

# UZBEKISTAN 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. In May the parliament approved a religious freedom “roadmap” to implement all twelve of the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur on Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed. It simplified rules for registering religious organizations and their reporting requirements. The government established a consultative body – the Council of Faiths – as a platform for discussing issues with 17 recognized religious groups. Through presidential pardons, the government released 185 prisoners convicted on religious extremism charges. In September the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Uzbekistan dismissed Imam Parpiev for diverging from his government-approved sermon. For the first time in eight years, the government registered a church, Svet Miru, run by a Presbyterian religious community in Chirchick, near Tashkent. The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported a significant drop in police harassment of their members: 114 cases compared with 240 in 2017. According to multiple sources, until late in the year, police continued to raid unregistered religious group meetings, detain participating individuals, conduct legal and illegal searches, and seize outlawed religious materials from private residences. One raid was reported following the government’s announcement in December it would halt raids on religious groups. Courts continued to sentence detained individuals to fines and prison; however, for the first time, higher courts overturned some of these sentences. Members of religious groups whose registration applications the government denied remained unable to practice their religious beliefs without risking criminal prosecution. Authorities fined members of some groups, including unregistered Jehovah’s Witnesses, for engaging in collective worship and other religious activities. The Ministry of Education issued a new dress code prohibiting the wearing of religious garments and symbols, such as skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs, in schools. Media reported authorities ordered more than 100 girls at the Tashkent International Islamic Academy to remove their hijabs or face expulsion. Police detained and fined nine bloggers who called for the government to allow girls to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to attend mosques. According to press reports, the Tashkent District Department of Public Education instructed educators to schedule school activities on Fridays to prevent the release of pupils for prayers. Human rights activists said police continued to check the identities of worshippers and blocked entrance to most mosques for anyone under 18 years old. According to Roman Catholic leaders, the government banned a summer camp for Catholic youth in the Fergana Valley and surveilled Catholic masses. Media reported the

government intentionally blocked access to several websites containing religious content, including Christian and Islamic-related news.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private persons continued to report social pressure on individuals, particularly among the majority Muslim population, against religious conversion. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity reportedly suffered continued harassment and discrimination, including government pressure 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 Christians, Pentecostals, and Baptists, said they continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination. Some religious minorities said social stigma for conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials.

Senior officials from the Department of State, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, met with government officials and recommended tangible steps the government could take to improve religious freedom. Steps raised included releasing individuals detained for engaging in peaceful religious activities; relaxing requirements for registering faith-based organizations so they may all operate legally and not be subject to fines or raids; allowing members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship; removing restrictions on the importation and use of electronic and hardcopy religious literature; and providing protection for public discourse on religion. Embassy officials urged the government to include religious prisoners of conscience in its annual amnesty and routinely met with religious groups and civil society regarding religious freedom and tolerance.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. Uzbekistan had been designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006-2017 and moved to a Special Watch List after the Secretary determined the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30 million (July 2018 estimate). Uzbek government statistics estimate the country's population at 33

million. According to U.S. government estimates, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 93-94 percent of the population is Muslim. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School. The government states approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari School, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 3.5 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, according to reports, and 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 Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. According to members of the Jewish community, the population, a mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic (Bukharian) Jews, numbers fewer than 10,000. There are approximately 6,000 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharian Jews, 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. According to the constitution, these rights may not encroach on lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society. The law allows for restricting religious activities when necessary to maintain national security, the social order, or morality. The constitution establishes a secular framework providing for noninterference by the state in the affairs of religious communities, separates the state and religion from each other, and prohibits political parties based on religious principles.

The 1998 law on religion details the scope of and limitations on the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities.

In June the parliament approved a new law "On Countering Extremism." The legislation states it aims to provide for individuals' security, protect the society and the state, preserve the constitutional order and the territorial integrity of the country, retain peace, and provide for multiethnic and multireligious harmony

among citizens. The law provides a framework of basic concepts, principles, and directions for countering extremism as well as extremist activities.

The criminal code distinguishes between “illegal” groups, which are unregistered groups, and “prohibited” groups viewed as “extremist.” It criminalizes membership in organizations banned as terrorist groups. It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four million to eight million som (\$480 to \$960), to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. The law also specifically prohibits persuading others to join illegal religious groups, with penalties of up to three years in prison. The criminal code provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. Charges against alleged members of religious extremist groups may include the stated offenses of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and terrorism.

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

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

The law requires notarized documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith, the group’s sources of income, and CRA concurrence to register. The law also requires that local governments (*khokimiyats*) concur in registration of groups in their areas and that the group presents notification from *khokimiyat* authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements, including obtaining authorization certificates from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and locally selected *mahalla* committees. After checking the submitted certificates, *khokimiyats* grant registration permission and then send the documents to the CRA for review. By law, the MOJ may take

one to three months to review a registration application. The MOJ may approve or deny the registration, or cease review without issuing a decision.

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

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

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

The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The law restricts the activities of NGOs, the government classification for religious congregations.

The government must approve religious activities outside of formal worship, as well as religious activities intended for children under 16 years old without parental permission.

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

The law punishes private entities for leasing premises or other property to, or facilitating gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations of religious groups

without state permission. The law also criminalizes unauthorized facilitation of children's and youth meetings, as well as literary and other study groups related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 9,215,000 to 18,430,000 som (\$1,100 to \$2,220) or up to 15 days imprisonment.

The administrative code requires all religious organizations to inform the CRA, local magistrate, and the local MOJ representative one month in advance of religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies that are to occur outside of a group's registered building(s), including those activities involving foreign individuals or worshippers from another region.

Under the law, state bodies, including *mahalla* 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 freedom, prohibiting propagation of religious views, and considering other questions related to observance of the law.

The law prohibits all individuals except clergy and individuals serving in leadership positions of officially recognized religious organizations from wearing religious attire in public places. The government does not enforce this section of law; individuals may appear in public places in religious attire.

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

The law requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute religious materials. The law requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications. 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. To receive a Bible, individuals must complete a "Bible application," which is subject to government clearance before the group or individual may purchase a government-authorized version of the Bible.

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 (3,686,000 to 18,430,000 som – \$440 to \$2,200) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage (\$1,100 to \$3,300). The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” Courts issue fines under the administrative code. In instances where an individual is unable to pay the fine, courts will issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (18,430,000 to 36,860,000 som – \$2,200 to \$4,400) or “corrective labor” of up to three years for individuals who commit these acts subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code. In practice, criminal code violations for religious literature are rarely applied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Government Practices**

According to the report issued in February by UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed, who visited the country in October 2017, freedom of religion or belief was subject to excessive government regulations that prioritized security over freedom. The rapporteur stated the government continued to constrain the rights of its citizens to freely speak of, publicly profess, or share their 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 could restrict activities protected under international law. He also said the government imposed strict penalties on those worshipping outside an authorized location. The special rapporteur provided a list of 12 recommendations, which included revising the 1998 Law on Religion, simplifying registration procedures, and allowing religious education for children.

In May the parliament approved the “Roadmap to ensure freedom of religion or belief” in an effort to implement all 12 recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed. The roadmap also included the mechanisms needed for their implementation, suggested deadlines for these actions, responsible agencies, and the expected results. In May and September the government reduced the fee for registration of religions organizations from 100 to 20 times the minimum monthly wage (from 18,430,000 to 3,686,000 som – \$2,200 to \$440); reduced organizational reporting requirements from four times per year to once; and adopted the practice of suspending a religious organization’s activity only at the organization’s discretion or by a court decision. The government established a consultative body – the Council of Faiths under the Religious Affairs Committee – including representation from the Committee on Religious Affairs and providing a platform for 16 participating religious groups registered in the country, including

Jehovah's Witnesses, to develop recommendations on religious freedom for the committee.

According to the government, 1,503 persons convicted of engaging in terrorist and extremist activities, or those belonging to what the government called religious fundamentalist organizations, were serving sentences in the country's detention facilities. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev pardoned 185 individuals who had been previously convicted of membership in movements the government labeled extremist, compared with 399 in 2017. NGO representatives stated they could not independently verify the numbers of such individuals who remained in detention.

Civil society groups expressed concern that the law's definition of extremism remained too broad. NGO representatives said the government continued torture of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of "religious extremism" or of participating in underground Islamic activity.

On September 19, the government issued a presidential decree creating a procedure for citizens to apply for release of criminal liability for joining terrorist, extremist or other banned organizations. In accordance with the decree, citizens would be exempted from criminal liability if they had not undergone military training, did not participate in terrorism financing, or distributed information promoting terrorism. The decree established the Republican Interdepartmental Commission to review cases.

Media reported authorities closely observed social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, and arrested several individuals based on their participation in such gatherings. 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.

During the year, the Jehovah's Witnesses recorded 114 episodes of "hostile acts" by authorities against their members, affecting 233 persons, ranging from interrogations to 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. The Jehovah's Witnesses recorded 240 episodes of such acts affecting 480 persons in 2017.

According to unregistered evangelical Baptist Congregation representatives, in August the city court in Chust, Namangan Region, sentenced Pastor Alisher and his assistant Abror to 10 days of administrative detention. Judge Bokhodir Kazakov found them and six women guilty of “illegal religious activity” for gathering at Alisher’s home. Authorities fined the women one million som (\$120) each and confiscated their mobile phones.

According to human rights groups, in August and September police and secret police officers detained up to nine bloggers in at least five regions of the country. The bloggers had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls for women to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to pray in mosques. Courts assessed fines and jail terms of up to two weeks. One of the Tashkent-based bloggers, Adham Olimov (also known as Musannif Adham), was fined and jailed for 15 days. According to independent local news agencies, the bloggers were released on September 6-11. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists website and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)’s Uzbek Service, blogger Ziyodilla Kabirov (also known as Ziyovuddin Rahim) was sentenced to 10 days’ administrative arrest and fined 184,300 som (\$22). Blogger Otabek Usamov, who wrote commentaries for the religious website Azon.uz, was sentenced to 15 days’ administrative arrest.

According to the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, on July 17, a Fergana court overturned a district court decision giving Muslim scholar and human rights activist Musajon Bobojonov a three-year suspended prison term on charges of disseminating “extremist material” and using religion to disturb public order. According to RFE/RL, Bobojonov heads the Ezgulik (Compassion) human right group’s branch in the eastern city of Andijon.

In February two Muslim sisters, Zulhumor and Mehrinisso Hamdamova, were released after spending more than eight years in prison. Authorities arrested them in 2009 for holding unauthorized religious meetings. In a closed trial in 2010, the Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court sentenced the sisters to between six and one-half and seven years in prison. Authorities convicted both sisters under sections of the criminal code regarding attempting to change the constitutional order, holding materials threatening public security and public order, and participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organizations.

According to Forum 18, in March Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov, a Tajik citizen, was released after serving most of a five-year sentence for possessing an electronic

copy of the Quran and Islamic sermons on his mobile phone while transiting through Tashkent. A court convicted Mirzorakhimov in 2013 under the section of the criminal code covering smuggling material to “propagandize religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism.”

According to Forum 18, on January 8, in the Parkent District of Tashkent Region, a court fined Yevgeni Kupayev, his wife Natalya Kupayeva, and seven other Jehovah’s Witnesses 1,843,000 som (\$220) for distributing religious literature on the street. According to Forum 18, on February 25, police officers in Parkent District, led by Senior Lieutenant Khozhiyev, arrested Kupayev and Natalya Kupayeva, along with Aliya Sadikova and Elmira Davletshina, at a bus stop when they were returning home from sharing their religious beliefs with persons in the village of Karakalpak. They were all released immediately after questioning. The Jehovah’s Witnesses told Forum 18 that police physically forced them into a patrol car and took them to the police station, where police questioned them and a male officer conducted a body search of all four individuals, including the three women. Sadikova and Davletshina were not charged. On March 14, prosecutors opened a criminal case against Kupayev and Kupayeva for “illegal manufacture, storage, import or distribution [of] religious materials.” On November 9, a Tashkent court ordered their telephones confiscated and fined Kupayev and Kupayeva 10 times the monthly minimum wage each, – 1,843,000 som (\$220).

In January Jehovah’s Witnesses Dilbar Odinayeva and Turabek Asadov were summoned to the Samarkand police station and interrogated. A police officer threatened them and demanded they convert to Islam, according to congregation sources. Authorities subsequently released them without charges.

In February Jehovah’s Witness Radjabbanu Khodzhayeva reported that *mahalla* representatives and four police officers in Bukhara came to her home. They questioned her about her beliefs and demanded she start reading the Quran.

In February Jehovah’s Witness Iroda Razikovna reported that Tashkent police searched her home and interrogated her. Police demanded she write an explanation of her beliefs and reason for leaving Islam.

Law enforcement officers raided meetings and detained participants of unregistered religious groups and social gatherings where participants discussed religious issues. According to multiple sources, police continued to raid unregistered religious group meetings, conduct legal and illegal searches, and seize outlawed religious materials from private residences. One raid was reported

following the government's announcement in December it would halt raids on religious groups.

According to the 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses Country Report, on March 28, police in the village of Uzinavo in Karshi District interrupted a peaceful religious meeting of six Witnesses in a private home. The officers conducted what the Witnesses said was an unlawful search of the house and seized a Bible and other religious literature in the Uzbek language. Police interrogated the group at the police station until 1:30 a.m. According to the report, police ignored requests for medical assistance from two of the women who suffered from high blood pressure. Police released the accused after questioning and did not pursue criminal charges.

According to Forum 18 news service, on November 25, 40 plainclothes officials, including members of the National Guard, the State Security Service secret police, the MOJ, and Yashnobod District police, raided Baptist Sunday worship services in the Yashnobod District of Tashkent. The congregation was part of the unregistered Baptist Council of Churches. Officials searched the building and confiscated approximately 7,800 items of literature and DVDs. Forum 18 reported police took 14 individuals, including a 14-year-old boy, to the Yashnobod police station and made them wait outside in the cold while officials tried to force them to sign statements admitting to participating in "an unauthorized meeting." When they refused, police interrogated them for nine and a half hours. According to Forum 18, police recorded names, addresses, workplaces, and other personal details of all the individuals present at the service and on November 27 came to the home of one of the participants for a "passport check." Authorities later released all individuals without charges and returned the confiscated literature.

Forum 18 reported that on November 23, police raided the home of Sharofat Allamova in Urgench where she, her two daughters, and four friends, including the pastor of her church Ahmadjon Nazarov, were having dinner. Police searched the home without a warrant and confiscated a New Testament. According to Forum 18, police filmed everyone present and recorded their personal details and addresses. On November 24, Captain Mukhammad Rakhimov, head of the Urgench Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, brought one of the dinner participants to the *mahalla* committee and tried to pressure her to accuse the host and the pastor of holding "unauthorized religious meetings" by threatening to take away her two children. According to Forum 18, when the woman refused to sign a statement about what one officer called "illegal Christian Wahhabi activity," police brought her mother-in-law to the station and ordered her

to beat the daughter-in-law until she signed. Forum 18 also stated police tried to pressure Nazarov to sign a statement but he refused.

According to Forum 18, on September 30, police in Tashkent raided a group of 40 Protestants meeting at a private home for a meal and Bible study. Without a search warrant, police detained the group and confiscated Bibles and other literature, including DVDs and CDs, the group had purchased legally from the state-registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan. Forum 18 said police applied “psychological pressure” to the group; one woman and a five-year-old girl were subsequently hospitalized.

According to local congregation members, in July in Urgench, police officers detained seven Christian teenagers who were decorating greeting cards. Ten security officials entered the apartment of the leader of a local evangelical Christian community, Akhmed Nazarov, where Nazarov’s wife, Elena, and the teenagers were the only individuals present. Police confiscated a calendar with popular proverbs, six greeting cards, a notebook that contained Christian music, another notebook with Uzbek-language quotes from the Bible, and two pieces of paper with handwritten scripture. Authorities charged Nazarov with holding an unauthorized religious meeting and destroyed all the confiscated materials. In the entire Khorezm Region, where Urgench is located, according to Nazarov, there was one registered Protestant religious organization, commonly known as “the Korean Church.” Nazarov told Fergananeews.ru that he collected the necessary number of signatures for registration, but an employee of the regional department of the Ministry of Justice told him, “Uzbeks will not be registered.”

In April in Chimbay City, Karakalpakstan Region, local police raided an all-Christian birthday party, according to congregation members. Police took the participants to the local police station and charged them with holding an “illegal religious meeting.” Police released them early the next morning. On July 13, a local judge found all the individuals who had been present except the minors guilty of engaging in illegal religious activity. The judge sentenced all the women to pay penalties of 1,254,000 to 1,672,000 som (\$150 to \$200) each, and the owner of the house to pay 8,360,000 som (\$1,000). The 11 men involved were sentenced to five to seven days of administrative detention. Later, the Superior Court of Karakalpakstan vacated the fines and returned all confiscated possessions.

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 “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.

According to human rights activists and religious community representatives, the government continued to review 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 sources said the government ensured its control over the Muftiate through the CRA by selecting the Muftiate's staff and circulating approved sermons for prayer services. The government did not legally limit the volume of public calls to prayer, although many mosques voluntarily did so, according to media sources.

In September the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan dismissed Imam Fazliddin Parpiev from his position at Tashkent's Omina Mosque after Parpiev posted a video appeal to the president asking him to allow more religious freedom, including lifting the country's ban on women's Islamic headscarves and on men's beards. In his Friday sermon, Parpiev also addressed the right to mosque attendance and religious education for youth. While the state-backed Muslim Board of Uzbekistan did not specifically mention the reasons for dismissing Parpiev, the imam told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service that shortly prior to his dismissal, an official of the state's religious affairs department had told him that "You shouldn't have deviated from the script" – an apparent reference to his questioning state policy on Islam. The dismissal letter, signed by four top officials of the Muslim Board, said the board's ethics commission made the decision to terminate Parpiev's contract. Parpiev subsequently left the country, according to media reports.

The government stated it did not review *mahalla* committee decisions and activities related to religious freedom, including local registration decisions, but reports continued to state that there was ongoing coordination.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the new registration rules adopted in May and September contained many of the same obstacles to registration for all groups as the 1998 law. According to the CRA, by year's end the country had 2,260 registered religious organizations representing six different faiths. Muslim religious groups operated 2,052 Sunni mosques, four Shia mosques, 15 scientific centers, and 12 educational institutes. According to the CRA, the total number of mosques reached 2,056, compared with 2,043 in 2017, and the highest number

since 1998. The 177 non-Muslim groups include 36 Orthodox churches, five Catholic churches, 50 Pentecostal churches, 22 Baptist churches, nine Adventist churches, three New Apostol churches, two Lutheran churches, one Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, one Voice of God church, 27 Korean Protestant churches, two Armenian churches, eight Jewish communities, six Baha'i centers, one Hari Krishna temple, and one Buddhist temple. There was also a registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

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. At year's end, they had only one registered site, on the outskirts of Tashkent, which they stated did not adequately meet their needs.

Many religious group representatives reported they were unable to meet the government's registration requirements, which included the need for a 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 harassment by local authorities and criminal sanction for engaging in "illegal" religious activities.

In October Jehovah's Witnesses appealed to *mahalla* committees in Fergana and Karshi for permission to open a Kingdom Hall, one of the first steps of a multistep process in receiving government registration. In Fergana, the *mahalla* committee categorically refused the Jehovah's Witnesses' request, responding "the Jehovah's Witnesses are dangerous to young persons because of their radical views...have violated the law among Christians...[and are] forbidden in many countries." In Karshi, the *mahalla* committee noted in its rejection that there were already two registered Christian churches (a Korean Evangelical Church and Russian Orthodox Church) in the city and recommended the Jehovah's Witnesses use those church facilities for their services.

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

Churches that previously attempted to register reportedly remained unregistered. These included the Bethany Baptist Church, Life Water Church, Tashkent Presbyterian Church, Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, Uyushma Church, and Anapa Church in Tashkent; the Pentecostal church in Chirchik; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church, United Church, and a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Gulistan; Association of Independent Churches and Union Evangelical Church in Urgench; Pentecostal Church in Andijan; and a Seventh-day Adventist church, Greater Grace Christian Church, Central Protestant Church, Miral Protestant Church, Samarkand Presbyterian Church, Our Brotherhood Church, and a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Samarkand. Catholic congregations in Navoi and Angren remained unable to register their churches after 12 years of unsuccessful attempts.

In April Jehovah's Witness Fazliddin Tukhtayev reported visiting the Shekhonchi *mahalla* committee in Bukhara to seek the committee's approval to register a Kingdom Hall. Tukhtayev provided a presentation kit about Jehovah's Witnesses to the committee to explain the mission of the organization and its activities. Following the presentation, *mahalla* council officials filed an official complaint with police. Subsequently, Tukhtayev was charged with production, storage, importation, and distribution of religious materials, and fined 1,722,400 som (\$210).

For the first time in eight years, the government registered a church, Svet Miru, a Presbyterian religious community in Chirchick, approximately 50 kilometers north of Tashkent. The government offered to register a central office for the Jewish community, but members declined the offer, citing lack of funds and community interest to sustain a central office.

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

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

Despite the Jewish community's efforts to obtain recognition for additional rabbis, the MOJ accredited only one rabbi, a Bukharian, in 2014, and none since. The Ashkenazi Jewish community continued to lack a rabbi. Members of the Jewish community said the lack of rabbis limited faith practices, religious interest, and growth of the community. Jews continued to be concerned about the future of their congregations as the current generation of adherents either emigrated or died.

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 and imposed strict penalties on those worshipping outside an authorized location.

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.

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 July authorities fined Tashkent resident Yulduz Baltaeva 10,334,400 som (\$1,200), for carrying out illegal religious activity. Baltaeva accompanied three deaf adult men to Chirchik, the location of the only registered Jehovah's Witnesses' congregation in the country, for a religious convention. Because the CRA did not approve the convention, the CRA determined that Baltaeva's attendance and her assistance to others to attend constituted illegal religious activity.

Media reported security services continued to film participants at Friday prayer services at local mosques. Parishioners at Catholic masses also reported surveillance and said authorities continued to prohibit a summer camp for children in the Fergana Valley, citing security threats. Other communities, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, reported surveillance of their facilities.

In September Tashkent District's department head of public education sent a letter to schools to prevent schoolchildren from attending Friday prayers and instructed

that additional school events should be planned for Fridays, according to RFE/RL's Ozodlik Uzbek Service. According to the report, Muslims said police had begun cordoning mosque entrances and performing identity checks on youth, as well as prohibiting admission to anyone younger than 18. Media reported police broadly implemented these measures in the Fergana Valley, Bukhara, and Samarkand.

On October 17, human rights activist Shukhrat Ganiyev told Forum 18 that police and the State Security Service in Bukhara openly monitored individuals who went to mosques, especially during Friday prayers. According to Ganiyev, authorities paid particular attention to young men and boys under the age of 18. Ganiyev stated that after they were identified, police would visit their parents' homes to pressure them into stopping their children from attending mosques. Ganiyev told Forum 18 that he knew of approximately 50 such cases involving men and boys from July to October. Ganiyev said officials in Bukhara Region put less pressure on Muslim young men attending mosques during the year than in 2017.

*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 what they characterized as a family's spiritual needs.

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 said, and UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Shaheed also stated during his October 2017 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 Shaheed, authorities did not permit inmates to pray five times a day and refused to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. These restrictions remained in place at year's end.

The government continued to provide logistical support, including charter flights, for Muslims to participate in the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, although pilgrims paid their own expenses. As in 2017, the government allowed 7,200 Hajj pilgrims, 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 State Security Services, and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and

the Muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. According to human rights groups in the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan, it remained exceedingly difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and bribery. A commission established in 2017 continued to review participation eligibility. New regulations require that pilgrims apply to local *mahalla* committees, which submit a list to the *khokimiyats*. The CRA uses the *khokimiyats*' lists to coordinate national air carrier flights to Jeddah. During the year, the government allowed 18,000 pilgrims to travel for the Umrah, compared with 10,000 in 2017. Beginning in September, the government removed all restrictions on the number of Muslim pilgrims who wish to travel for Umrah.

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

Large, government-operated hotels continued to furnish a limited number of rooms with Qurans and Bibles. The government reported that 1,000 Qurans were made available for hotels. Upon advance request, hotels also provided other holy books, prayer mats, and *Qiblas*, which indicate the direction of Mecca. All airports and train stations had small prayer rooms on their premises.

According to civil society observers, authorities allowed Muslims for the second year in a row to celebrate Ramadan openly and the number of public iftars was greater than in the previous year.

The government sponsored multi-stage Quranic recitation competitions among men and women followed by Hadith (a collection of Islamic traditions containing sayings of Muhammad) competitions.

In September the minister of education issued a dress code regulating the length of hair and dress, the color of uniforms, and the type of shoes for all pupils in both public and private schools. The government expressly forbade religious symbols of all types, such as skullcaps and crosses. The policy continued the ban on students wearing hijab. In September, at the beginning of the school year, authorities forced more than 100 girls at the Tashkent International Islamic Academy to remove their hijabs under threat of expulsion, according to the BBC Uzbek service.

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

The CRA continued to prohibit and penalize religious groups in possession of religious literature uncensored by the CRA. 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.”

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.

According to a Jehovah’s Witness, 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.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, on May 26 in Jizzakh, Director of the Counter Terrorism and Extremism Department Bobur Boymurodov interrogated Jehovah’s Witness Muborak Abdurakhmanova about possessing and sharing religious content. Officials seized her mobile phone, found e-copies of religious literature and videos, and initiated administrative charges against her. According to the report, on May 31, police officers separately detained and interrogated three Jehovah’s witnesses: Dilyafroz Sheralyeva, Nasiba Umarova, and Sarvinov Esonkiliyeva. Police inspected their mobile phones and pressured them to write statements admitting to communicating with Abdurakhmanova about religious content. On June 3, police interrogated Jamshid Umatov and told him to provide a

statement admitting that he had received religious content from Abdurakhmanova through his mobile phone. On June 4, police also interrogated Jamshid's sister, Dilnavoz Umatova, and told her to provide a statement.

According to congregation members, in April and May authorities raided Jehovah's Witnesses worship meetings in private homes in Samarkand and Fergana, and twice raided a home in Karshi. Authorities also raided Jehovah's Witnesses homes for religious literature in Urgench and in the Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. After the Yangiyul search, a court fined two members of the local community 921,500 som (\$110) under an article in the administrative code that prohibits production, storage, importation, and distribution of religious materials.

Forum 18 reported that on July 17, a Tashkent court upheld Gayrat Ziyakhojayev's June 12 conviction for sharing texts that the lower court said contained "a threat to public security and public order," even though he downloaded the texts from an Uzbek website that was not banned. The court ordered his phone and computer destroyed. Ziyakhojayev was immediately released. According to BBC journalists, the court summoned him again prior to year's end.

According to congregation members, in July an administrative judge in the Uchkuduk district court of Navoi Region fined Baptists Igor Zherybatnikov and Iskhok Urazov for possessing various Christian materials, including three Bibles, one copy of "Bible Stories," and one copy of "Stories from the Holy Scripture." The judge ordered the materials destroyed.

According to congregation members, in October approximately 20 officers of the Bostanlyk District police in Tashkent Region raided a group of 40 Protestants, including members of an ethnic Korean church and other Protestant churches, meeting at a Protestant center in Kyzyl-Su. Police searched the center and confiscated numerous items of church property, including a laptop computer, guitar, overhead projector, loudspeaker, three microphones, three electric kettles, music stands, a writing board, and two Christian books. Police provided no formal record of the confiscations.

According to Forum 18, police fined persons suspected of storing authorized versions of the Bible, purchased from government stores, and confiscated them. Forum 18 stated that on November 19, police in Pap, in eastern Namangan Region, raided a group of Protestants meeting for a meal and Bible reading in a private home. Police confiscated Bibles, booklets, and DVDs and CDs containing Christian films, songs and sermons. Forum 18 reported all of the confiscated

literature had been purchased from the state-registered Bible Society of Uzbekistan. Police arrested the eight individuals and took them to Pap Police Station, where police questioned them until 3 a.m. the next morning. The report stated police forced most of the Protestants to sign statements admitting guilt and said they might prosecute them for illegal possession of religious literature.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses online news service JW.org, between March and November the Supreme Court reversed four lower court decisions that resulted in fines for possessing Bible-based literature and electronic versions of the Bible. According to the web site, the court of the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan also reversed a lower court decision finding an individual guilty of possessing religious material and imposing a fine.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on May 2, police in Samarkand raided a private home where seven Witnesses had gathered for a religious meeting. Police inspected the personal belongings of all those present and confiscated an Uzbek-language book of Proverbs from one person and a mobile phone containing electronic religious publications from another. On May 22, a court found the two Witnesses liable under an article in the administrative code and fined each of them 861,200 som (\$100).

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on March 24, police in Samarkand raided a private home where nine Witnesses had gathered for a religious meeting and seized a phone that contained electronic copies of Jehovah's Witnesses literature.

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

According to worshippers, 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 authorities continued to seize religious literature for alleged customs violations.

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.

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 Catholic Churches.

Christian groups stated they needed more than the single authorized version of the Bible in Uzbek to practice their faith. Religious leaders said 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.

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

According to the television channel Uzbekistan 24, during the first half of the year, the staff of the State Security Service uncovered 116 illegal Islamic educational institutions (*hujras*). Uzbekistan 24 reported that for calendar year 2017, the comparable number uncovered was 33 *hujras*. Authorities raided and closed each establishment. In the summer, the government released a film on what it said were the dangers of underground mosques that featured a number of organized underground *hujras*. According to media reports, in Andijan Region, Nosirbek Turgunov created a religious school in the basement of his house where boys 5-6 years of age studied religion. According to the film, Turgunov locked pupils in a cramped room, deprived them of food, and applied corporal punishment. According to the film, an investigation revealed Turgunov had had no formal study of theology. He said his knowledge of Islam came from his parents.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. No Islamic religious institutions in the country could receive private funding because of a government prohibition. In April a presidential decree established the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. The academy's stated goals were to provide the country's religious educational institutions (universities and madrassahs) with highly trained teachers and mentors, improve the research and professional skills of scholars, educate graduate students in the fields of Quranic studies, Islamic law, the science of *hadith* and *kalam* (Islamic doctrine), and engage in research, teaching, and public outreach.

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

At a July 25 event in Washington, D.C., Minister of Justice Ruslanbek Davletov stated the country's "new religious policy fully acknowledges the adherence to the international standards and treaties," but that under these treaties "religious rights are not absolute... when it comes to public security, public order, or moral of the rights, and of the other citizens[.]" He said religious missionary work and proselytism would continue to be banned under the new laws being created under the road map because such activities could lead to "disagreements in society" that threatened religious peace and could incite hatred among religions in his country. At a December event in Washington, Uzbek Ambassador to the United States Javlon Vakhobov said there were "some difficulties with the implementation of our [religion] laws, especially at the regional and local level, but they are all reduced to a few incidents and are not systematic in nature." Vakhobov also stated Uzbekistan had committed to ceasing raids on unregistered religious organizations as well as simplifying registration procedures.

State-controlled and -influenced media continued to accuse missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord.

In the March 29 edition of progovernment newspaper *Khordik Plus*, an article entitled, "Oh, miserable people ... Religion is worship, not a crime!" the author said, "What about the various missionary societies? We have not forgotten how many young people unable to distinguish between the white and the black, were fraudulently lured by them."

An article in the June 9 edition of *Khordik Plus* described police officers searching the house of Anna Mologina (a Jehovah's Witness) and her mother, Svetlana Mologina (not a Jehovah's Witness). Police officers seized printed literature, and authorities opened a criminal case. The article stated that any illegal missionary activity in Uzbekistan was subject to penalty.

The March 29 edition of *Khordik Plus* noted that Jehovah's Witness Matyakubova Zamira, "propagandizes" among her fellow believers. That article stated that there would be consequences for missionary activity.

The online Russian news magazine *Sputnik* reported in a July 26 article entitled, "The Minister of Justice helps in ensuring interreligious peace in the country," that Minister Davletov said missionary activity and proselytizing would lead to a

comparison of religions and to social tensions and controversies. The minister also stated, “Many foreign visiting experts say that we should remove this ban. But this is a matter of principle for us.”

RFE/RL reported the government banned a “flash-mob protest” set for September 5 in Tashkent at which the singer known as Young Zapik had planned to debut his song “Beautiful Girl in Hijab.” Young Zapik subsequently released the song on social media.

In October the government rescinded an order issued in March to demolish a Buddhist temple in Tashkent, the only active Buddhist temple in Central Asia and the country’s only legal place of worship for the small, mostly Korean, Buddhist community. City authorities earmarked the temple, a tourist destination and point of interest for visiting religious officials, including the chief Buddhist monks of Burma and Thailand, for demolition to widen a city road. The government’s reversal came after members of the Buddhist community registered a protest on the president’s virtual portal and with local area diplomats and journalists.

At year’s end, there were three public Islamic universities in the country: the Tashkent Islamic Institute, Tashkent Islamic University, and Mir-i-Arab Madrassah in Bukhara. According to official figures, 593 persons were studying at Islamic universities (509 in Tashkent and 84 in Bukhara).

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

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

In February, according to witnesses, a father removed his daughter from a religious meeting at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik. The Witnesses said the woman’s father humiliated and beat her in public, demanding that she return home and return to Islam. According to congregation members, her parents threatened other relatives who were Jehovah's Witnesses and other fellow believers. Police officers interrogated her and had a conversation with her regarding her religious convictions.

Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christian, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian Churches, stated they continued to face societal scrutiny and discrimination. They said their neighbors regularly called police to report their activities.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses members, in May the counterterrorism police unit detained Lazizbek Isomov and Ilvos Ashrapov in Bukhara, along with their supervisor, after coworkers lodged complaints against them for sharing a religious video. Police seized their mobile phones and searched their homes for Jehovah's Witnesses publications. A judge fined both Isomov and Ashrapov 516,720 som (\$62), for sharing the video.

#### **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. In September the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with the country's senior leadership, including the president, foreign minister, and members of parliament. The Ambassador noted ongoing concerns about religious rights and privileges for Muslims including religious education and attire for children, the inability of Christian organizations to register and grow their churches, and systematic and persistent harassment of the Jehovah's Witness community. He commended the government for religious freedom reforms under the leadership of the president and noted that implementing the road map would help ensure religious freedom is more fully protected across the country. In June the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities visited the country and raised issues, including prisoners of conscience, impediments to registration of religious groups, and overly broad application of antiterrorism statutes with the foreign minister, the CRA, and leading members of parliament.

Throughout the year, the U.S. Ambassador and the Charge d'Affaires met with senior government officials, including the president, foreign minister, and officials from the National Human Rights Center and CRA, to raise concerns about imprisonment of individuals for their religious beliefs, bureaucratic impediments to the registration of religious minority groups, and raids on religious groups. The Ambassador also raised the lack of access to religious literature and general harassment of religious groups. At various levels of government and in different forums, U.S. officials continued to urge the government to amend the religion law

to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship and relax requirements for registering faith-based organizations. They pressed the government to provide protection for public discourse on religion and remove restrictions on the importation and use of religious literature, in both hardcopy and electronic versions. They also discussed the difficulties religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations faced with regard to registration, and with authorities confiscating and limiting their access to religious literature. The U.S. government supported the adoption of a religious freedom roadmap and the drafting of legislation overhauling the law on religion as concrete steps to enhance religious freedom.

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

In his remarks at the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, held in Washington, the Secretary of State stated, “When religious freedom flourishes, a country flourishes. As one example today, we applaud the steps that Uzbekistan is taking towards a more free society. We have great confidence that a degree of religious freedom greater than before will have a positive ripple effect on their country, their society, and the region as well.”

In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy drew attention to the continuing inability of Christian groups to register houses of worship, of evangelical Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss their beliefs openly in public, and of Muslim parents to take their children to mosque or educate them in their faith. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. officials, including a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 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 leaders of the Baptist and Catholic Churches on registration of congregations and with members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to address their concerns about police raids on parishioner homes. They also met with expatriate Bukharian Jews and those still living in Bukhara to discuss their concerns about the future of their community, and with Buddhists about the proposed government demolition of their temple.

In October the Charge d’Affaires posted on the embassy’s website an opinion piece commemorating International Religious Freedom Day. Several major news websites in the country republished the piece.

On November 28, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. Uzbekistan was designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006-2017 and moved to a Special Watch List after the Secretary determined the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom.