincide with the end of Ramadan. Of the 575 prisoners, 361 were released outright and 214 had their sentences shortened. Government representatives said those released had signed a document admitting they had been “misled” by false teachings of Islam. A presidential directive instructed local administrations to refurbish the housing of released prisoners and assist with other material needs in order to begin their reintegration into society.

On October 24, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced it had arrested several members of the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir in the Andijon, Namangan, and Fergana Regions. The ministry did not say how many persons were arrested but stated many of them had been previously convicted of participating in the group's activities and were continuing to spread "extremist" ideas. The ministry said it seized literature containing extremist language and initiated a criminal investigation. In its statement, the ministry urged citizens, especially young persons, "to avoid breaking the law, not to be exposed to destructive ideas, and not to store or distribute materials that pose a threat to public order."

Early in the year, police detained two bloggers who had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls to allow women to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to pray in mosques. According to Forum 18, on April 8, a Tashkent court sentenced one of them, Muslim activist Tulkun Astanov, to 15 days in prison for criticizing the country's lack of religious freedom at a meeting with the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Human rights defender Rukhiddin Komilov told Forum 18 that this was "usual procedure – the state puts defendants in custody to keep them under pressure to cooperate and it is easier to fabricate criminal cases this way." The July 25 indictment stated, "Extremist materials belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization were found on the mobile phone seized from Astanov during questioning." Astanov told Forum 18 on October 4 that "the only allegedly extremist thing the investigators could find" in his materials was the "miniscule flag of Hizb ut-Tahrir" in a Facebook video he shared. On October 9, according to Forum 18, the state prosecutor requested that Astanov receive a five-year suspended sentence. The case continued at year's end.

Other Islamic bloggers operated websites and social media platforms without hindrance. Popular blogger Adham Atajanov (who goes by the pen name "Abu Muslim") operates the website "Islamonline.uz" and has a Facebook page with almost 24,000 followers. Atajanov said he frequently criticized government policies on religious issues and faced no repercussions or backlash. Other Islamic media platforms that remained active without government interference included a private, well-known Muslim streaming channel on YouTube called "Azon.tv." which has 162,000 subscribers, the private Azon Facebook page (with almost 54,000 followers), and the privately owned radio channel "Azon.fm."

In March the MOJ published a list for the first time of prohibited organizations and online resources judged by the country's Supreme Court as promoting "religious extremism." The MOJ stated it found dozens of internet sites, online information profiles, channels, and pages on social networks, including Facebook, YouTube,

and Telegram, to include extremist or terrorist materials. The list contained 40 names of internet sources and social network sites, such as “Lovers of Paradise,” “Information of Freedom,” “Excerpts from the Lesson,” and “Turkiston.”

The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as “extremist” and criminalized membership in such groups, which include 22 religious organizations. The government did not provide a list of the religious organizations it deemed extremist. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not a matter of religious freedom, but rather a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and the incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

According to some Muslims, the ban on private religious instruction continued to result in the government detaining and fining members of religious communities for “illegally teaching one’s religion to another.” They said the ban included meetings of persons gathered to discuss their faith or to exchange religious ideas. Some Muslims said religious discussions continued to be considered taboo because no one wanted to risk punishment for “proselytism” or teaching religious principles in private.

The government continued to restrict access to some websites. In September the Jehovah’s Witnesses said their website was blocked from time to time.

According to local media, on August 23, police detained more than 100 men near one of the biggest mosques in Tashkent and transported them to a local police station, where they forced them to shave their beards. Following criticism on social media, the Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed that beard shaving took place but denied it was forced. According to media accounts, the authorities stated it was “clearly a security issue, not a religious one. Some men were just asked to ensure that they look like the photograph page of their passports, as the passport pictures are included into the databases of smart surveillance city cameras.”

In September residents of Urgench reported worship services of an unregistered Baptist church to local police. According to the pastor, a police officer arrived, apologized for the intrusion, and told the pastor that he was required to investigate all complaints. After five minutes speaking with the pastor, the officer left. The pastor said he was later required to go to the police station to fill out paperwork closing the case. He also spoke with the local *mahalla* committee about his church but noted that the *mahalla* officials were polite and the interaction was nonconfrontational. According to the pastor, and contrary to a report by a religious

freedom group stating raids occurred on the church in question, there were no raids and no other visits by police to his church through the rest of the year.

Many religious group representatives continued to report they were unable to meet the government's registration requirements, especially the need for a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units to acquire central registration and the need for application by 100 members for registration in a specific locality. They said their inability to register made them subject to harassment by local authorities and criminal sanction for engaging in "illegal" religious activities.

As in previous years, the MOJ continued to explain denials of registration by citing failures of religious groups to report a valid legal address or to obtain guarantee letters and necessary permits from all local authorities. Some groups stated they did not have addresses because they continued to be reluctant to purchase property without assurance the government would approve their registration application. Other groups stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. In response, some groups reported providing congregation membership lists with only Russian-sounding surnames.

According to religious groups, many churches again attempted to register but remained unregistered at year's end. In Tashkent, these included the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall, Ahli Kitob Church (formerly known as Uyushma), "Agape" Church, Pentecostal Salt of the Earth Church, Pentecostal Life Water Church, and Pentecostal Source of Life Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls in Urgench, Fergana, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kungrad, Nukus, and Karshi. The Pentecostal Full Gospel churches in the cities of Kungrad and Chimbay remained unregistered. In the Sirdarya Region, the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church remained unregistered.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also stated that because the government considered illegal any religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses outside of the one registered religious building in Chirchiq, the group remained potential targets for harassment and mistreatment, although they stated no raids occurred during the year. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said the group had repeatedly attempted to register in seven districts of the country, but the government had rejected their application at the *mahalla* level, the first step in the registration process. In addition to attempting registration in the seven regions, Jehovah's Witnesses members filed an application to register a branch of the U.S.-based Christian

Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses yearly report, however, the MOJ denied the application for registration on March 4 and again on March 18, after the Jehovah's Witnesses resubmitted their application. Subsequently, the Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint before the Administrative Court of Tashkent, and on July 4, the court dismissed the complaint, stating the case was out of its jurisdiction. The Jehovah's Witnesses subsequently filed a cessation appeal, which was pending consideration at year's end. On March 11, the Jehovah's Witnesses filed an appeal regarding the same case before the National Human Rights Center. On July 22, the center responded, stating the issue was not within its purview and recommending the Jehovah's Witnesses appeal to the Constitutional Court.

The Ministry of Education maintained a dress code regulating the length of hair and dress, the color of uniforms, and the type of shoes for all pupils in both public and private schools. The government continued to forbid any religious symbols, including skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs. Reportedly, one private school for girls, however, allowed students to wear hijabs.

In September news media released an audio recording of a Tashkent district education department meeting in which officials ordered school administrators to stop female students from wearing hijabs on school premises. An official also demanded photographic evidence of the teachers standing on duty every morning, ready to remove hijabs, and the department urged school directors to assign female teachers to this task. These practices angered some parents and family members and led to at least one case of violence. Media reported the husband of a teacher in Andijon physically assaulted an acting school director and a staff member with a baseball bat after they advised his wife not to wear a headscarf at work.

In March a Tashkent appeals court upheld a lower court decision allowing the Tashkent-based and government-funded International Islamic Academy to maintain a ban on religious attire in its dress code. Former student Nazimakhon Abdukakharova had filed a lawsuit in February against the school, stating her rights were violated after she was dismissed for wearing a hijab to class. After the court ruled against Abdukakharova in the first instance, the appeals court said the academy was within its constitutional rights to bar religious clothing in secular public institutions. In May the Supreme Court heard the case but in June dismissed Abdukakharova's claims, stating that the school had the right to choose a policy regarding school uniforms. Activists said that while many local Muslims expected this court decision, they considered it further proof that state policy continued to restrict the rights of Muslims. Other Muslims, however, supported the policies,

especially the ban on wearing hijabs in schools and universities. According to one media report, a student of Tashkent State University stated she “cannot understand why people need to show external signs of their faith,” adding “we must remember that we live in a secular state with its rules and regulations.”

In April the Supreme Court heard the appeal of Luiza Muminjanova regarding her expulsion from the International Islamic Academy for wearing a hijab to classes. On May 22, the Supreme Court dismissed Muminjanova’s claims. Human rights activists said the intense public outcry surrounding the court cases – in the form of social media debate – likely prompted the state advisor to the president to issue oral guidance to the International Islamic Academy in April, in which he instructed that female students were permitted to wear headscarves in the traditional Uzbek *ikat* style with a knot tied behind their heads. He stated that the *ikat* style headscarf was more representative of national traditions than denoting religious observance. The instruction followed a meeting between President Mirziyoyev and religious leaders and clergy in Bukhara, focusing on the need to resolve disputes between practicing and nonpracticing Muslims and to reach consensus on the issue of Islamic female dress in educational institutions. The ban on hijabs remained in effect through year’s end.

According to media, women and girls in hijabs were subject to strict checks at airports. On October 24, a source told media that “passport control officers photographed only women and girls in a Muslim shawl, the remaining passengers passed without problems.” Employees of the Tashkent International Airport and Bukhara International Airport confirmed these checks occurred. An employee of the Bukhara International Airport stated the officers “check not only arriving, but also departing passengers in a scarf.” According to media, the father of a young woman who had undergone a thorough check and was forced to take a picture without a headscarf called this process “baseless paranoia.” The father said his daughter had a biometric passport containing all data “necessary for these examiners.” An airport official told media that only local citizens were subjected to these checks, stating, “No one says anything to Turkish women or Arab women in a Muslim shawl.”

Media reported that in September Shukhrat Ganiev, the governor of Fergana Region, was recorded while giving a speech to colleagues about the wearing of hijabs and growing long beards. Media obtained the recording and quoted the governor stating, “Remember this, dear governors: if I see a woman in such clothing in your official meetings – I don’t care if she’s a neighborhood chief, a teacher, a businesswoman, an activist, a lawmaker – I’ll remove her headscarf and

shove it in your mouth!” Ganiev was also heard on the recording speaking about men with “ugly beards” in public places, repeatedly raising his voice, and cursing. During its September 30 session, the national senate issued a letter of reprimand to the governor, who is also a member of the senate, for these remarks.

Muslim activists reported that the Muftiat dismissed Imam Murod Kabirov of the Minor Mosque in Tashkent (also known as the White Mosque) for teaching the Quran in an “underground madrassah” in Tashkent. They said that as part of a sting operation to shut down illegal private religious schools (popularly known as *hujras*), police discovered Kabirov teaching recitations from the Quran to 10 students. Subsequently, the Tashkent Islamic Institute, where Kabirov had worked for two years, did not renew his teaching contract for the 2019-20 academic year. According to human rights activists, during the summer months, Muslim parents tried to immerse their children in Islamic study, sending them to mosques and/or private religious schools. They said the country, however, had only 12 accredited Islamic learning institutions in which to legally study Islam; these schools typically received 20-30 applications for every available seat. Activists believed parents sought out Kabirov to teach the Quran to their children because of his role as an official cleric and religious educator.

At the end of the school year in May, media reported the administrative offices of some schools required parents to sign a letter stating their children would not go to mosques during summer vacation – such a letter was a common practice during the time of former president Karimov. On May 22, the Ministry of Public Education released an official statement that it did not require any such letters to be signed by parents, but rather, this was an initiative of the administrations of some schools. The ministry asked the public to report such cases via the ministry’s helpline.

A religious freedom “roadmap” approved by parliament in 2018 to implement all 12 of the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Shaheed simplified rules for registering religious organizations and their reporting requirements, but the underlying law on religion continued to make it difficult for groups to register, according to religious freedom activists. The government began drafting an update to the law on religion and allowed for comment by international experts and organizations. In June the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University released an analysis of the draft law, stating that while the draft provided some protections, it also allowed the government to maintain strict and excessive control over religion and religious freedom. The analysis highlighted areas of concern including the mandatory registration of religious activity and religious organizations;

unnecessary requirements for registration; establishment of forms of censorship on religious materials and bans on religious expression; excessive discretion by government officials that would allow for discrimination; and, interference with a religious organization's right to autonomy.

According to the CRA and Muslim religious leaders, the government continued to review the content of imams' sermons as well as the volume and substance of Islamic materials published by the Muftiate. Religious leaders said the government ensured its control over the Muftiate through the CRA by selecting the Muftiate's staff and circulating approved sermons for prayer services. The government did not legally limit the volume of public calls to prayer, although many mosques voluntarily did so, according to media sources.

In July Foreign Minister Kamilov announced that since 2016, more than 20,000 prisoners convicted on religious grounds were removed from a watch list containing the names of those convicted for religious crimes or crimes against the government. Previously, authorities compelled individuals on the watch list to submit to police for regular interrogation, denied issuance of passports and travel visas, and, in some cases, prohibited the purchase and use of smartphones. Religious freedom activists confirmed the government was no longer using the watch list.

The national government stated it did not review *mahalla* committee decisions and activities related to regulation or status of religion, including local registration decisions.

According to the CRA, by year's end the country had 2,280 registered religious organizations representing 16 different faiths compared with 2,260 registered religious organizations and 16 faiths in 2018. Muslim religious groups operated 2,065 Sunni mosques, compared with 2,052 in 2018; four Shia mosques, 15 muftiates, and 12 educational institutes. The 184 non-Muslim groups registered included 38 Orthodox churches (up from 36 in 2018), five Catholic churches, 56 Pentecostal churches (50 in 2018), 24 Baptist churches (22 in 2018), nine Seventh-day Adventist churches, three New Apostol churches, two Lutheran churches, one Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, one Voice of God church, 27 Korean Protestant churches, two Armenian churches, eight Jewish communities, six Baha'i centers, one Hari Krishna temple, and one Buddhist temple. There was also a registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

During the year, the government registered eight churches: the Sun Bogim Pentecostal Church in Bekabad, Tashkent Region, on January 9; a Baptist church in Khorezm Region, on January 9; Vozrojdenie Pentecostal Church in Kokand on July 12; Logos Pentecostal Church in Tashkent on August 20; Vozrojdenie Pentecostal Church in Navoi on September 27; a Baptist church in Gulistan, Sirdarya Region, on September 27; the Vera Pentecostal Church in Samarkand on September 30; and the Pentecostal “House of Bread” Church in Jizzakh Region, on December 30.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that, despite continued efforts to engage with the government, they had no success in registering new congregations, even though their numbers were growing. At year’s end, they had only one registered site in Chirchik, which they stated did not adequately meet their needs.

According to anecdotal reports, a small number of unregistered “neighborhood mosques” continued to function for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live close to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques remained limited in their functions and were not assigned registered imams.

Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious groups reported they continued to experience particular difficulties conducting religious activities in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan because all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities continued to lack legal status in the region. There was only one registered church, a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the entire region, which has a population of approximately two million.

Representatives of both the Bukharian and the Ashkenazi Jewish communities said they had not requested accreditation of additional rabbis since 2014, when the last rabbi was accredited. Jewish leaders from both groups cited the community’s small size and limited resources as the reason for not seeking additional rabbis.

According to Christian religious leaders, many Christians, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, remained separated from an authorized gathering place by more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and gathered in private “house churches,” leaving them potentially vulnerable to police harassment and abuse since such gatherings remained illegal.

During the year, according to numerous religious leader and activists, both Christian and Muslim, authorities stopped filming participants of religious services.

According to Catholic Church leaders, the government allowed the Church to hold a summer camp for Catholic youth in the Fergana Valley. Catholic Church leaders noted that surveillance on Catholic masses had stopped during the year.

The government stated that prisoners had the right to practice any religion or no religion; however, according to former religious prisoner and current human rights defender Akhmadjon Madmarov, some prisoners told family members they were not able to observe religious rituals conflicting with the prison's schedule of activities. Such observances included traditional Islamic morning prayers. While some activists reported this situation had improved, others said it had not. According to human rights activists, authorities forbade all prisoners to observe religious holidays, such as Ramadan, including fasting. Although some prison libraries provided copies of the Quran and the Bible, family members continued to state that authorities did not allow some religiously observant prisoners access to religious materials.

The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications deemed extremist and arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports the government entered the homes of members of any religious group in search of illegal religious material.

The government continued to control access to Islamic publications and to require a statement in every domestic publication indicating the source of its publication authority. According to marketplace shoppers, it remained possible, although uncommon, to obtain a few imported works in Arabic from book dealers in secondhand stores or flea markets, but any literature not specifically approved by the CRA was rare.

The CRA continued to block the importation of some Christian and Islamic literature.

According to Forum 18, in January a court fined Shukhrat Safarov for giving a woman a copy of the New Testament in Uzbek. The court ordered the destruction of the book. In December 2018 police had searched the woman's apartment and seized the book in question.

The government continued to allow the following groups to publish, import, and distribute religious literature upon review and approval by the CRA: the Bible

Society of Uzbekistan, the Muftiate, Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Catholic Churches.

The Bible Society reported that during the year, Christians could easily request a Bible from them in three languages, English, Russian, and Uzbek, and that Christians were no longer required to fill out paperwork to obtain a Bible.

According to Muslim representatives, some official imams continued to state they could not teach Islam to children because the government forbade all religious education not controlled by the state. In 2017 the government approved fee-based courses on the Arabic language and Quranic studies for the public, but in 2018 it limited participation to adults.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government prohibited Islamic religious institutions in the country from receiving private funding. A 2018 presidential decree established the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. The academy's stated goals were to provide the country's religious educational institutions (universities and madrassahs) with highly trained teachers and mentors; improve the research and professional skills of scholars; educate graduate students in the fields of Quranic studies, Islamic law, the science of *hadith*, and *kalam* (Islamic doctrine); and engage in research, teaching, and public outreach.

The government continued to prohibit separate training of Shia imams inside the country and did not recognize training received outside the country.

In an October report prepared for the OSCE, the Jehovah's Witnesses stated, "After many years of religious freedom violations and outright persecution, the Government of Uzbekistan has recently made significant progress in improving its treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses." The report cited examples to include the cessation of police raids, permission that was granted to a Jehovah's Witnesses delegation to travel from the United States to Uzbekistan, and permission granted to Jehovah's Witnesses to conduct a "memorial service of the death of Jesus Christ" in rented premises in Fergana, Karshi, and Urgench.

At year's end, there were three public Islamic universities in the country: the Tashkent Islamic Institute, Samarkand Higher School of Hadith Studies, and Mir-i-Arab Madrassah in Bukhara. There were nine madrassahs for secondary education. Additionally, there were two Christian seminaries. According to

official figures, 1,984 persons were studying at the Islamic universities and madrassahs, 41 at the Orthodox seminary, and 20 at the Protestant seminary.

The government required individuals wishing to participate in the Hajj to apply to local *mahalla* committees, which submit a list to the *khokimiyats*, using the lists to coordinate national air carrier flights to Jeddah. The government continued to provide logistical support, including charter flights, for Muslims to participate in the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, although pilgrims paid their own expenses. As in previous years, the government allowed 7,200 Hajj pilgrims, approximately a third of the country's allotment allowed by Saudi Arabia. Local *mahalla* committees, district administrations, the State Security Services (SSS), and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the Muftiate, reportedly participated in vetting potential pilgrims. According to some sources, religious authorities continued generally to limit access to the Hajj to persons older than age 45. Several other Muslim sources, including activist and blogger Abu Muslim, said the government no longer placed age restrictions on Hajj participants. According to Forum 18, the Hajj Committee removed from the list young women from Fergana Region scheduled to participate in the 2019 Hajj because they were below the state's "unwritten age limit." According to other activists, however, no such age limit existed (unwritten or otherwise), but rather, local authorities would sometimes prefer to choose older pilgrims who may not get the chance again to make the journey.

Some media reported it remained difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and bribery. One individual told Forum 18 that due to the "obstacles at so many levels," individuals feared not being placed on the waiting lists or being "removed from the lists arbitrarily." They added that many "are willing to pay up to the officials." Some examples of what they characterized as local corruption included a requirement to perform charitable works at both the district authority and local *mahalla* committee level where officials asked pilgrims to make donations for the repair or upgrading of roads, to lay electricity lines, to help poor families, or for the unspecified welfare of the *mahalla*."

Forum 18 stated, "Even successful completion of the hajj application process does not guarantee a hajj pilgrimage, as the SSS maintains an exit blacklist of people – for example human rights defenders – who are not allowed to travel abroad." One Muslim told Forum 18 on November he was blacklisted for being "devout."

Umrah regulations also required pilgrims to apply to local *mahalla* committees, which submit a list to the *khokimiyats*. The CRA used the *khokimiyats*' lists to

coordinate national air carrier flights to Jeddah. During the year, the government allowed 21,419 pilgrims to travel for the Umrah, compared with 18,000 in 2018. There were restrictions on the number of Muslim pilgrims who wished to travel for Umrah. During Umrah high season, there were daily direct flights to Jeddah on Uzbekistan Airways.

Representatives of a registered Christian group and of the Baha'i community stated children were able to attend community-sponsored activities, including Sunday school, and services with the permission of their parents.

Large, government-operated hotels continued to furnish a limited number of rooms with Qurans and Bibles. The government did not report how many Qurans were made available for hotels. Upon advance request, hotels also provided other holy books, prayer mats, and *Qiblas*, which indicate the direction of Mecca. Many airports and train stations had small prayer rooms on their premises.

Civil society observers and religious freedom activists reported that authorities continued to allow Muslims to celebrate Ramadan openly and that the number of public iftars was greater than in 2018.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Activists and human rights groups continued to report social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam. Religious community members said ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma for conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials and that Muslims in the community forced them to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or allowed burials only with Islamic religious rites.

According to Open Doors USA, a Christian nonprofit that supports persecuted believers, individuals experienced “pressure and occasionally physical violence to renounce their faith and return to Islam.” According to the organization, on February 9, a man killed his wife because she had recently become a Christian. She was attempting to flee the country to seek refuge in Istanbul with Christian friends when her husband confronted her at Tashkent Airport and slit her throat.

Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christian, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian Churches, stated they continued to

face societal scrutiny and discrimination. They said their neighbors sometimes called police to report their activities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials and senior officials from the Department of State, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, raised religious freedom concerns with the country's leadership. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials met with multiple senior government officials, including the president, foreign minister, and officials from the National Human Rights Center and CRA, and raised concerns about imprisonment and mistreatment of individuals for their religious beliefs and bureaucratic impediments to the registration of religious minority groups.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom held a series of engagements with senior government officials when they visited the United States, raising the status of the country's draft religion law and of the registration of religious organizations and places of worship, as well as the need for the government to allow children to participate in religious activities and release individuals charged and detained for exercising their faith peacefully. In May the Ambassador at Large met with Senator Alisher Kurmanov and with Akmal Saidov, the director of the National Human Rights Center. In July he met with Foreign Minister Kamilov at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington and again in September during the UN General Assembly High-Levels Week in New York. Religious freedom issues were also on the agenda for the annual bilateral consultation, held in February. Several Department of State principal officials also raised religious freedom points in their high level meetings, including the Under Secretary for Political Affairs and the Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia.

At various levels of government and in different forums, U.S. officials continued to urge the government to amend the religion law to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship and to relax requirements for registering faith-based organizations. They pressed the government to provide protection for public discourse on religion and remove restrictions on the importation and use of religious literature, in both hardcopy and electronic versions. They also discussed the difficulties religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations faced with regard to registration, and with

authorities limiting their access to religious literature. The U.S. government supported the adoption of a religious freedom roadmap and the drafting of legislation overhauling the law on religion as concrete steps to enhance religious freedom.

Embassy representatives frequently discussed individual religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring court cases and contacting government officials for updates on police cases.

In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy drew attention to the continuing inability of certain Christian groups to register houses of worship, of evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss their beliefs openly in public, and of Muslim parents to take their children to mosque or educate them in their faith. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society, and with relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Embassy engagement included meetings with virtually all religious denominations in the country.

On December 18, 2019, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State renewed Uzbekistan's place on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. Uzbekistan had previously been designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006 to 2017 and moved to a Special Watch List in 2018 after the Secretary determined the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom.