

UZBEKISTAN 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. The law allows for restricting religious activities when necessary to maintain national security, the social order, or morality. The freedom of conscience and religion law further 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. The religion law also provides for a registration process for religious organizations but prohibits private religious education.

According to government authorities and human rights activists, more than 1,800 prisoners remained in detention, convicted of involvement in terrorist and extremist activities or of belonging to religious fundamentalist organizations. On May 27, the Ellikala District Criminal Court in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan convicted religious freedom activist Alimardon Sultonov of five extremism-related counts, sentencing him to seven years in a labor camp. According to Forum 18, an international religious freedom organization, on May 17, the Andijan criminal court sentenced former religious prisoner Oybek Khamidov to five years in prison for sharing a prohibited audio sermon with his wife. Forum 18 reported that on June 23, a Bukhara court sentenced Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov to five years and one month in prison for participating in a group that met to study the banned works of Islamic theologian Said Nursi. During the year, the government registered four religious groups, including three churches and a Baha'i Faith congregation, but it did not register any of the 16 religious organizations that had sought and been denied registration in 2021. A U.S. entity reported that while the religion law – revised in 2021 – streamlined the registration process, many aspects of the legislation remained seriously inadequate in comparison to internationally recognized best practices. According to the entity, problematic provisions of the law included continued criminalization of unregistered religious organizations, state control over religious literature, and prohibitions on private teaching of religion. Despite the removal of restrictions on religious attire for those outside government, media outlets continued to

report uneven implementation of this aspect of the new law. On May 6, according to media reports, local government officials detained approximately 10 men in Tashkent and forcibly shaved off their beards, threatening them with 15 days' imprisonment for failure to comply with the "lawful demands of a law enforcement officer." According to government spokespersons, the government continued to strictly control religious education for youth, including by shutting down private religious schools operating without government permission and fining individuals who provided unauthorized religious education. Human rights activists continued to state that President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reforms and the law on religion did not resolve the cases of prisoners who remained incarcerated under former President Islam Karimov for their religious practices and beliefs. According to local activists, despite improvements and the release of many religious prisoners since the start of Mirziyoyev's presidency in 2016, a significant number of prisoners remained in custody for engaging in peaceful religious practices.

Members of religious minority groups again stated that converts from Islam in their religious communities experienced social pressure from the majority Muslim population. Human rights activists reported an increase in anti-Christian, antisemitic, anti-Western, and misogynist content on social media channels of popular Islamic bloggers such as Abror Muxtor Aliy. In September, authorities dismissed Aliy, who has approximately half a million followers across dozens of channels on several social media outlets, from two government positions in the country's Islamic academy and muftiate.

In its public outreach and private meetings, the U.S. embassy drew attention to the continuing inability of religious groups to register as official religious organizations, of groups that proselytize to discuss their beliefs openly, and of parents to educate their children in their faith. Embassy officials also raised the continuing detention and imprisonment of individuals based on their religious beliefs. The embassy and visiting U.S. government officials raised concerns about the registration process and the deficiencies of the religion law with government officials prior to and after the law's adoption. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials also met with representatives of religious groups, civil society, and relatives of religious prisoners to discuss freedom of conscience and belief.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.1 million (midyear 2022). According to the national government, the population as of September reached 35.8 million. According to U.S. government estimates, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 96.3 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi school. The government states that approximately .03 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari school, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand.

Approximately 2.2 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, compared with 3.5 percent in 2019. According to government estimates the number of ethnic Russians and other Orthodox individuals is increasing due to the influx of Russians into the country following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The government states that the remaining 1.5 percent of the population includes small communities of Roman 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 the government, the Jewish population – a mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic (Bukharan) – numbers 5,425. The vast majority – approximately 3,500 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharan Jews – live 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 that everyone has 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 Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations further 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. This law, commonly known as the religion law, provides a registration process for religious organizations that allows online applications. It requires an organization have 50 founding members to register and stipulates all founding members must live in one district or city. It prohibits private religious education. While the law on religion lifts the ban on appearing in public spaces in religious attire, a different law, separate from the religion law, says that those appearing in public dressed in religious attire can be fined.

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 the peace, and multiethnic and multireligious harmony. The law provides a framework of basic concepts, principles, and directions for countering extremism and 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, [and] 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, involves pornography, or promotes narcotic usage. According to the Ministry of Justice, the government may permanently 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." Organizing or participating in an illegal religious group is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of 15 to 30 million soum (\$1,300 – \$2,700). The law

also 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 online with the Ministry of Justice; without registration, a group may not carry out any activities. 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 50 citizens who are 18 or older; and providing a charter in Uzbek with a legal, physical address to the local Ministry of Justice branch.

Religious groups applying to register in a specific locality require the concurrence of the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), a federal executive-level committee, and the khokimiyat (local government) for preapproval. Groups 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 Emergency Situations.

The law requires electronic copies of the documents affirming that the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith. Denominations whose faith does not provide for a system of religious vocational education are exempted from this requirement. All religious groups must report their source of income and obtain CRA concurrence to register. The law also requires that khokimiyats concur with the registration of groups in their areas and that the group present notification from khokimiyat authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements, including obtaining authorization certificates from the zoning board, sanitary-epidemiological services, and fire services. After checking the submitted certificates, khokimiyats grant registration permission to the religious group seeking registration. The Ministry of Justice has one month to review and approve, deny, or return the application for revision.

The law states registered religious groups may expand throughout the country by registering new locations, maintaining buildings compliant with fire and health codes, organizing religious teaching, and possessing religious literature.

The law limits the operations of a registered group to those geographic areas where it is registered. Even if it is registered in one area, a religious group may not expand to another area until it completes the registration process there. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy. Individual Muslim 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 16 registered religions, including Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, whom the government appoints to serve as consultants. The council discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion. The CRA also monitors internet discussion of religion and reports materials it deems “extremist” to law enforcement.

The government must approve religious activities outside of formal worship services, as well as all religious activities intended for children younger than 16, unless those children have been given parental permission. The law requires registered religious organizations to inform authorities 30 days in advance of holding nonroutine religious meetings and other religious activities at the group’s registered address(es). At the beginning of each year every religious organization must submit a list of planned meetings to the Ministry of Justice. Any meeting outside of that list would be considered “nonroutine.” The administrative code requires all registered religious organizations to seek permission from local authorities and then inform the CRA and Ministry of Justice representatives 30 days before holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies occurring outside a group’s registered building(s), including 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 the unauthorized facilitation of children’s and youth meetings as well as literary and other study groups not

related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 15 million to 30 million soum (\$1,300 – \$2,700) or up to 15 days' imprisonment.

The religion law lifts the ban on appearing in public spaces in religious clothing. Public institutions are responsible for setting clothing requirements for the employees of governmental organizations and institutions as well as for students.

The law prohibits proselytizing and other missionary activities. The criminal code punishes proselytizing with up to three years in prison and prohibits teaching children religion against their will as well as efforts to involve minors in 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, 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 the “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage (6 million to 30 million soum in 2022), (\$540 - \$2,700) for private individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage, or 15 million to 45 million soum (\$1,300 – \$4,000). 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 may issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (30 million to 60 million soum) (\$2,700 – \$5,300) or “corrective labor” for up to three years for repeat offenders.

The state forbids banned “extremist religious groups” from distributing any type of publication. Individuals who distribute leaflets or literature deemed extremist via social media 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 Special Commission for Preparation of Materials on Clemency to review the prison profiles of convicts sentenced on charges of religious extremism. To be eligible for clemency, prisoners must admit guilt and express remorse for their alleged crimes. Another commission, the Commission on Clemency, reviews the petitions of persons who “mistakenly became members of prohibited organizations.” This commission may exonerate citizens from criminal liability on religious grounds. Citizens are exempted from criminal liability if they have not undergone military training provided by an organization the government views as extremist, participated in terrorism financing, or distributed 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 religious education in public schools except for some classes that provide basic information on world religions or the study of national culture in the curriculum.

Religious schools may operate only after registering with the Ministry of Justice and receiving the appropriate license. Individuals teaching religious subjects at religious schools 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. Ten madrassahs, including two 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 only 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 to register 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 and religious freedom activists, 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.

Under the law, the human rights ombudsman has the responsibility to consider applications, proposals, and complaints of citizens, foreign persons, and stateless individuals in the country regarding the actions or failure to act of organizations or officials that violated their rights, freedoms, and legal interests, and he or she has the right to conduct independent investigations. The ombudsman may enter prison and detention facilities and meet with detainees and prisoners.

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

Government Practices

Activists and international organizations, including Amnesty International, continued to criticize the religion law passed in 2021, saying it retained too many of the earlier standing restrictions. Specifically, the group said it was concerned about bans on the exercise, teaching, and sharing of religious beliefs without state approval, as well as tight censorship of religious literature. Forum 18 reported that international experts reviewed the draft legislation, and that it was available to the public. At the time, media widely reported that members of the public and international experts made recommendations to improve the law during its development, but the government accepted few of these recommendations.

Civil society representatives said the government continued to physically abuse and threaten incarcerated persons. Forum 18 reported that authorities tortured Fazilkhoja Arifkhojajev, who was sentenced in January to seven-and-a-half years in a labor camp for criticizing state-appointed imams.

According to Forum 18, since early in the year, Tashkent police targeted Muslims through raids, house searches, detentions, arrests, administrative punishments for teaching religion without state permission as well as with criminal investigations. In one incident, police reportedly detained a young woman they had previously targeted for wearing a hijab and studying Arabic. After 10 hours' questioning without food or water, the woman, who is anemic, fainted. Police did not explain why they raided the family home, pressured the family, and detained the woman.

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.

Throughout the year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrested several members of the banned groups Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tawhid and Jihad Katibati in Tashkent, Andijan, Termez and Khiva, and Kashkadarya. The ministry did not say how many persons it had arrested but stated that two unnamed men in Termez received lengthy prison terms of 15 years on charges of having participated in religious extremist organizations. The men reportedly promoted jihadist ideas outside mosques, including actively encouraging schoolchildren to engage in religious extremism and terrorism, distributing extremist materials, and planning to travel to Syria to participate in its civil war.

On June 8, the Interior Ministry reported that since the beginning of the year, it had suppressed the activities of four underground cells, 10 virtual groups, and 250 lone members of terrorist organizations linked to the Tawhid and Jihad Katibati and Islamic State in Syria movements. According to the ministry, some of the individuals or groups were planning to carry out actions in public spaces in the country.

In October 2022, the Ministry of the Interior reported more than 1,800 prisoners, approximately six percent of the country's prison population, were held for crimes related to their alleged religious extremism.

According to the government, during the year, President Mirziyoyev released or reduced the sentences of 607 prisoners, 75 of whom had been detained on violations of the law on religion. Of these, 55 were released and 20 had their

sentences reduced. These releases brought the total number of religious prisoners released or receiving reduced sentences since 2016 to 1,866, compared with 1,791 in 2021, according to the government. Human rights activists said Mirziyoyev's reforms and the law on religion did not resolve the remaining cases of prisoners incarcerated under former President Karimov for their religious practices and beliefs.

Religious freedom activists said the government's security services continued to fabricate charges against detainees to make a "show" of being tough on religious extremism. One prominent human rights lawyer stated authorities had charged some individuals with extremism based solely on incoming messages to their phones. Government officials said these messages referenced Hizb ut-Tahir, even though the arrestees themselves did not write, forward, or respond to these messages.

Religious activists again reported many religious prisoners continued to face extensions of their sentences when prison officials brought new charges, accusing inmates of involvement in extremist groups or other crimes. The new charges resulted in new sentences, and many individuals whose original sentences had ended years before were consequently still imprisoned.

Forum 18 stated that officials tortured incarcerated blogger Tulkan Astanov in prison for praying and that he lost 55 pounds between January and July 2021. Sentenced to five years' probation in 2019 after posting online discussions on a wide range of religious themes, including calls to allow women to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to pray in mosques, Astanov was rearrested, tried, and sentenced in 2020 for breaking parole terms that restricted him from leaving Tashkent. The Tashkent City Criminal Court heard his appeal in 2020 but upheld the verdict. In 2021, Astanov's wife told Forum 18 that prison guards beat Astanov several times and tortured him by pushing his head under water to suffocate him, and that he went on a hunger strike for 20 days between July and August to stop the abuse. Astanov's wife filed a complaint with the Interior Ministry, but at year's end, she had not received notification of the results of the investigation.

On May 27, the Ellikala District Criminal Court in Karakalpakstan convicted religious freedom activist Alimardon Sulstonov of five extremism-related counts,

sentencing him to seven years in a labor camp. According to Forum 18, Sultonov was arrested “for criticizing President Mirziyoyev, state-appointed imams, and other officials.” During Sultonov's trial, the judge refused to hear his complaints that he was tortured after being arrested. On August 4, Karakalpakstan’s supreme court reversed one of the five charges and reduced his sentence from seven years to six years and nine months.

According to Forum 18, on June 23, a Bukhara court sentenced Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov to five years and one month in prison for participating in a group that met to study the banned works of Islamic theologian Said Nursi. Tukhtamurodov had returned from exile in Russia after Uzbek authorities told him he would not be jailed.

According to Forum 18, on May 17, the Andijan Criminal Court sentenced former religious prisoner Oybek Khamidov to five years in prison for sharing with his wife a prohibited audio sermon from an imam who had been banned and disappeared in the 1990s. The CRA claimed the audio file contained extremist material.

According to religious freedom activists, there is a culture of surveillance and suspicion via the neighborhood mahalla, a neighborhood association that functions as a social welfare and dispute resolution mechanism. Community members report suspected illegal religious activities to the mahalla, which then reports this activity to law enforcement.

According to international observers, the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” signed by President Mirziyoyev in 2021, did little to change the nature of religious freedom in the country.

After the new religion law was passed, the government did not respond to requests for then UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Ahmed Shaheed to visit the country and continue his work. In 2020-2021 Shaheed had worked closely with the government to develop a roadmap toward achieving greater religious freedom in the country.

Representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to say that although there were some improvements in the 2021 law, it still did not address many of their concerns, including the requirement for khokimiyat and CRA approval for

registration, prohibitions on missionary activity, and the banning of religious meetings in private homes.

The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as extremist and criminalized membership in such groups, which included 22 religious organizations. The government reported that at year's end, the following organizations remained banned: Akramites, Islamic Movement of Turkestan, Islamic Jihad Group, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, al-Jihad, al-Qa'ida, World Jihad Foundation, Muslim Brotherhood, Zamiyati Islomi Tablig, Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Pakistan, Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Boz Kurd, Abu Saif Group, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, Islamic State, Tavhid va Jihad, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhariy, Jamoat-e-Ansarulloh, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jihadists, and Nurchists. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not an infringement on religious freedom, but rather were a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and the incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

According to media and the government, the ban on private religious instruction continued to result in the government detaining and fining members of religious communities. The ban included meetings of persons gathered to discuss their faith or to exchange religious ideas. Some members of religious groups said religious discussions continued to be considered taboo because no one wanted to risk being punished for proselytism or for teaching religious principles in private. The government reported that as of October 1, it had shut down 75 hujras (private schools that provide Islamic education), compared with 62 during the same period in 2021. Authorities found more than 70 persons "administratively liable" (subject to fines) for conducting illegal religious education, compared with 60 persons during the same period in 2021.

During the year, Jehovah's Witnesses reported police detained members of their community for proselytizing. According to Jehovah's Witnesses' 2022 report, in February, a Jehovah's Witnesses couple were peacefully talking with sales assistants and in casual conversation spoke about the Bible. At that moment, a man approached them, introduced himself as a law enforcement officer, and asked the husband to go outside. The man began questioning the male member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, verified his passport, and attempted to check his cell

phone, then reportedly stated that the couple were engaged in missionary activity.

Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that in September, two women were detained in Tashkent for starting a conversation about the Bible with a person on the street. Authorities seized their phones and transported them to jail, where they were questioned until the early hours of the morning and then subsequently released. One woman reported fainting due to lack of sleep.

Multiple Jehovah's Witness members reported visits and calls from law enforcement officers warning them to stop their activities.

In April, the Counterterrorism and Extremism Department of the Ministry of the Interior and the State Emergency Service jointly raided several educational centers in Tashkent. In a press release, the ministry said two women conducted classes using religious literature in one of the training centers without proper authorization. A Shaykhantokhur court fined both women.

The CRA did not amend its 2021 official statement in response to appeals to end the ban on unauthorized religious education, which remained their most recent policy statement on the issue at year's end. According to the CRA, "Some fanatical individuals and groups have unfairly criticized Uzbekistan's unified state policy in the field of religious affairs, misinterpreted the news to suit their own interests, [and] distorted and exaggerated the situation." The CRA stated there was "unnecessary controversy" surrounding proposals to lift the ban on private religious education and training and that the government had "legitimate need to set boundaries" in this area. The CRA also said the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan had created websites and Telegram broadcast channels to meet the country's religious education needs.

Forum 18 reported that in March, Nosir Numanov and his friends went to their local mosque for evening prayers. Because there were too many other worshippers and many police outside the mosque, they decided to go to a local teahouse to pray and then share a meal. On March 22, a judge handed Numanov a 15-day jail sentence and fined the teahouse owner approximately 10 months' average wages.

According to some religious leaders, some government officials required a simple notification of planned events, allowing the participants to proceed without official “permission.”

On January 26, a Tashkent court sentenced Muslim blogger Fozilkhoja Arifkhodjaev to seven and a half years in prison for criticizing state-appointed imams and for resharing a Facebook post that said Muslims should not congratulate non-Muslims on their religious holidays. The CRA concluded that the social media post “propagate[d] the ideas of religious fundamentalism.” Arifkhodjaev’s lawyer said police tortured Arifkhodjaev while in detention. On March 10, the Tashkent Appeals Court upheld the verdict against Arifkhodjaev.

According to local media, on July 22, the Fergana Regional Court sentenced bloggers Olimjon Khaydarov and Komiljon Akhmedov to 15 days in prison for posting about alleged illegal activity by the Pentecostal Church in Kokand. On July 24, a Fergana regional court overturned the case of Olimjon Khaydarov, placing sole responsibility on Khaydarov for posting the blog.

During the year, the Supreme Court ruled in 13 instances that 80 online profiles, channels, and pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, and Telegram were promoting extremism. The court ruled the materials and content of these sources were prohibited from entering or being manufactured, distributed, or possessed in the country.

The government continued to restrict access to websites, including Forum 18. The government maintained a list of illegal websites it said were linked to Islamic extremist activity.

According to the CRA, the country had 2,338 registered religious organizations representing 16 different faiths, compared with 2,313 registered religious organizations and 16 faiths in 2021. Islamic religious groups operated 2,107 Sunni mosques (compared with 2,096 in 2021), four Shia mosques, 15 branches of the government-controlled muftiate, and 13 education institutes. There were 190 registered non-Muslim groups, including 38 Orthodox churches, five Catholic churches, 61 Pentecostal churches, 24 Baptist churches, 10 Seventh-day Adventist churches, four New Apostle churches, two Lutheran churches, one Jehovah’s Witness kingdom hall, one Voice of God church, 26 Korean Protestant churches,

two Armenian Apostolic churches, eight Jewish communities, seven Baha'i centers, one Hari Krishna temple, and one Buddhist temple. The Bible Society of Uzbekistan was also registered as of 2020.

The government registered four new religious groups during the year: three Pentecostal churches in Gulistan, Fergana and Tashkent, and one Bahai congregation in Namangan. According to religious groups, there were 16 known churches that still sought to register. In November, the government allowed the reopening of the Shia Hoji Bahrom Mosque in Bukhara, which had been closed since 2008.

Many religious group representatives continued to report they were unable to meet the government's registration requirements, especially the requirement for a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units, to acquire central registration, as well as the requirement that 50 members must apply for registration in a specific locality. Some religious groups said the minimum requirement of 50 members constituted a barrier for them. Unregistered religious groups said their inability to register made them subject to harassment by local authorities and to criminal penalties for engaging in "illegal" religious activities.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Justice explained denials of registration by citing the failure 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 assurances the government would approve their registration application. Other groups stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because officials opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on at least two occasions, a landlord backed out of a rental agreement after the prospective congregation submitted their registration with the government.

According to some Christian groups, many churches continued their efforts to register but were not successful, some because the government rejected their applications for technical reasons, including typographical errors. Many religious groups reported that various local government bodies prevented their application from advancing. Some religious groups said that local authorities blocked

registration efforts by constantly finding “mistakes” in applications and asking applicants to resubmit, while others maintained that the mahalla retained its ability to block registration applications despite the government’s formally removing the mahalla from the registration process in 2021. In Tashkent, affected religious groups included Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostal Life Water Church, and Pentecostal Source of Life Church. Jehovah’s Witness kingdom halls also remained unregistered in Urgench, Fergana, Bukhara, Samarkand, Nukus, and Karshi. The Pentecostal Full Gospel churches in the cities of Khanabad, Kungrad, Chimbay, and Jizzakh remained unregistered, along with two in the city of Nukus.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported being the target of harassment and mistreatment due to the organization’s unregistered status, except for its sole registered community in Chirchik. The group continued to attempt registration in seven districts of the country. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that local governments continued to block official registration of additional congregations for administrative reasons, including the need to obtain additional documentation from other various local governmental agencies. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, local agencies such as local branches of the Ministry of Construction or local fire safety offices, among others, refused to provide the documentation required to complete the registration process.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ 2022 Religious Freedom Report on Uzbekistan, in April a video entitled Missionary Activity Religious and Ideological Divisions, Political Machinations, and Prohibitions in the Law was posted on YouTube that was “wildly inaccurate” and appeared to be “aimed solely at tarnishing the Witnesses’ reputation.” According to the same report, on January 31, the European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses filed a submission on Uzbekistan with the Centre for Civil and Political Rights, highlighting that the CRA censored religious publications. The submission stated, “Since 2006, [the CRA] has not allowed any publications of Jehovah’s Witnesses into the country. The Witnesses are able to bring in some individual copies of religious literature on their person, but these publications can only be distributed within the confines of their kingdom hall [place of worship] property in Chirchiq.”

The Ministry of Education continued to maintain 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. In 2021, education authorities declared schoolgirls were allowed to wear skullcaps and Islamic headdresses, including

hijabs, a reversal of previous rules preventing the wearing of religious dress in state-owned premises. On July 27, the Minister of Public Education, Bakhtiyar Saidov, issued a statement regarding the introduction of a school uniform for public schools. He said that based on national values, girls could come to school wearing a headscarf made of white and light-colored fabrics. According to some parents, during the year, some schoolgirls experienced peer pressure to wear a hijab and some were bullied if they chose not to wear hijabs.

Human rights activists and government workers reported the wearing of religious attire in the workplace was still banned in government offices.

Local media reported that on May 6, authorities summoned approximately 10 men in Tashkent and forced them to shave off their beards, threatening them with 15 days in jail if they did not comply.

According to the CRA, the government continued to disseminate, through the muftiate, sermons for imams to read during Friday prayers. The government continued to control the amount and content of materials published by the muftiate. The CRA selected muftiate staff. Although there were no reports during the year of the government limiting the volume of public calls to prayers, which occurred in previous years, media sources reported that many mosques voluntarily did so.

The government continued to use an estimated 12,000 mahalla committees as a source of information on potential “extremists.” The committees provided various social support functions, including the distribution of social welfare assistance to the elderly, single parents, or families with many children; intervention in cases of domestic violence; and adjudication of disputes among residents. They also informed government and law enforcement authorities on community members. On March 1, the President issued a decree that reorganized the mahalla system to give it greater powers of oversight and surveillance in the local community. According to activists this decree increased the responsibility of mahallas in overseeing the daily activities of religious groups in their areas.

Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox Christian religious groups said they continued to experience difficulties conducting religious activities in Karakalpakstan because

most non-Muslim and non-Orthodox Christian religious communities continued to remain unregistered. A Pentecostal church and a Russian Orthodox church were the only two Christian churches in the region of two million people.

Property disputes between registered religious organizations and the government persisted. Leaders of an historic Roman Catholic Church in Fergana continued to seek to reclaim the use of the church. In 2021, the government ordered the transfer of the church building from municipal ownership to the church, in accordance with a Cabinet of Ministers resolution authorizing the transfer. During the Soviet era, the local government allowed a family to move into the back of the church and convert some of its rooms into apartments. According to the parish priest, the local government was going to relocate the family to a nearby apartment complex that was still under construction at year's end so that the church could reclaim its property.

In September, construction crews built a bridge directly over a Buddhist temple's property in Tashkent to expand a metro line in the city. According to temple leaders, they were compelled to close because the new construction made it too dangerous to continue worship services. According to temple leadership, despite initial rounds of negotiations and government promises that it would help relocate the temple, at year's end the temple still awaited the government's decision regarding a new location.

During the year, a historic Baptist church in Bukhara was unable to resume activities after a city water main burst and flooded it in 2021. Although the church was registered with the government, it was forced to cease operation because the flooding severely weakened its structure, and church leadership deemed it unsafe to hold services. The members of the church were not allowed to hold services elsewhere because by law, religious groups may function only in their approved buildings. According to the church's pastor, despite government promises to help relocate the congregation, the church did not have a location in which to worship by year's end.

According to Christian religious leaders, many Christians, including Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to have no access to an authorized house of worship within 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and gathered in private "house churches," leaving them vulnerable to police harassment and abuse because such gatherings remained illegal.

During the year, the government stated that prisoners had the right to practice any religion, but some prisoners told family members that prison authorities did not permit them to observe religious rituals that conflicted with the prison's schedule. Such rituals included traditional Islamic morning prayers. While some activists reported this situation had improved, others stated the restrictions continued. Although some prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible, family members continued to report that authorities did not allow all religious prisoners access to religious materials.

The government announced they had given permission for the opening of a new Shia mosque in Bukhara. The request to open a Shia mosque had been pending since 2020.

The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications deemed extremist and during the year arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission, such as unauthorized sermons contained on cell phones, any printed material from the Jehovah's Witness organization, or any material not explicitly approved by the CRA. The government continued to require a statement in every domestic publication indicating the source of its publication authority. According to marketplace shoppers, it continued to be 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 also continued to block the importation of some Christian and Islamic literature and to monitor conversations on social media for illegal religious content. The CRA stated it reported materials it deemed extremist to law enforcement agencies.

According to the government, it opened 156 criminal cases from January-October under the article forbidding the possession of religious literature that the government has not formally approved.

Religious activist Adham Atajanov (pen name Abu Muslim) reported that his request to publish interpretations of two Islamic texts remained pending with the CRA. Atajanov sought permission in 2019 to publish interpretations of five texts. He received permission to publish two of the books in October 2020 and received verbal assurances that he could publish another book during the year, but the

CRA did not grant official permission. Atajanov said he stopped pursuing publication of these books due to lack of funds. At year's end, the remaining publications remained unapproved.

The government continued to allow only the following groups to publish, import, and distribute religious literature after review and approval by the CRA: the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the muftiate, the Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Catholic Churches.

The Bible Society of Uzbekistan reported that during the year, Christians could continue to request a Bible from the society in English, Russian, or Uzbek. According to some Christian groups, there was a shortage of Uzbek-language Bibles, particularly in regions outside Tashkent. The Bible Society reported that the CRA did not approve a new print run of Bibles or the registration of Christian children's books.

According to the government, during the year, authorities returned 600 children from abroad whose families had sent them for religious education but who had subsequently been abused, including sexually.

According to Muslim representatives, some official imams again stated they could not teach Islam to children because the law forbids it. Fee-based courses on the Arabic language and Quranic studies for the public continued to be available but were limited to adults.

During the year, the government-controlled muftiate continued to operate a call center and website created in 2019 and staffed by religious experts that allowed citizens to ask general questions pertaining to Islam.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government prohibited Islamic religious institutions from receiving private funding other than for construction and repairs. It did not permit funding of any kind for religious purposes from foreign governments. The government-run International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan continued to provide the country's religious education institutions (universities and madrassahs) with academic experts, teachers, and mentors, but it did not permit any other Islamic higher education institutions to provide such experts.

The government continued to prohibit the separate training of Shia imams inside the country.

There were three public Islamic training academies to prepare clerics in the country and 10 madrassahs for secondary education. Government officials and Islamic leaders reported this was not enough to meet the demand for Islamic clergy. Additionally, two Christian seminaries continued to function, with an enrollment of 44 students during the year. The Quran courses offered at Islamic religious educational institutions were attended by 1,940 students during the year.

According to the government, since 2021, citizens of the country were eligible for admission to al-Azhar University in Egypt at the CRA's recommendation. According to the procedure, the CRA-established Advisory Council on Assistance to Citizens of Uzbekistan in Foreign Religious Educational Institutions reviewed 545 applications to study at al-Azhar for the 2021 academic year and 120 applications for the 2022 academic year.

Pilgrimage regulations continued to require pilgrims to apply to local mahalla committees. The CRA coordinated ticketing on national air carrier flights to Jeddah for the Hajj pilgrimage. Local mahalla committees, district administrations, security services, the CRA, and the muftiate reportedly participated in vetting potential Hajj pilgrims. Previously, only state-run travel companies were allowed to organize pilgrimage tours. According to sources, the government continued to maintain a monopoly on organizing the Hajj pilgrimages and controlling the lists of pilgrims but relaxed restrictions for those wishing to make the shorter Umrah pilgrimage. During the year, the government authorized private tour operators to organize Umrah pilgrimages.

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 to hotels. Upon advance request, hotels also provided other holy books, prayer mats, and qibla direction finders, used by Muslims to indicate the direction of Mecca. Many airports and train stations continued to maintain small prayer rooms on their premises.

Civil society observers and religious freedom activists continued to report that authorities allowed Muslims to celebrate Ramadan openly.

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 risked harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma because of 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. Individuals who reported these incidents declined to share their names or even the details of their cases for fear of retaliation.

As in 2021, there were no reports of individuals being attacked for their conversion to a minority faith; however, reports of harassment continued. A Christian clergyman reported being told by members of his community that they were not allowed to talk to him since he was not a Muslim.

Government officials and human rights activists continued to express concern over the rise in popularity of Islamic video bloggers who espoused what they said was a hardline, intolerant version of Islam. According to human rights activists, the most prominent of these bloggers was Abror Muxtor Aliy, with approximately a half million followers over dozens of social media accounts. Activists said that Aliy and other bloggers like him espoused anti-Christian, antisemitic, anti-Western, and misogynistic practices. For example, in one of his sermons posted to YouTube, Aliy tells his followers that they must beat their wives and gives advice on how to do so without leaving bruises. During the year, the government removed Aliy from two government positions in the Islamic academy.

Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to state they faced societal scrutiny and discrimination in the form of hostility from neighbors, shunning in public, difficulty doing business in their communities, and overt shadowing of their daily routines by security services.

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 and other U.S government agencies and branches raised religious freedom concerns with the country's leadership. At various levels of government and in different fora, U.S. officials continued to urge the government to increase religious freedom by registering more religious organizations, streamlining registration, improving the 2021 religion law to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship, and allowing parents to educate their children in their faith. U.S. officials raised the problems of the treatment of prisoners and the existence of religious prisoners and urged the government not to imprison individuals for peaceful religious beliefs and practices. They continued to press 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 raised the difficulties religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations faced with registration and with authorities' limiting their access to religious literature. Senior U.S. government officials urged the authorities to prioritize a visit to the country by former UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief Ahmed Shaheed.

Embassy representatives frequently discussed individual religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate advocacy efforts, including in monitoring court cases, submitting joint letters to the government on religious freedom issues, and meeting with government officials on religious freedom concerns.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with religious groups, human rights activists, and other civil society representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics included the registration of minority religious groups, religious education for children, and concerns of Muslims about the wearing of hijabs and beards. In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy again drew attention to the continuing inability of religious groups to register houses of worship, of groups that proselytize to discuss their beliefs openly, and of parents to educate their children in their faith. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials continued to meet with relatives of prisoners to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Embassy engagement

included meetings with virtually all major religious denominations in the country, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist groups, Jewish leaders, Muslim scholars, and religious freedom activists. In September, the Ambassador visited the Roman Catholic Church in Fergana to discuss with the resident priest local authorities' delay in handing over property to the Catholic Church.

In October, a delegation from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom advocated for increased religious freedom in the country and met with religious freedom activists. The delegation discussed religious prisoners and urged the government to reevaluate their cases, the mandatory registration of all religious congregations, the prohibitions against the publication and distribution of nonapproved religious material, and several religious organizations that were experiencing difficulties due to resistance at local levels of government.

In November, a U.S. Assistant Secretary of State visited the country and met with members of the Shia community in Bukhara.