



## Uzbekistan

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, the 1998 Religion Law restricts many rights only to registered religious groups and limits which groups may register. Violators of the law's prohibitions on activities such as proselytizing, importing, and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction are subject to criminal penalties.

Respect for religious freedom remained restricted during the reporting period; however, religious freedom conditions improved for the Muslim majority. The Government generally did not interfere with worshippers attending sanctioned mosques and granted approvals for new Islamic print, audio, and video materials. The Government permitted the operation of religious groups it considered mainstream; however, a number of religious groups remained unregistered because they were unable to satisfy the strict registration requirements set out by the law. Some unregistered Christian groups, particularly those with ethnic Uzbek members, experienced raids, harassment, and the detention of their leaders and members; some faced criminal charges. The Government's campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups suspected of extremist sentiments or activities appeared to have slowed, but it did not cease. Alleged members of extremist groups continued to be arrested and sentenced to lengthy jail terms.

Religious groups enjoyed generally tolerant relations; however, neighbors, family, and employers sometimes continued to pressure ethnic Uzbek Christians, especially recent converts and residents of smaller communities. Some minority religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and evangelical Christians, continued to face negative media coverage.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy and the State Department's Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom remained engaged in monitoring and promoting religious freedom and maintained contact with government and religious leaders and human rights activists. The Embassy sponsored exchange and educational programs designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom. In 2006 the Secretary of State designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 172,742 square miles and a population of 28.2 million. International experts believe the population has lost 2 to 3 million in recent years due to the growing trend of labor migration to neighboring countries, particularly Russia and Kazakhstan. Approximately 80 percent of the population is ethnic Uzbek, 5.5 percent Russian, 5 percent Tajik, 3 percent Kazakh, 2.5 percent Karakalpak, and 1.5 percent Tatar.

No official statistics exist on membership in religious groups; however, an estimated 90 percent of the population is nominally Sunni Muslim, of the Hanafi school. Shi'a Muslims, who are concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand, constitute an estimated 1 percent of the population. Approximately 5 percent is Russian Orthodox, a percentage that declines as ethnic Russians and other Slavs continue to emigrate. The remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas, as well as atheists. In addition, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews remain, concentrated in the cities of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. At

least 80,000 Jews emigrated to Israel and the United States over the past two decades, mainly for economic reasons.

As of May 15, 2008, the Government had registered 2,228 religious congregations and organizations--an increase of 1 from the 2,227 recorded in May 2007. Mosques, Muslim educational institutions, and Islamic centers accounted for 2,048 of the total, an increase of 2. Among the Muslim groups were several Shi'a congregations. The number of registered Christian groups decreased by one. The 180 registered minority religious groups included 58 Korean Christian, 36 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 21 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 10 Seventh-day Adventist, 8 Jewish, 5 Roman Catholic, 6 Baha'i, 3 Lutheran, 4 "New Apostolic," 2 Armenian Apostolic, 1 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 Krishna Consciousness group, 1 Temple of Buddha, and 1 Christian "Voice of God" Church. In addition, there were a number of unregistered religious groups.

A growing percentage of Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents actively practice their religion. Outside of Tashkent, practicing Muslims outnumber nonpracticing Muslims. During the period covered by this report, mosque attendance continued to increase, particularly among younger men, who constitute the majority of worshippers.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government and laws restricted these rights in practice. The Constitution also establishes the principle of separation of church and state. The Government prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 Religion Law) provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state, and the right to establish schools and train clergy; however, the law grants those rights only to registered groups. It also restricts religious rights that are judged to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, bans religious subjects in public schools, prohibits the private teaching of religious principles, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), an agency accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve all religious literature.

The 1998 Religion Law requires all religious groups to register and provides strict and burdensome criteria for their registration. Among its requirements, the law stipulates that each group must present a list of at least one hundred citizen members to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The CRA oversees registered religious activity.

The law prohibits religious groups from training religious personnel if they do not have a registered central administrative body. Registration of a central body requires registered religious groups in 8 of the 13 provinces, an impossible requirement for most religious groups. There are six such entities that may legally train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law permits no private religious instruction and provides for fines for violations. The law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. Article 14 of the Religion Law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except "those serving in religious organizations."

The Criminal and Civil Codes contain stiff penalties for violating the Religion Law and other statutes on religious activities. In addition to the prohibited activities that include organizing an illegal religious group, the law also proscribes persuading others to join such a group and drawing minors into a religious organization without the permission of their parents. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The Criminal Code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those that are not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups, such as the extremist Islamist political party Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), Tabligh Jamaat, and other groups branded with the general term "Wahhabi" that are banned altogether. The code makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to 5 years in prison, to organize an illegal religious group or to

resume the activities of such a group after it has been denied registration or ordered to disband. In addition, the code punishes participation in such a group with up to 3 years in prison. The code also provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison (if the crime results in "grave consequences") for "organizing or participating" in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups.

The main laws under which authorities charge citizens for religious activity are article 159 (anticonstitutional activity); article 216 (illegal establishment of public associations or religious organizations); article 216, section 2 (violation of legislation on religious organizations, including proselytism); article 244, section 1 (production and distribution of materials that create a threat to public security and public order); and article 244, section 2 (establishment, direction of, or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organizations) of the Criminal Code. Citizens charged under these sections (particularly article 244, section 2) are frequently charged with being HT members.

December 2005 amendments to both the Criminal Code (article 217, section 2) and Administrative Code (article 201) increased fines for repeated offenses of violations of the law on religious activity, raising them to 200 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage of \$16 (20,865 soums) under the Criminal Code and 50 to 100 times the minimum wage under the Administrative Code.

Authorities also use four provisions of the Administrative Code to impose administrative penalties for violations of laws regulating religious activities. Article 201 of the Administrative Code imposes fines on violators of the law on how religious organizations should operate as well as for holding illegal public rallies, marches, and demonstrations. Article 202 imposes fines for "creating the conditions" for holding unsanctioned meetings. Article 240 of the Administrative Code imposes administrative fines for violating the Religion Law, while article 241 imposes fines for "teaching religious doctrines without specialist religious education and without the permission of an agency of the central administration of a religious organization, and equally teaching religious doctrines in a private capacity."

June 2006 amendments to the Administrative Code punish "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of materials of religious content" with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage for individuals, or 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage for officials of organizations, together with confiscation of the materials and the "corresponding means of producing and distributing them." Criminal Code article 244-3 addresses the same offense, punishing those already convicted under the corresponding article of the Administrative Code with a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labor of up to 3 years. Other changes introduced simultaneously to the Criminal and Administrative Codes punish those convicted of the production and distribution of "literature promoting racial and religious hatred."

Although the law treats all registered religious denominations equally, the Government funds an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The Government provided logistical support for selected Muslims to participate in the December 2007 Hajj, but the pilgrims pay their own expenses. The Government controls the Muftiate, which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials. The Kurbon Hayit and Roza Hayit Islamic holy days are observed as national holidays.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

There were significant governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the reporting period. The Government, by continuing to deny registration to some religious groups and by deregistering others, deprived them of their legal right to worship. The Government restricted many religious practices and activities, punishing some citizens because they engaged in religious practices in violation of the registration laws.

The Government bans Islamic organizations it deems extremist and criminalizes membership in them. Chief among the banned organizations are the HT, Akromiya, Tabligh Jamaat, and groups the Government broadly labeled Wahhabi. The Government states that it does not consider repression of persons or groups suspected of extremism to be a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing armed resistance to the Government.

The HT is an extremist Islamist political organization motivated by a socioreligious ideology. Its literature lays

out a three-stage campaign for the establishment of a worldwide Islamic Caliphate. While the HT maintains that it is nonviolent, it has repeatedly praised or justified acts of armed jihad and instances of terrorism. Its literature strongly suggests that the organization might at a later stage resort to armed action. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature and websites call for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia. Authorities' actions to suppress the HT and prosecute its members are based on the group's political activity and are not a restriction on religious freedom per se. Religious freedom concerns arise when the Government, through overly restrictive policies on the teaching and practice of religion, restricts legal avenues for spiritual fulfillment and hence induces individuals to join organizations like the HT. Convictions of individuals associated with the HT and similar organizations have lacked due process and have also involved credible allegations of torture. In addition to the serious human rights concerns this raises, it appears that innocent persons are accused of membership in these groups based on their religious beliefs or practice. The Government appears to have recognized this problem, and this may account in part for the loosening of controls on the practice and teaching of moderate Islam.

The Government has repressed and prosecuted members of "Akromiya" (Akromiylar) since 1997. Religious experts claim that Akromiya is an informal association that promotes business along the lines of Islamic religious principles, while the Government claims that the group is a branch or splinter of the HT and that it attempted, together with the terrorist group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), to overthrow the Government through armed rebellion in Andijon in May 2005.

Tabligh Jamoat is an Islamic missionary group with origins in South Asia whose worship, dress, and grooming practices are based on practices from the time of Prophet Muhammad; its members claim to be exclusively religious and apolitical.

Other banned groups include alleged "Wahhabists," a term the Government uses rather loosely to describe strongly conservative Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derive from the teachings of any of several prominent ultraconservative imams of the early 1990s. Imams Nazarov, Parpiev, and Mirzaev are among the more prominent of these. Nazarov lives in Sweden, which granted him political asylum, while the others disappeared in custody. The Government remains deeply suspicious of Muslims who worship outside state-approved institutions, who were educated at madrassahs abroad, or who are tied to known "Wahhabi" imams.

Many in the Government expressed suspicion of the Jehovah's Witnesses, viewing it as an extremist group. Internal police training documents continued to list the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with the IMU and HT, as security threats. Local officials and representatives of the religious establishment continued to express apprehension over the group's missionary activities.

New mosques continued to face difficulties gaining registration, as did those closed previously that reapplied. Several mosques in the southern and eastern Ferghana Valley, which had reported registration problems in past years, remained unregistered despite having the required number of congregants to register. A number of unofficial, independent mosques were allowed to operate quietly under the watch of official imams.

Minority religious groups continued to have difficulties registering in the reporting period. The Jehovah's Witnesses applied for registration at local, regional, and national levels and received either a denial or no official answer during the period covered by this report. Of the 11 Jehovah's Witnesses groups in the country, only 1, in Chirchik, had registration status at the end of the reporting period. The Forum 18 news service reported that the Full Gospel Church in Tashkent applied for registration with the Tashkent Justice Department in July 2007, but it did not receive a response during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, at least one church was stripped of its registration. On November 23, 2007, the Tashkent City Civil Court invalidated the registration of the Grace Presbyterian Church of Tashkent. On November 15 the Tashkent Regional Economic Court annulled the results of an auction held in 1999 whereby the Grace Church acquired its building, thus invalidating its title to the property, which left it without the legal address needed for registration. In January 2008 authorities briefly brought criminal charges against the Church's pastor, Felix Li, and another member for allegedly distributing psychotropic substances. A few days later, the charges were dropped. The Church ceased its regular worship in March 2008 after receiving a warning letter from the hokimiyat (local administration) of Tashkent's Khamza District.

Other churches remained unregistered after unsuccessful efforts in past years to register. These include

Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Guliston; the Pentecostal Church in Andijon; and the Adventist Church, Greater Grace Christian Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand. No Baptist church has successfully registered in the country since 1999.

Religious activity remained particularly difficult in Karakalpakstan, as no non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities had official registration status. The last registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, Emmanuel Pentecostal Church, lost its registration in June 2005. More than 20 Protestant and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in the region have been refused legal status, making their activity illegal.

During the reporting period, many churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, did not apply or reapply for registration because they did not expect local officials to register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, reported that they preferred not to bring themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously would not meet legal requirements. Some groups also did not want to give the authorities a list of their members, especially ethnic Uzbeks, as they were harassed during previous attempts to register. A few groups refused on principle to seek registration because they challenge the Government's right to require it.

To register, groups also must report in their charter a valid legal address. In previous reporting periods, local officials denied approval of legal addresses or did not answer such requests, thus preventing religious groups from registering. The MOJ also cited this requirement in explaining local officials' decisions. Some groups, such as the Tashkent International Church, were reluctant to purchase property without assurance that their registration would be approved. Others claimed that local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

Other problems preventing registration in the past included: claims of falsified congregation lists; problems certifying addresses; improper certification by fire inspectors, sanitation workers, and epidemiologists; grammatical errors in the Uzbek text of a group's charter; and other technicalities.

Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners enjoy greater freedom to choose and change their religion than do members of Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks. Most Christian churches can operate freely as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks.

The private teaching of religious principles and the teaching of religion to minors without parental consent is illegal. Only religious groups with a registered central office may legally provide religious instruction.

There are 11 madrassahs (including 2 for women), which provide secondary education including a full range of secular subjects. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, thus enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. In addition, the Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher educational instruction. The curriculum in the madrassahs and Islamic Institute is oriented towards those planning to become imams or religious teachers. At the government-funded and established Tashkent Islamic University, students pursue religious studies from a secular perspective, which does not qualify graduates to practice as imams; however, some graduates of the university have been appointed imams after pursuing a standard sequence of study at a madrassah.

Apart from full-time study in these institutions, there is no officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam. Two madrassahs in the Ferghana Valley remained closed after the Government converted them into medical facilities in previous years. An increasing number of imams informally offer religious education; although this is technically illegal, local authorities took legal action only in rare instances. Forum 18 reported that in 2008, two imams and a local member of the Muslim Board in Namangan were fired after the imams provided religious education to youth without state permission.

The Government restricts Shi'a Islamic education by not permitting the separate training of Shi'a imams inside the country and not recognizing such education received outside the country. However, Shi'a imams are educated in Sunni madrassahs, which offer some courses in Shi'a jurisprudence. The Russian Orthodox Church operates two monasteries (one for women, one for men) and a seminary and offers Sunday school education through many of its churches. Other religious groups offer religious education through their religious

centers. The Jewish community has no rabbinate because it does not have synagogues in eight different provinces and therefore cannot meet the requirements for a registered central office; however, the Jewish school in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy District provides instruction on Jewish culture.

Foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) accused by the Government of proselytizing remained closed, along with most other foreign NGOs. A 2003 decree of the Cabinet of Ministers outlining a change in registration requirements for NGOs restricted the activities of faith-based entities, and the 1998 Religion Law prohibits "actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing) as well as any other missionary activity." The MOJ controls accreditation, a necessity for any foreigner attempting to work for an NGO in the country, which gives it the ability to force out, without bringing formal charges, those it believes are proselytizing.

In April 2008 the Ministry of Justice publicly threatened to revoke the registration of the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). JDC remained registered as a representational office. In June 2008 the MOJ reportedly told JDC's regional coordinators that the organization would be reregistered soon as a branch office, pending the resolution of a minor legal issue. In April 2008 the MOJ also rejected the application of Rabbi David Gurevich--a dual American-Israeli citizen and Head Emissary of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement--to renew his accreditation and visa. In June 2008 he was deported. The Lubavitch synagogue remained open under another rabbi but without its longtime spiritual leader. Both these actions appear to have resulted from factors unrelated to religious freedom.

On April 21, 2008, the Associated Press reported that the Ministry of Justice revoked the accreditation of an evangelical church in Samarkand run by South Koreans for allegedly conducting unauthorized missionary work.

Sources reported that the Government instructed some mahalla (neighborhood) committees and imams to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion. The Government controls the content of imams' sermons and the volume and content of published Islamic materials. The Muftiate reportedly issued special instructions to local imams in September 2007 on how to observe the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The instructions specifically banned imams from preaching during the nightly Tarawih prayers and prohibited the attendance of school-age children.

Conversely, many sources reported an improved atmosphere in the Muslim community, with many mosques overflowing into the streets for lack of space during Friday prayer. Observant Muslims appeared to be able to display their faith in public more freely. Large numbers of school-age children also were observed attending Friday prayers.

There were credible reports that the security services increased their covert surveillance of Christian religious communities.

State-controlled media in some cases encouraged societal prejudice against certain minority religious groups. On May 17, 2008, Uzbek TV's First Channel broadcast an Uzbek-language documentary entitled "In the Clutches of Ignorance," which condemned the Full Gospel and Blagodat (Grace) churches for their missionary activity, ranking it as a "global problem" on par with "religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism, and drug addiction." The film accused missionaries of using psychotropic drugs and hypnosis to attract recruits and alleged that missionaries targeted youth and the mentally handicapped for recruitment. The program, which also targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Hare Krishnas, named and profiled individual church leaders in a threatening manner. The same program aired in Russian several weeks later.

On March 31, 2008, the state-controlled Gorizont.uz website carried an article describing Jehovah's Witnesses as "obsessed sect members" and advising readers to avoid falling under their "pernicious influence." The state-controlled *Gorizont* newspaper published articles on January 11, 2008, and October 22, 2007, critical of the Grace Church in Tashkent, accusing members of conducting illegal missionary work and "hypnotizing" people with psychotropic drugs. On January 15, 2008, the state-owned *Narodnoe Slovo* reprinted the second *Gorizont* article.

Although the Government requires that the CRA approve all religious literature, in practice a number of other government entities, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), National Security Service (NSS), Customs Service, and police may suppress or confiscate religious literature of which they do not approve. The Religion Law restricts the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious organizations, of which seven existed: an interdenominational Bible Society; the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan; two Islamic centers; and Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic offices. The Government may confiscate and in some cases destroy illegally imported religious literature.

During the reporting period, the Government restricted the quantity of Christian literature in Uzbek that registered central religious organizations could import. Authorities also confiscated Christian literature in Uzbek that had been legally imported. For historical and cultural reasons, evangelical pastors generally preach in Russian while offering limited services in Uzbek--the official national language and the one linked most closely to the majority Muslim population. In previous reporting periods, the CRA allowed some materials, such as limited quantities of Uzbek translations of some books of the Bible, to be imported. The Government requires the Bible Society to file regular reports on its printing, importing, and translating activities.

In May 2008 the customs service held up an Uzbekistan Biblical Society shipment of approximately 11,000 religious books and brochures; the CRA refused importation permission in a June 30 letter, claiming that the Bible Society had not properly notified authorities about the shipment. This was the Bible Society's only shipment during the reporting period. The shipment of 500 Russian-language Bibles and other literature that had been shipped to the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Chirchik that the Customs Service detained in July 2006 remained impounded through the end of the reporting period, along with another shipment seized a month later in transit to Tajikistan.

The International Post Office in Tashkent continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send examples of any religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. When the CRA bans the materials, it mails a letter to the intended recipient and the sender explaining the rejection. The CRA has denied entry of both Christian and Muslim titles. On February 29, 2008, the Ministry of Internal Affairs' weekly *Ogoh* newspaper reported that Customs intercepted a parcel of 13 Christian magazines, alleging that they were intended for proselytizing.

The Government tightly controls access to Muslim publications and requires a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, compact discs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Many books are published with the phrase "permission for this book was granted by the CRA" or "this book is recommended by the CRA," thus indicating official sanction. Generally, only books published under the Muslim Board's imprint "Movarounnahr" contain these phrases. Other works published under the imprint of the state-owned Sharq or Adolat Publishing Houses do not appear to require CRA approval, even when they deal with Islamic law. A few imported works in Arabic are sometimes available from book dealers. More controversial literature, if available, is not displayed, but available only upon request. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists, or of any illegally imported or produced literature, may lead to arrest and prosecution. The Government categorically prohibits HT leaflets.

The Government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,000, or approximately 20 percent of the country's allowed number of pilgrims (estimated at approximately 25,000 pilgrims or 1,000 pilgrims for every 1 million of population). An additional 4,000 pilgrims traveled on the Umrah (small Hajj). Local mahalla committees, district administrations, the National Security Service, and the state-run Hajj Commission, which is controlled by the RAC and the Muftiate, were all reportedly involved in vetting potential pilgrims, subject to a blacklist.

Government employees generally display less religious devotion than do citizens in the private sector. The state maintains a policy of secularism, and government employees are under greater scrutiny than others to maintain the separation between religion and state structures.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

The Government continued to commit serious abuses of religious freedom in its campaign against extremist organizations such as the HT. Authorities severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of extremism, using torture, beatings, and particularly harsh prison conditions. The Government took a number of administrative steps aimed at eliminating torture in detention. While there were several reports of prison conditions improving for those convicted of religious extremism, abuses continued. Most defendants received

sentences ranging from 3 to 14 years; some received sentences of 16 to 20 years. In the past some defendants have also been accused of terrorist activities with little or no proof and been given sentences of as much as 20 years.

In this and previous reporting periods, observers reported that authorities accused persons of HT membership based solely on outward expressions of devout belief or made false assertions of HT membership as a pretext for prosecuting those of moderate religious belief. Authorities also targeted individuals whose relatives were already in prison on charges of extremism or served as witnesses in other trials. Knowledgeable observers note that the Government may have recognized that the limits it placed on other avenues of religious fulfillment correlate directly with the success of extremist organizations in attracting membership. Even as mosque attendance and open religiosity increased, the number of known cases of arrest or detention based on alleged membership in religious extremist organizations appeared to decline for the second consecutive year.

There were several reports of inmates convicted of religious extremism dying under uncertain circumstances. On May 5, 2008, authorities delivered the body of Odil Azizov, who was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on religious extremism charges, to his relatives, who reported signs of torture on the body. Accounts differed on whether Azizov died from torture or bronchitis due to poor prison conditions. In separate incidents in November 2007, three men who had been convicted of membership in the HT died at a prison in Andijon. Police delivered the bodies of Fitrat Salakhiddinov and Takhir Nurmukhammedov to their families on November 13 and 15, respectively. Family members reported signs of torture on the bodies. A third unnamed prisoner died on or about November 29.

During the reporting period, at least 37 persons were convicted of membership in the HT and other banned groups. Many of these cases involved allegations of torture and coercion. Observers were not able to attend many of the trials. It remained unclear how many cases were unreported.

In June 2008 a court in Tashkent Province sentenced two women--Ugibi Mizayev and Rano Akhrokhodzhayeva--to 5 years' imprisonment for membership in the HT, recruitment of HT members, and dissemination of extremist literature.

In February 2008 a court in Bukhara sentenced 13 individuals to between 16 and 20 years' imprisonment on charges of membership in a religious extremist organization. At least one of the defendants reportedly confessed after authorities threatened to harm him and his family. The trial was held in Bukhara, even though all of the defendants were from Shakhrisabz in Kashkadarya Province, making it more difficult for family members to attend.

On January 22, 2008, the Zangiata District Criminal Court in Tashkent Province sentenced Alisher Ubaydullayev to 5 years' imprisonment for membership in an extremist organization. Government authorities accused Ubaydullayev of spreading Wahhabi ideas and cited his participation in an antigovernment rally outside the Uzbek embassy in London in 2005.

In December 2007 a court in Khorezm Province convicted three men of membership in Tabligh Jamaat and sentenced each to between 11 and 14 years in prison. In October 2007 a court in Bukhara sentenced eight men to between 3 and 10 years' imprisonment for membership in the HT. According to human rights activists, police tortured them during pretrial investigation.

On July 9, 2007, the Tashkent Regional Criminal Court sentenced Dilnoza Tokhtakhodjaeva to 3 years' imprisonment and gave 2-year suspended sentences to six other women for membership in the HT. All of the women were reportedly subjected to psychological pressure and threats.

There were no developments in the following cases from previous years of individuals convicted of membership in the HT and other banned religious groups: the April 2007 case of 6 men in Surkhondarya Province, who were sentenced to between 3 and 6 years' imprisonment for membership in a Wahhabi sect and whose confessions were reportedly extracted through torture; the April 2007 case of Gulnora Valijonova, who was sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment for HT membership based on reportedly insubstantial evidence; the October 2006 case of 3 defendants in Samarkand, who were sentenced to between 3 and 8 years' imprisonment for HT membership after a trial in which several defendants alleged that their testimony had been coerced through torture; the September 2006 case of 7 men sentenced to between 10 and 13 years' imprisonment for HT membership who confessed after allegedly being threatened by authorities; the August

2006 case of 29 men in Tashkent Province, who were sentenced to between 1 and 13 years' imprisonment for HT membership after 2 separate trials in which several defendants testified that their confessions had been coerced through severe beatings; the August 2006 case of 5 men sentenced to between 12 and 15 years' imprisonment in Tashkent in which the men alleged in open court that they had been tortured; the April 2006 sentencing of 8 men on charges of membership in an unregistered religious organization in Yangiyul, following a trial in which the defendants testified they had been beaten and tortured.

There were also no further developments in the case of former Tashkent Imam Rukhitdin Fakhruddinov, who was sentenced on September 6, 2006, to 17 years in prison on charges of extremism and involvement in the 1999 Tashkent car bombings, or of seven other followers of Imam Abidkhan Nazarov, who were sentenced in July 2006 to an average of 6 years' imprisonment on charges of Islamic extremism.

The Government continued to prosecute persons suspected of involvement in the Islamic group Akromiya. In December 2007 the General Prosecutor's Office in Andijon charged Anvarjon Mahsadaliyev with membership in Akromiya and complicity in the 2005 Andijon events. There were no further developments in the cases of Abdumalik Ibragimov, sentenced in February 2007 on charges of membership in Akromiya to 8 years' imprisonment, or Abdusamat Karimov and Ilkhomjon Yuldoshev, sentenced in July 2006 to 8 and 5 years' imprisonment respectively, or of the other members of their group convicted and sentenced at the same time as a group on charges of Akromiya membership.

On April 25, 2008, the Samarkand City Court sentenced Jehovah's Witness congregant Olim Turayev to 4 years' imprisonment on criminal charges of illegally teaching religion and organizing an illegal religious organization. Turayev's conviction reportedly rested on coerced testimony from three minors, two of whom were allegedly threatened and one beaten. Turayev was originally detained along with 11 other congregants during a police raid on his home on February 7, 2008. One minor detained during the raid was reportedly sexually molested by a drunken police officer. Following the raid on Turayev's home, the Samarkand Region Deputy Chief Prosecutor issued a warrant enabling police to search 20 additional homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand. After those raids, courts in Samarkand fined six congregants between \$70 and \$700 (93,150 and 931,500 soums) for illegal distribution of religious materials and illegal religious activity. In addition to his criminal sentence, authorities imposed an administrative fine of approximately \$100 (125,000 soums) on Turayev for teaching religion illegally.

On November 29, 2007, the Pap District Criminal Court in Namangan Province sentenced Nikolai Zulfikarov, the leader of a small unregistered Baptist church in Khalkabad, to 2 years of corrective labor for illegally teaching religion. On December 27, the Namangan Criminal Case Appeal Court granted amnesty to Zulfikarov.

In early 2008 Irfan Hamidov, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses Samarkand congregation who had been sentenced in May 2007 on charges of illegally teaching religion to 2 years in a labor camp, was transferred from an open work camp near Samarkand to a harsher prison in Tashkent, and then in April to another prison in Navoi Province, for allegedly violating prison regulations. Following a court ruling, he was returned to the work camp near Samarkand.

Despite appeals for his release in a November 2007 amnesty, Pentecostal pastor Dmitry Shestakov remained in the labor camp in Navoi where he was serving a 4-year sentence after his March 2007 convictions on charges of organizing an illegal religious group, inciting religious hatred, and distributing religious extremist literature. Authorities alleged that Shestakov had violated prison regulations and therefore could not be granted amnesty. Irfan Hamidov likewise was denied amnesty. Prison officials routinely charge religious and political prisoners with violating prison regulations as a means of denying them amnesty.

In previous reporting periods, some sources noted that some prisoners convicted of religious extremism continued to be held separately from "ordinary" prisoners and were treated more harshly by prison guards. In this reporting period, however, there were several reports that authorities reintegrated religious prisoners with other inmates in several prisons.

It is impossible to verify the number of prisoners being held in detention based on alleged HT membership; estimates from previous reporting periods were as high as 4,500.

There were continued reports that shortly before their release, prisoners convicted of religious extremism were retried for organizing extremist cells within prison or other offenses and had their prison terms extended. There were reports that prison authorities did not allow some prisoners suspected of Islamic extremism to practice their religion freely, including not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast.

There were continued reports that authorities harassed or arrested family members of persons wanted in connection with Islamic political activities or already jailed in connection with those activities. In many cases the relative's only crime was association.

Forum 18 reported that Aitmurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant from Nukus, was beaten by authorities after his June 14, 2008, arrest on criminal charges of teaching religion illegally and participating in a "religious extremist" organization. The charges carry a penalty of 5 to 15 years' imprisonment.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. There were numerous reported instances of police raiding meetings of unregistered congregations and detaining their members. With a few exceptions, authorities often charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum wage.

Forum 18 reported that on June 16, 2008, the Yukori-Chirchik District Criminal Court of the Tashkent Region sentenced four members of the unregistered Friendship Baptist Church--Natalya Ogai, Filipp Kim, Dmitri Kim, and Nurlan Tolebaev--to 10 days' administrative detention and fines of approximately \$32 (42,000 soums) each for organizing illegal religious meetings, violating the Religion Law, and teaching religion illegally.

Forum 18 reported that on May 12, 2008, the Navoi Criminal Court fined two members of Navoi's unregistered Baptist Church for holding illegal meetings; one member, Alisher Abdullaev, received a fine of \$790 (1,043,000 soums). On May 10, 2008, the Mubarek Criminal Court reportedly fined two members of the town's unregistered Baptist church following a March 16, 2008, raid on the church.

On April 15, 2008, according to Forum 18, the Syrdarya Regional Criminal Court fined four Seventh-day Adventists from Guliston--Nadezhda Kozhina, Rita Madminova, Eduard Yugay, and Viktor Klimov--for holding unregistered meetings in their homes.

Government authorities also reportedly raided a Full Gospel church in Tashkent's Chilanzar District on April 9, 2008, and seized religious literature found on the premises. On April 11, 2008, the Chilanzar District Criminal Court imposed a 3-day administrative arrest and a fine of seven dollars (10,000 soums) on the church's leader, Serik Kadyrov, in addition to levying administrative fines of \$320 (417,000 soums) against three other church members.

Forum 18 reported that during a raid on a Charismatic Protestant church in Samarkand on April 3, 2008, police briefly detained and beat several congregants and seized Christian literature and a laptop computer.

On February 26, 2008, the Fergana City Criminal Court imposed a fine of \$287 (373,000 soums) on a Baptist, Eduard Kim, for holding illegal religious meetings, according to Forum 18. Government authorities raided Kim's house during a Sunday worship service on February 3, 2008.

Forum 18 reported that on October 10, 2007, the Jizzakh City Criminal Court fined Pastor Aleksandr Vinokurov, the leader of a registered Baptist congregation in Jizzakh, \$35 (46,575 soums) after Christian books in Uzbek and Kazakh were confiscated from him. Forum 18 reported that on September 11, 2007, police in Termez raided a birthday party for local Protestant Vitaly Suvorov, seized Christian literature, and detained 17 individuals until the next morning. Several individuals were reportedly beaten, and one person signed a statement against the leaders of the Surkhundarya Protestant Church after allegedly being threatened with a knife.

In August 2007 police in Nukus opened a criminal case against Pentecostal Christian Maksat

Djabbarbergenov for teaching religion illegally after raiding his home and confiscating religious material, computer equipment, money, and his passport. Djabbarbergenov subsequently went into hiding, and police placed him on a wanted list.

Salavat Serikbayev, who received a 2-year suspended sentence in May 2007 on criminal charges of teaching religion illegally in Nukus, was granted amnesty in January 2008. There were no further developments in the June 2007 case of two God's Love Church members sentenced to 10 days' imprisonment for illegally teaching religion.

Jehovah's Witnesses came under particular scrutiny and occasionally faced arrest and imprisonment on charges of proselytizing. On March 10, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses congregant Abdumannob Ahmedov was arrested with another congregant in Ferghana while conducting a Bible study. Ahmedov was later fined \$280 (372,000 soums) for illegal distribution of religious materials and \$845 (1,117,800 soums) for illegal religious activity.

On February 27, 2008, 19 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained at a congregation meeting in Jizzakh. On March 5, 2008, a local court in Jizzakh sentenced Mamur Tursunkulov and Nabi Kipchakov to 5 days' imprisonment and Arslan Suvankulov to 3 days' imprisonment for illegal religious activity. Several other congregants detained in the raid were also fined between \$14 (18,000 soums) and \$42 (56,000 soums).

On February 22, 2008, 16 Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in a private apartment in the Sergeli District of Tashkent. On February 27, 2008, the Sergeli District Court of Tashkent fined congregants Elvira Safarova \$71 (93,150 soums) and Yevgeniy Kurbatov \$143 (186,300 soums) for several violations of the administrative code related to the illegal teaching of religion. The court also ruled that all literature confiscated during the raid be destroyed.

Shortly after authorities rejected an application for registration from the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in the town of Kagan, near Bukhara, in August 2007, police detained ten members of the congregation and threatened them with bodily harm and imprisonment if they continued their attempts to register. On October 9, 2007, the Kagan Town Criminal Court fined each of the ten congregants \$719 (931,500 soums) for organizing and conducting illegal meetings. Bailiffs repeatedly visited the homes of defendants who had not paid their fines and threatened to confiscate personal possessions.

Dilafruz Arziyeva, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses Samarkand congregation convicted of illegally teaching religion in June 2007, continued to serve 2 years of corrective labor, whereby 20 percent of her wages are deducted and handed to the state.

For the second year in a row, there were few reported disruptions of the Jehovah's Witnesses annual memorial services commemorating Jesus Christ's death, but authorities refused to grant visas to several Jehovah's Witnesses representatives from other countries, including the United States, to observe the services on March 22, 2008.

In contrast with previous years, there were no cases during the reporting period in which authorities deported members of religious minority groups from the country, presumably based upon their religious affiliation. Bethany Baptist Church members Ivan Bychkov and Viktoria Khrypunova, deported in August and September 2006 respectively, as well as a Tajik Pentecostal deported in mid-June 2007 to Tajikistan, all long-time Tashkent residents, remained unable to return home.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

The Government took steps to reduce the likelihood of torture, including for those arrested on alleged religious

extremist charges, by transferring authority to issue arrest warrants from prosecutors to the courts (habeas corpus), thereby subjecting law enforcement officials to judicial oversight. Authorities also allowed independent monitors from the International Committee of the Red Cross to conduct prison visits, which had been suspended in 2006. There were also several reports of prison conditions improving for those convicted of religious extremism, including that such individuals had been reintegrated into the general inmate population at several prisons across the country.

The Government appeared to ease its campaign against possible religious extremists, as the number of individuals sentenced for membership in religious extremist groups appeared to have declined. The Government also allowed greater religious expression by Muslims. It was more common to see women on the street wearing the hijab than in the previous reporting period, and mosque attendance continued to increase. Former Mufti Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusuf continued to host a popular radio program on Islam, teach at the Islamic University, and publish widely on a variety of religious topics in both print and electronic formats.

The Government continued to respect the military pacifism of Jehovah's Witnesses as the draft board routinely gave exemptions. On March 22, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country for the second year in a row encountered few disruptions during their annual memorial services commemorating Jesus Christ's death.

At least two Protestants were granted amnesty during the reporting period. There were also reports of authorities dismissing charges against Protestants after their lawyers protested procedural matters or evidence.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

Society is generally tolerant of religious diversity but not of proselytizing. The population maintained its long tradition of secularism and tolerance. In particular, Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society. However, evangelical or Pentecostal Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts encountered difficulties stemming from discrimination. There were persistent reports that ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced discrimination and harassment.

State-controlled media in some cases encouraged societal prejudice against evangelical Christians and other minority groups. On March 23, 2008, a regional television station in Kashkadarya broadcast footage from a police raid on the small Council of Baptist congregation in the town of Mubarak, accusing the church members of depriving their children of a normal childhood.

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

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with local religious leaders, human rights activists, and government officials to discuss specific issues of human rights and religious freedom. Officials in Washington, D.C. met on several occasions with embassy officials of the country to convey U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom. U.S. officials traveled to and around the country meeting with religious leaders and groups as well as with government officials. The Ambassador and embassy officials maintained regular contact with the CRA and with religious leaders including imams, priests, and rabbis; they also regularly discussed religious freedom concerns with educators, journalists, and human rights activists. The Embassy emphasized the importance of religious freedom by including religious leaders in its human rights focused events.

When the Embassy learned of difficulties faced by religious groups or faith-based foreign aid organizations, it intervened on their behalf where possible, taking such actions as contacting government officials and attending trials. Embassy officials frequently discussed religious freedom cases with diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring cases and contacting government officials.

U.S. diplomats monitored Jehovah's Witnesses' worship services in Tashkent on March 22, 2008, to help ensure the congregations' freedom to observe their annual Memorial of Jesus Christ's death.

The Embassy's Democracy Commission also continued to provide small grants to local groups reporting on religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with numerous Muslim clergymen and other religious figures to discuss and monitor religious freedom concerns. The Embassy also hosted discussions of religious freedom, tolerance, and Islam in America.

Embassy officials urged the Government to allow more freedom of religious expression and more mosque registrations, consistently emphasizing that religious tolerance and political security are complementary goals. U.S. officials, both in Washington, D.C., and in Tashkent, encouraged the Government to revise its laws on religion, including lowering the 100-member minimum required to form a religious group, repealing the ban on proselytizing, lifting restrictions on the importation and publication of religious literature, and eliminating legal provisions prohibiting the private teaching of religion, which the U.S. Government believes is an essential element for preventing further radicalization of young Muslims.

The U.S. Government sponsors exchange and educational programs designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom, and human rights including religious freedom.

In November 2006 the Secretary of State designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom made a second visit to the country in May 2008 to continue dialogue with government officials on improving religious freedom.

Released on September 19, 2008

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