

UZBEKISTAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. Constitutional 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 law requires religious groups to register with the government and declares religious activities of unregistered groups to be illegal. It bans a number of religious groups as “extremist.” The law restricts public speech or proselytism, censors religious literature, and limits home possession of religious materials of all types and formats. Raids of unregistered religious group meetings, legal and illegal searches, and seizure of outlawed religious materials by law enforcement officers (including cell phones and laptops that government officials said contained religious materials) from private residences resulted in a combination of fines, corrective labor, and prison sentences. On February 2, authorities arrested 20 Shia Muslim men in Bukhara for disorderly conduct. The government released some of them immediately, imprisoned five for 15 days and subsequently fined four of them, and convicted one and sentenced him to a five-year term. Government officials conducted customs searches and seizures on individuals arriving on international flights or crossing national borders, looking for contraband religious material. Reports from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicate prison authorities abused prisoners and charged some with organizing extremist religious activities from within prisons, resulting in lengthened sentences. NGO monitors reported, however, that in the fall prison authorities discontinued the practice of arbitrary extension of prison sentences for religious convicts. In May the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported three brothers who were due to be released after serving multiple-year prison terms for “religious extremism” had their sentences extended. Prisoners held on religious extremism charges were unable to practice their religion. Members of religious communities that have had registration applications denied by the government, including the 22 organizations labeled as “extremist,” were unable to practice their religious beliefs without risking criminal prosecution. Authorities continued to impose strict penalties on individuals found worshiping outside an authorized location, and the government failed to register non-Sunni Muslim and other religious groups and their places of worship. The government had not registered a new non-Sunni Muslim house of worship in eight years. Authorities fined members of some groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, which had

unsuccessfully attempted to register, for engaging in religious activities. Several groups remained unable to register their churches after attempting to do so annually for the past 11 years. The Jewish community remained unable to register a central office due to a regulation requiring synagogues in at least eight of the country's 14 administrative units (12 provinces, the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan and the city of Tashkent). Following a gathering of senior Muslim officials in June, President Mirziyoyev announced a new governmental approach to regulating religion. Throughout the summer and into the fall, media and religious groups reported authorities allowed children and teenagers under the age of 16 to practice religion alongside their parents in mosques for the first time. Civil society groups stated that plainclothes police reduced their surveillance of Muslim worship and were replaced by uniformed officers. Civil society groups also said the government removed several thousand names from a security watch list; allowed increased numbers of applicants to go on the Hajj; and permitted open celebration of Ramadan iftars. In honor of Constitution Day, December 7, the president pardoned 2,700 convicts, including 763 "religious prisoners," the largest one-time release of prisoners of conscience in the country's history. A leading civil society association that monitors prison conditions estimates 7,000 inmates remain held on religious charges. Individuals who deviated from traditional ethnoreligious beliefs and practices continued to report police harassment. According to media sources, NGOs, and religious congregations, law enforcement officers closely monitored and raided meetings of unregistered Christian groups and detained their members. The government limited access to religious publications to only a registered legal address. Courts continued to sentence individuals and members of religious groups to administrative detention and fines following court-authorized searches of their homes for private collections of religious materials and literature. Members of the Shia community, Pentecostals, Evangelical Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses all reported police raided private homes of members to either disrupt private gatherings or search for contraband literature. In March the Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application with the UN Human Rights Council alleging the government had repeatedly violated their human right to profess a religious belief. The government cancelled a summer camp for Catholic youth in the Fergana Valley and surveilled Catholic masses. During the year, all minority religious groups that attempted to register a new house of worship failed.

NGOs and private persons continued to report social pressure on individuals, particularly among the majority Muslim population, against religious conversions. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity reportedly suffered continued harassment and discrimination, including pressure upon them from national and local authorities to repudiate their new faith and on their family members to

convince them to do so. Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian Churches, stated they continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination. A number of media organizations continued to publish articles and broadcast television programs critical of proselytism and defaming minority religious groups they regarded as “nontraditional.”

Senior officials from the Department of State met with government officials and recommended tangible steps the government could take to improve its record on religious freedom, including removing restrictions on religious practice and increasing tolerance of minority religions. Embassy officers urged the government to include religious prisoners of conscience in its annual amnesty and met with government officials to discuss the nonregistration of religious communities, limitations on religious expression, and restrictions on the publication and dissemination of religious literature.

Since 2006, Uzbekistan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 22, the Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies the designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32 million (July 2017 estimate). According to government figures from the 1989 census, the last time it collected data on religious beliefs or affiliation, approximately 93 percent of the population is Muslim. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School; the government states approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari School, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 4 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, according to news reports, and Russian migration statistics indicate this number continues to decline as ethnic Russians and other ethnic Slavs emigrate. The government states the remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Roman Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. The Jewish community estimates 6,000 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharan Jews remain, concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara,

Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley. The Jewish population continues to decline because of emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom of religion or belief, including freedom of not professing any religion, but also contains limitations. Constitutional 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 criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities.

The administrative and criminal codes specify sanctions for violations of the law and other statutes on religious activities. The administrative code punishes illegal production, storage, or importation of religious materials. It criminalizes unapproved religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies and punishes private entities for leasing premises or other property to, or facilitating gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations of, religious groups without state permission. It punishes unauthorized religious activity, failure to properly register a religious organization under the law, and facilitating children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature, and other study groups related to worship. The penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage (172,240 som) (\$21) or up to 15 days imprisonment, while the other violations of the law described carry fines only.

The criminal code distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups viewed as "extremist." It criminalizes membership in organizations banned as terrorist groups. It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four million to eight million som (\$500 to \$1,000), to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. The law also specifically prohibits persuading others to join illegal religious groups with penalties of up to three years in prison. The criminal code provides penalties

of up to 20 years in prison for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. Aside from joining an extremist group, charges of religious extremism may include the offenses of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and terrorism.

The criminal code punishes proselytism – the attempt to convert persons belonging to a certain religion to another religion – with up to three years in prison, proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without parental permission, and prohibits all individuals except clergy and individuals serving in leadership positions of officially recognized religious organizations from wearing religious attire in public places. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). Among the requirements, the law states each group must present a membership list of at least 100 citizens ages 18 years or older belonging to the group and a charter with a legal, physical address to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The law states a religious organization may carry out its activities only after the MOJ registers it. Religious educational establishments acquire the right to operate after registering with the MOJ and receiving the appropriate license. Individuals teaching religious subjects at religious educational establishments must have a religious education and carry out their work with the permission of the appropriate agency of the government. These provisions make it illegal to practice any form of religion or belief with others without first obtaining registration as a juridical entity.

The law imposes registration requirements, such as a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units for central registration and the application by 100 members for registration in a specific locality. The applicants also require the concurrence of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA, which reports to the Cabinet of Ministers) and the *mahalla* (neighborhood) committee. The government says it does not review *mahalla* decisions and activities, but reports continue to state there is ongoing coordination.

The law also requires notarized documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith, the group's sources of income, and CRA concurrence to registration. The law requires local governments to concur in registration of groups in their areas and that the group presents a "guarantee letter" from local government authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements (including

statements from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and locally selected neighborhood committees). By law, the MOJ may take one to three months to review a registration application. The MOJ may approve or deny the registration, or cease review without the issuance of a decision. Registered religious groups may expand throughout the country and have appropriate buildings, organize religious teaching, and possess religious literature.

The law limits the operations of a registered group to those areas where it is registered. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy.

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

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

The law requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. The CRA reviews all materials produced and must approve them before distribution. 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 state forbids banned “extremist religious groups” from distributing any type of publications. Individuals who distribute leaflets or literature deemed extremist via social networks have been subject to criminal prosecution and have faced jail terms ranging from five to 20 years. In the summer, government religious authorities expanded the list of religious literature clerics could use in services. To receive a Bible, a “Bible application” must be completed and is subject to government clearance before an authorized version of the bible may be purchased.

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 administrative code punishes “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage of 130,240 som (\$16) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage. The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labor of up to three years for these offenses for acts committed subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code. In practice, criminal code violations for literature are rarely applied, if ever. Courts issue fines under the administrative code. In instances where an individual is unable to pay the fine, courts will issue an order garnishing wages.

The law permits only religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel and conduct religious instruction. Nine madrassahs, including one for women, and an Orthodox and a Protestant seminary are officially approved to train religious personnel and provide secondary education. The government-sponsored Muslim Board of Uzbekistan plans to open a half-dozen religious education schools in 2018. The Cabinet of Ministers considers madrassah-granted diplomas equivalent to other diplomas, enabling madrassah graduates to continue to university-level education. In addition, the Tashkent Islamic Institute and the Tashkent Islamic University provide higher education religion programs. The law does not permit private religious instruction absent state approval and imposes fines for violations. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools.

The law requires imams to have graduated from a recognized religious education facility and 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 can become an imam later.

The law allows those who object to military service based on their religious beliefs to perform alternative civilian service. The law restricts the activities of faith-based NGOs, which is how the government classifies religious congregations. It prohibits religious activities outside of formal worship, as well as religious activities intended for children under 16 years old without parental permission.

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: According to NGOs, religious organizations, and expert observers such as the UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, the government continued to constrain the rights of its citizens to freely speak of and publicly profess or share one's religion, faith, or belief with others. In his preliminary Uzbekistan trip report, the special rapporteur also said, "One of the primary ways in which the freedom of religion or belief is violated is through an overly broad interpretation of religious extremism." The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as "extremist" and criminalized membership in such groups, which included 22 religious organizations. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not a matter of religious freedom, but rather a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious instability and hatred. Reports from NGOs indicated prison authorities physically abused prisoners, and charged some with organizing extremist religious activities from within prisons, which resulted in lengthened sentences. Authorities prevented prisoners held on "religious extremism" charges from practicing their religion.

The government continued to prohibit gatherings for worship in communities where a registered house of worship did not exist, and imposed strict penalties on those worshipping outside an authorized location.

For the eighth consecutive year, the government did not register a non-Sunni Muslim house of worship. The Jewish community remained unable to register a central office due to a regulation requiring synagogues (or other houses of worship) in at least eight of country's 14 administrative units. Authorities fined members of some groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, which had unsuccessfully attempted to register, for engaging in religious activities. Law enforcement officers raided meetings and detained participants of unregistered religious groups and social gatherings where religious issues were discussed. The possession of religious literature uncensored by the CRA was heavily penalized and remained prohibited. Officials continued to search homes, offices, and spaces belonging to members of minority religious groups, at times without valid search warrants, and courts sentenced members of such groups to administrative detention or fines, including for possession of Bibles. The government continued to limit access to certain Islamic publications deemed extremist and arrested individuals

attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission. It also continued to arrest individuals in possession of literature deemed by the government to be “extremist.” State-controlled media accused missionaries and others engaged in proselytizing of posing a danger to society.

The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as “extremist” and criminalized membership in such groups, which included 22 religious organizations. Groups the government labeled as “extremist” were unable to practice their religious beliefs without risking criminal prosecutions. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not a matter of religious freedom, but rather a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious instability and hatred. NGO sources reported the government continued its physical abuse of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of “religious extremism” or of participating in underground Islamic activity.

According to UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed, who visited the country in September – the first such visit since 2012 – freedom of religion or belief was subject to excessive government regulations that prioritize security over freedom. The rapporteur stated the government continued to constrain the rights of its citizens to freely speak of, publicly profess, or share one’s religion, faith, or belief with others in defiance of its own laws and international obligations. He said the various criminal code provisions addressing extremism captured a wide range of activities and have the potential to restrict activities protected under international law. He also said the government imposed strict penalties on those worshipping outside an authorized location and it failed to register a non-Sunni Muslim house of worship in eight years.

Representatives of minority religious groups stated the government continued to prohibit peaceful gatherings for worship and other religious activities in communities where a registered house of worship did not exist. In some cases, Christians remained separated from an authorized gathering place by more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and gathered in private “house churches,” leaving them vulnerable to police harassment and abuse since such gatherings remained illegal.

Based on information gathered during the year from a leading civil society association that follows prison reform, the country’s prison system held approximately 7,000 inmates on charges relating to their religious beliefs or

practices. According to a speech by the president on December 7, the total prison population was 57,000.

Minority religious groups said they continued to experience difficulties registering and conducting religious activities because of harassment by local authorities.

On May 26, IGIHRDU reported the Tashkent City Criminal Court charged 11 devout Muslims with “religious extremism” and sentenced them to five to six year prison terms. According to IGIHRDU, defendants reported that, during the investigation, authorities tortured and physically abused them and harassed their family members. The judge and prosecutor rejected their torture claims.

Prison administrators reportedly continued to charge prisoners convicted of religious extremism with organizing extremist cells while in prison, or with other offenses which served as grounds for extending their prison terms. Reports from independent media and rights activists continued to state that administrators charged prisoners incarcerated for religious extremism with alleged internal prison violations, making them ineligible to apply for an amnesty for which they otherwise would be eligible.

In May IGIHRDU reported that three brothers – Abdukarim, Akhmadillo and Abduvokhid Mirzaev, who were serving prison terms for “religious extremism” and attempts to overthrow constitutional order – received additional prison terms prior to the end of their prior sentences in January and April. Courts had sentenced Abdukarim Mirzaev to eight years in 2009; Akhmadillo Mirzaev to five years in 2006, and an additional six years in 2009; and Abduvokhid Mirzaev to 11 years in 2006. According to family members, prison authorities tortured all three men and denied them accommodation to practice their faith.

In September police raided the private Tashkent home of a Sunni Muslim woman who held regular gatherings of a women’s club at her home to discuss religious matters and Islam with neighbors. A Shaykhontokhur District administrative court convicted the organizer of teaching religion without a license, and fined her 13.8 million som (\$1,680).

According to Shia community representatives, in Bukhara on February 2, the National Security Service (NSS) and police officers raided a gathering of 20 Shia men at a local restaurant for disorderly conduct. According to *Centre1*, an independent news publication founded by an exiled expatriate journalist, authorities released 15 of the detainees immediately while charging the other five –

Jahangir Kulijanov, Shavkat Azimov, Alibek Khusanov, Jamshid Khasanov, and Sharof Sharapov –with harassing a woman and refusing to obey police orders; authorities sentenced the men to 15 days in jail. Detainees reported authorities physically abused them while in detention, placed them in solitary confinement, and provided no access to lawyers. Authorities searched the men’s homes, and found unauthorized religious literature and materials, including a video sermon of Moscow-based Imam Amin Ramin, who created a popular lecture series in Russian on the history of Shia Islam and the faith’s basic tenets. In May the government charged Kulijanov and Azimov with illegally establishing a public association or religious organization. Later in the month, authorities charged Kulijanov with possession, production, and dissemination of materials deemed a threat to public order. On August 22, a Bukhara District Court judge ordered Azimov and Kulijanov each to pay an 8,190,000 som (\$1,000) fine on the illegal religious association charge. In November a court in Bukhara convicted Kulizhanov of illegal possession of religious material and violating the law on religious organizations and sentenced him to five years in jail. According to human rights activists, the prosecution provided what it said was evidence of alleged appeals to religious discord, but similar passages could be found in officially authorized literature used in mosques. Human rights defenders said the lack of a competent expert on Shia Islam led to an inaccurate interpretation.

President Mirziyoyev took several steps regarding improving relations with the Sunni Muslim community: the government cleared 16,000 persons from a security watch list of potential religious extremists; dispatched imams to prisons to begin a course of rehabilitation with religious prisoners; and lifted sanctions on the day-to-day practice of Islam, including public prayer to youth participation in mosques. A dedicated Islamic prayer room with a separate space for ablution was opened for the first time at Tashkent International Airport; the government has also announced plans to open prayer rooms in train stations. Authorities recently allowed major mosques to use loudspeakers for calls to prayer for the first time in more than a decade. In November the government approved fee-based courses on Arabic language and Quranic studies for the general public. In honor of Constitution Day, December 7, the president pardoned 2,700 convicts, including 763 “religious prisoners,” the largest one-time release of prisoners of conscience in the country’s history.

Religious groups and human rights activists reported armed law enforcement officers continued to raid meetings of unregistered groups and detain their members. Courts continued to sentence members of minority religious groups to

administrative detention following searches, at times without valid search warrants, of homes and offices.

In March Forum 18, an Oslo-based NGO that chronicles religious rights abuses in Central Asia, reported that on February 28, three police officers, including an antiterrorist officer, entered the residence of Protestant couple Andrei and Tursuna Li in Uchtepe District, Tashkent Region, under the guise of conducting a passport check. Officers confiscated two Bibles in Russian, two Bibles in Uzbek, and a concordance (Bible index) in Russian. They also seized two mobile phones and a laptop computer. Li stated they had purchased the Bibles from the officially registered Bible Society. Authorities told Forum 18 that the confiscated materials were being examined by a religious expert pending a decision on whether to press charges.

Forum 18 reported the Council of Baptist Churches said that on March 11, two officers of the Yashnobod District Antiterrorist Police, Tashkent City, raided the home of a Baptist couple, Konstantin and Susanna Binkovsky. According to the couple, the officers stated it was part of a regular inspection for security reasons on the eve of the Novruz holiday (Persian New Year). As soon as the officers entered the Binkovskys' home, however, they asked the couple whether they had religious literature. The officers confiscated a family Bible, other Christian books, and a paper notebook with notes without a warrant and made no official record of the search. The same day officers took Konstantin Binkovsky to Yashnobod District police station. According to Susanna Binkovsky, officers questioned them and ordered them not to disclose publicly information concerning the raid. Once the Baptists published information about the raid and literature seizure on the internet, the same officers came back to the Binkovskys' home and threatened the couple with arrest.

On April 6, authorities raided the home of Alla Dobronravova, a member of an officially registered Baptist church in Navoi, while she was hosting her daughter and son-in-law at her residence, Forum 18 reported. Police confiscated Christian materials, including five books, two songbooks, two DVDs, and two personal paper notebooks with notes. Officers also told Dobronravova she might be charged with illegal production, storage, or import into the country, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials. For individuals, this would involve fines between approximately 3.4 million som (\$420) and 17.2 million som (\$2,100), plus confiscation of the materials and any items used to manufacture or distribute them.

On April 20, Nukus Criminal Court sentenced four Protestant men – identified only as Marat, Joldasbai, Atamurat, and Salamat – to 15-day jail terms for worshipping together at a private residence. Forum18 reported authorities freed the four from custody on May 5. According to *Centre1*, the NSS deprived the men of food rations as a form of punishment while in prison.

In May Forum 18 reported that authorities fined two visiting female Protestants from Turkmenistan in Khorezm Region. Customs officials searched the women as they prepared to cross back into Turkmenistan and discovered Christian materials on their mobile phones. The materials included sermons, songs, and the Bible in Uzbek. Officials confiscated the women's mobile phones and passports, preventing them from leaving. Over the next few days, officials summoned the women for questioning each day, often for several hours at a time. Authorities then fined them 172,240 som (\$21), each under the Administrative Code and allowed them to return to Turkmenistan.

On June 18, law enforcement in Karshi, Kashkadarya Region, raided a meeting for worship organized by the Council of Baptist Churches for approximately 200 deaf church members. On July 21, the Karshi City civic court tried five church members – Viktor Tashpulatov, Mikhail Balykbayev, Jahongir Shadmonov, Svetlana Andreychenko, and Munira Gaziyeva – on charges of conducting unsanctioned worship. The court sentenced Tashpulatov and Balykbayev to five-day jail terms. The three others each received a fine of 449,325 som (\$56).

According to religious freedom advocates, on July 23, 25 police officers in Urgench, Khorezm Region, conducted an unauthorized raid during the Sunday morning worship meeting of a group of 27 local Protestants in the home of Ahmadjon and Yelena Nazarov. According to witnesses, some of the officers carried automatic weapons and only six wore police uniforms. Police confiscated a children's Bible, a personal notebook with notes, sheets of paper with Christian songs, and three mobile phones. The officers detained all of the worshippers and took them to the Urgench City police station, where, according to victims, they were harassed, including subjecting females to strip searches.

In August, according to Forum 18, police raided a private home where Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov and fellow Protestant worshipers were meeting. Participants were taken to police headquarters for questioning and released. In October Judge Bakhtiyar Torebayev fined some of the worshipers detained in August, including Nazarov, while others were given warnings.

On November 10, police in Andijan raided the private apartment of Irina Stepanova, a member of the local state-registered Baptist church. Officials justified their search with a claim that she “illegally stored a gun in her apartment.” Officials confiscated three Bibles, one Baptist songbook, Christian magazines, booklets, CDs and DVDs, and six personal notebooks. Andijan police opened a case against Stepanova with a possible penalty of a fine between approximately 3.4 million som (\$420) and 25.8 million som (\$3,150).

On November 19, 14 officials raided the private home of Stanislav Kim in Urgench during Sunday morning worship, according to Forum 18. Police arrested nine adults and interrogated and threatened them for two hours at the police station. Officials confiscated Christian books and detained other worshippers for police questioning. Three congregants were fined and two served 15-day sentences in custody. The other four were released from custody.

Media reported authorities closely observed social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, and made several arrests of individuals based on their participation in such gatherings. In one case, police raided a private home in Nukus where more than a dozen Baptists gathered for a dinner party service. Police found no religious materials but issued a fine for illegal worship outside a registered premise.

According to human rights activists and religious community representatives, the government reviewed the content of imams’ sermons as well as the volume and substance of Islamic materials published by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (Muftiate, the highest Sunni Muslim authority in the country). The government ensured its control over the Muftiate through the CRA and by selecting the Muftiate’s staff. The government did not legally limit the volume of public calls to prayer, although many mosques did so.

The government stated most prisons continued to set aside special areas for inmates to pray, and prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible. Family members of prisoners reported, and the UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief confirmed during his October visit to the maximum security Jaslyk prison, that prison authorities did not allow prisoners suspected of religious extremism to practice their religion, including reading the Quran or praying privately. According to the UN special rapporteur, reported restrictions included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast.

Authorities continued to fine representatives of registered religious groups, or representatives of groups that had unsuccessfully attempted to register, for engaging in religious activities, including fining members of Jehovah's Witnesses for congregating in a place other than their sole registered house of worship in Tashkent Region. In October Jehovah's Witnesses reported law enforcement personnel raided the houses of Bayrambay Begzhanov and Zhanar Alekbaeva, members of the congregation, and confiscated religious literature and a mobile phone with religious publications on it. On October 3, the Chirchik City Administrative Court in Tashkent Region charged the two with illegal production, storage, and distribution of religious materials and fined them 1,497,750 som (\$190) and 2,995,500 som (\$370) respectively.

In Tashkent on February 4, authorities arrested Lidiya Sisoyeva of the Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing her beliefs with others. Officials searched her personal belongings and seized a mobile phone and tablet computer; they were subsequently fined under the administrative code. On February 14, police arrested two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Svetlana Andreeva and Alfiya Ganieva, while they were peacefully proselytizing. Police officers seized two mobile phones and a tablet computer; the two women were subsequently fined under the administrative code. In Fergana, on July 2, police officers arrested two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Anastasiya Berezeva and Gulnara Islamkulova, after they were proselytizing; they were subsequently fined under the administrative code.

During the year the Jehovah's Witnesses recorded 245 episodes of "hostile acts" against their members, ranging from physical abuse in police detention and threats of physical violence against family members, to home raids, unlawful searches and seizures of personal property, and employment discrimination – a decrease from 264 such acts in 2016. In March the international Jehovah's Witnesses organization filed a petition with the UN Human Rights Council alleging egregious violations of their members' right to practice their faith in the country.

Many religious group representatives reported they were unable to meet the government's registration requirements, which included the need for permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units to acquire central registration, and application by 100 members for registration in a specific locality. Their inability to register left them subject to criminal sanction for engaging in "illegal" religious activities.

As in previous years, the MOJ continued to explain denials of registration by citing alleged failures of religious groups to report a valid legal address or to obtain

guarantee letters and necessary permits from all local authorities. Some groups stated they did not have addresses because they continued to be reluctant to purchase property without assurance their registration would be approved. Other groups stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. In response, some groups reported providing congregation membership lists with only Russian-sounding surnames.

Churches that previously attempted to register reportedly remained unregistered. These included the 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 Gulistan; the Pentecostal church in Andijon; and the Adventist Church, Greater Grace Christian Church, Central Protestant Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand. Catholic congregations in Navoi and Angren were unable to register their churches after 11 years of unsuccessful attempts.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that, despite continued efforts to engage with the government, they had no success in registering new congregations despite their growing numbers. They currently only have one registered site, on the outskirts of Tashkent, which does not adequately meet their needs.

According to the CRA, the number of registered Sunni mosques reached 2,042, the highest number since 1998. Anecdotal reports said a small number of unregistered "neighborhood mosques" continued to function for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live close to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques remained limited in their functions, and were not assigned registered imams.

Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious groups reported they continued to have particular difficulties conducting religious activities in Karakalpakstan because all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities continued to lack legal status there.

The Jewish community remained unable to register a central office because it did not have synagogues in at least eight of the country's 14 administrative units, as required by law. Despite the community's efforts to have additional rabbis recognized, the MOJ accredited only one rabbi, a Bukharan, in 2014, and none since. The Ashkenazi Jewish community continued to lack a rabbi. Members of the Jewish community said the rabbi shortage limited faith practices, religious

interest, and growth of the community. Jews expressed concern over the future of their congregations once the current generation of adherents either emigrated or passed away.

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

Media reported security services continued to conduct surveillance of Muslim communities by filming participants at Friday prayer services at local mosques. Parishioners at Catholic masses also reported surveillance and that authorities prohibited a summer camp for children in the Fergana Valley, citing security threats. Other communities, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, reported surveillance of their facilities.

The government and local imams continued to discourage public displays of religious adherence considered to be foreign-influenced. For example, media reported authorities questioned women in Surkhandariya and the Fergana Valley for wearing the hijab and encouraged them to remove it or wear it in the more traditional style of tying the scarf at the back of the neck.

According to civil society monitors, Muslims could openly celebrate Ramadan iftars in public for the first time in recent memory. According to the NGO Freedom House, for the first time in many years, the government allowed all-night prayers during Ramadan.

State-controlled and -influenced media continued to accuse missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord. In Karshi on May 18, the regional state broadcaster aired a documentary that encouraged residents actively to resist Jehovah's Witnesses in their neighborhoods because of the potential harm a conversion may have for family and social unity. Regional authorities also initiated an "antimissionary marathon" with posters in the central square.

Mahalla committees and imams continued to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion. Muftiate authorities stated they and *mahalla* committee members regularly made home visits in the *mahalla*'s district to check on a family's spiritual needs.

The government continued to provide logistical support, including charter flights, for a limited number of selected Muslims to participate in the Umrah and Hajj

pilgrimages, although pilgrims paid their own expenses. The government increased the number of Hajj pilgrims to 7,500 from 5,200 the previous year, the first increase since the founding of the country 26 years ago, although this number still represented only approximately a third of the country's allotment allowed by Saudi Arabia. Religious authorities continued generally to limit access to the Hajj to persons over 40 years old. Local *mahalla* committees, district administrations, the NSS, and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the Muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. According to reports from sources in the human rights community in the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan, it was exceedingly difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and bribery. Officials have established a commission to review participation eligibility.

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

A number of government entities, including the Ministry of Interior, NSS, Customs Service, and local police, continued to confiscate, and in some cases destroy, religious literature and the equipment used to produce it.

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

According to worshippers, the authorities continued to confiscate, and in some cases destroy, religious literature in the Uzbek and Russian languages imported legally or produced in country, as well as religious items such as prayer beads or incense.

Members of registered minority religious communities reported they continued to encounter difficulties when entering and leaving the country because authorities seized religious literature for alleged customs violations. In January Forum 18 reported customs officials at Tashkent airport confiscated Qurans and other Muslim books from pilgrims returning from the Umrah pilgrimage.

The government continued to block access to several websites containing religious content, including Christian- and Islam-related news sites, and to websites run by Forum 18.

On June 1, after a 23-year project, government translators finalized the first complete Bible in the Uzbek language. The government subsequently authorized the publication of 3,000 copies, which it conceded would not be enough to satisfy local demand. The government continued to allow the following groups to publish, import, and distribute religious literature upon review and approval by the CRA: the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the Muftiate, Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic Churches.

Christian groups stated they need more than the single authorized version of the Bible in Uzbek to practice their faith. Religious leaders commented they continued to lack access to other important religious materials and texts to explain the teachings and tenets of their faiths in the Uzbek language.

Following a gathering of senior Muslim officials in June, President Mirziyoyev called for a new governmental approach to regulating religion. As a result, media and religious groups reported authorities began permitting children and teenagers under the age of 16 to worship alongside their parents in mosques for the first time beginning in the summer. Civil society groups stated that plain-clothes police reduced their surveillance of Muslim prayer services, and were replaced by uniformed police officers.

In November the Kukcha mosque in Tashkent broadcast the call to prayer over its loudspeakers for the first time since 2005.

Representatives of a registered Christian group and of the Bahai community stated children were able to attend community-sponsored activities and services with the permission of their parents, such as Sunday school. Eyewitnesses continued to report large numbers of children in attendance at both places of worship.

In June religious authorities inaugurated a new Islamic theological seminary in Bukhara to prepare more imams for pastoral roles, and the government in conjunction with the Muftiate launched online courses on religious subjects such as jihad and sharia.

Media reported that as of the new year, officials would require hotels to furnish at least 10 percent of rooms with Islamic prayer mats and religious books such as the Quran, Bible, and Torah, and 30 percent of rooms with an indicator specifying the direction of Mecca.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. No Islamic religious institutions in the country are privately funded because of a government prohibition. In June the government approved a branch of the Tashkent Islamic University on the premises of the Burkhaniddin Naqshband Sufi Shrine. Officials stated Sunni clerics who obtained their qualifications at religious schools abroad were allowed to preach within registered premises.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Activists and human rights groups acknowledged the existence of social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion. There were reports that ethnic Uzbeks who have converted to Christianity faced harassment and discrimination. Some reported that social stigma for conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials of their dead and forced such groups to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or to allow burials only with rituals of another faith.

Religious groups known to proselytize faced greater social scrutiny, and their neighbors regularly called police to report their activities.

On January 31, the progovernment website *Podrobno.uz* published an editorial criticizing the Jehovah's Witnesses, stating the organization's activities were "extremist and totalitarian" and "banned in many countries."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, senior officials from the Department of State and other senior U.S. government officials addressed religious freedom concerns with the country's leadership. They raised issues such as prisoners of conscience, impediments to registration of religious groups, and overly broad application of antiterrorism statutes with the president, foreign minister, and CRA. Embassy officials met with several government officials, including at the National Human Rights Center and the CRA, to raise concerns about the imprisonment of individuals for their religious beliefs. U.S. officials

continued to urge the government to amend the religion law to allow members of minority religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship, relax requirements for registering a faith-based organization, provide protection for public discourse on religion, and remove restrictions on the importation and use of religious literature, in both hardcopy and electronic versions. U.S. officials urged the government to commit to implementing United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 on religious freedom (adopted in 2011), including holding workshops on religious freedom and tolerance. They also discussed the difficulties faced by religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations with regard to their registration and the destruction of their religious literature. U.S. officials continued to engage the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to identify concrete steps that could be pursued in a collaborative manner to address challenges and implement recommendations for improving religious freedom conditions.

The embassy also advised several visiting senior officials from United Nations bodies responsible for human rights, including the special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief. Embassy representatives frequently discussed religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring court cases and contacting government officials for updates on police cases.

In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy drew attention to ongoing concerns of Christian communities regarding their inability to register a house of worship, of evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses concerning discussion of their beliefs openly in public, and regarding the prosecution of several Shia, after they had expressed core beliefs that Sunni Muslims said were heretical. Embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society, and with relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Embassy engagement included meetings with the leaders of the Baptist and Catholic Churches to discuss issues related to registration of congregations, with members of the Jehovah Witnesses to address their concerns about increasing police raids on parishioner homes, with expatriate Bukharan Jews and those still living in Bukhara to discuss their concerns about the future of their community, as well as reaching out to other communities to discuss security measures imposed by the government.

Since 2006, Uzbekistan has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 22, the

Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.