U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Uzbekistan

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

UZBEKISTAN

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, in practice the Government only partially respects these rights. The Government perceives unofficial Islamic groups or mosques as extremist threats and sharply restricts their activities. The Government also restricts recently arrived religions that either the Government does not understand, or that proselytize.

The Government is secular and there is no official state religion. Despite the principle of separation of church and state, the government-controlled Spiritual Directorate for Muslims (the Muftiate) funds some Islamic religious activities.

Part of the legacy of the Soviet era was suspicion of all organized religion. However, the Government since independence has permitted persons affiliated with mainstream religions, including approved Muslim groups, Jewish groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and several other Christian denominations (e.g. Catholics and Lutherans) to worship freely.

On their face, the laws treat all religious confessions equally. Nonetheless, the Government shows its support for the country's Muslim heritage by funding an Islamic university and subsidizing citizens' participation in the Hajj. The Government promotes a moderate version of Islam through the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims, which controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials.

On May 1, 1998, the Parliament passed two laws that have restricted religious activity. The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations replaces the previous religion law of the same name. It provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state, and the right to establish schools and train clergy. However, the law also imposes a number of restrictions on religious rights. It requires that all religious groups and congregations register or reregister following stricter criteria. In particular, it stipulates that each group must present a membership list with at least 100 Uzbek citizen members to receive permission to register, compared with the minimum of 10 specified in earlier legislation. This provision enables the Government to ban any group simply by denying its registration petition.

Government officials designed the law to target Muslims worshiping outside the system of state organized mosques. Although the Government has granted some exemptions to the 100-member requirement, there are no formal criteria for receiving exemptions. Instead, exemptions are granted arbitrarily. To register, groups must report in their charter a valid juridical address. Local officials on occasion have denied approval of a juridical address in order to prevent churches from registering.

As of March 1, 1999, the Government had received 1,700 applications for registration from Muslim congregations. As of mid-year, 1999, it had approved registration for 1,510 Muslim, 119 Christian (out of 132 applications), and 11 other (Jewish and Baha'i) congregations or groups. A large but unverifiable number of mosques have not attempted to register. Most observers estimate that over 4,000 have been established in the country since independence. However, many of these were little more than prayer rooms in private homes. In several instances, the Government granted exemptions from the requirement of having 100 Uzbek members to foreign Christian groups and other small congregations. Some groups with too few members have reported they prefer not to bring themselves to the attention of the authorities by submitting a registration application that does not, on its face, meet legal requirements.

In addition to requiring reregistration, the new law severely limits religious activity. It restricts religious rights that are perceived to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, prohibits private teaching of religious principles, forbids the wearing of religious clothing in public by anyone other than clerics, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to import, publish, or distribute printed matter. The law gives government officials the right to approve or reject the credentials of teachers of religion in church educational centers.

The second law passed on May 1, 1998, consisted of a series of revisions to the criminal and civil code that stiffen the penalties for violating the religion law and other statutes on religious activities. These revisions provide punishments for activities such as organizing a banned religious group, persuading others to join such a group, and drawing minors into a religious organization without the permission of their parents. The criminal code was amended again in May 1999 with two changes that affect religious freedom. The changes draw a distinction between "illegal" groups, which are those not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups, which are banned altogether. The first measure makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to 5 years in prison, "to organize or resume the activities of an illegal religious group," and by up to 3 years to participate in the activities of such a group. The second sets out stiff penalties (up to 20 years in prison) for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups.

Since 1991 when the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, of the Sunni variety of Islam traditional in the region. There are no official statistics on membership in various faiths, but approximately 80 percent of the population are nominally Muslim. Another 10 to 15 percent are nominally Russian Orthodox. Only a small portion of members of these two leading faiths actually practices, although the numbers who do so are growing. Islam has not been a factor in the lives of most citizens for some time.

There are now roughly 30,000 Ashkenazy and Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan, concentrated in the main cities of Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. Almost 70,000 have emigrated to Israel or the United States since independence. The remaining 5 to 10 percent of the population include small communities of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Seventh-Day Adventists, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas.

The Government bans the teaching of religious subjects in public schools.

The Government's record on respect for the right to religious freedom worsened during the period covered by this report. The Government deprived some groups of their right to exist, restricted many religious practices and activities, and punished citizens for their

religious beliefs. Ethnic differences do not have an effect on the degree of religious freedom. Russians, Jews, and foreigners enjoy greater religious freedom than Muslim ethnic groups, including Uzbeks. Christian churches generally are tolerated as long as they do not try to win converts among Uzbeks. There have been isolated reports of Uzbek Christians suffering harassment by officials.

The most serious abuses of the right to religious freedom were committed against Muslim believers. While benevolent toward moderate Muslims, the Government seeks to control the Islamic hierarchy and is intolerant of Islamic groups that attempt to operate outside the state-controlled system. The Government is determined to prevent the spread of ultraconservative or extremist versions of Sunni Islam, which it labels "Wahhabism" and considers destabilizing. President Islam Karimov frequently has declared the Government's intention to rid the country of Wahhabists and underground Islamic groups such as Hezbut Tahrir, which it views as extremist. The Government perceives such groups as political and security threats and represses them severely. Waves of government actions against suspected extremists followed both the December 1997 murder of police officials in Namangan and the February 1999 terrorist bombings in Tashkent. At the beginning of 1998, the Government ordered the removal of loudspeakers from mosques in order to prevent the public broadcasting of morning and evening calls to prayer. The Government closed several hundred nonauthorized mosques during 1998, and they remained closed during the period covered by this report.

In June 1999, according to press reports, Ministry of Interior police arrested several dozen persons in Tashkent for distributing Hezbut Tahrir leaflets allegedly "propagating an extremist Muslim teaching" that was banned. Hezbut Tahrir members admit to desiring an Islamic government but deny that they advocate violence.

Dissident Islamic figures deny they are extremists and claim that they are being persecuted for their unwillingness to praise the Government's actions "slavishly."

Several persons arrested for religious reasons apparently have died from mistreatment in custody. An outspoken Muslim cleric, Qobil Muradov, apparently was beaten to death in prison on October 30, 1998. His body showed severe bruising, his teeth were knocked out, and his collarbone and several ribs were broken. Officials alternately claimed that he had fallen accidentally from a wall and that other prisoners had beaten him. Like many persons whom the Government considers to be enemies, he was arrested for possession of narcotics, which were probably planted on him by police. He had not been tried at the time of his death.

It appears that 42-year old Farkhod Usmanov was beaten or tortured to death in custody. On June 14, 1999, police arrested Usmanov for possession of a Hezbut Tahrir leaflet. Usmanov was the son of former Imam Nosir-Kori Usmanov. According to Human Rights Watch, after holding him incommunicado for 11 days, officials returned his body, which showed bruises and injuries, to his family on June 25, claiming that he had died of heart failure.

Akhmadhon Turahonov died in custody on June 19, 1999, reportedly because prison authorities refused to treat his diabetes. Turahonov was a member of the Birlik Democratic Movement and a human rights activist, and was not religious. Officials nonetheless accused him of being a Wahhabist and charged him with hooliganism and conspiring to overthrow the Constitution. In addition to these three cases, there were unconfirmed reports of at least five other deaths by torture or beating.

A leading independent Muslim cleric, Imam Abidkhon Nazarov, has been missing since March 5, 1998, when dozens of police and security agents raided and searched his home. Although his family claims that the security services abducted him, the Government and many observers believe that he fled to avoid arrest.

There were no reported developments in the 1995 disappearance of Imam Abduvali Kori Mirzaev; the 1997 disappearance of his assistant, Nematjon Parpiev; or the 1992 disappearance of Aboullah Utaev, leader of the outlawed Islamic Renaissance Party.

The security services have arrested, detained, and harassed Muslim leaders for perceived acts of insubordination and independence. Although international observers are not allowed to inspect prisons, conditions are said to be inhuman for all varieties of prisoners. Authorities have extended the sentence of imprisoned Muslim activist Abdurauf Gafurov, based on testimony by fellow inmates, although he was scheduled for release in March 1998. The government-appointed Muftiate has not reinstated several independent-minded clerics whom it fired in 1996. The Friday mosque in Andijon , where missing Imam Mirzaev formerly preached, was closed by the Government in mid-1995 and remains closed.

In early 1998, following the December 1997 murders of officials in Namangan, arrests and detentions of suspected "Wahhabists" numbered at least in the hundreds and perhaps in the thousands. Although it appears that the majority since have been released, there was no reliable information on the number actually charged with crimes. The police routinely planted small amounts of narcotics or ammunition on citizens to justify their arrest. The police based dozens of arrests on the mere fact that the individuals wore beards, a traditional sign of Islamic piety. In trials of those suspected of involvement in the murders, at least four defendants claimed that their confessions had been extracted by torture or beating.

From mid-1998 to mid-1999, the Government took several actions that, to human rights observers, seem designed to discredit the well-known imams Mirzaev and Nazarov. On December 29, 1998, the Supreme Court handed down sentences of from 5 to 16 years to a group of 15 alleged associates of Imam Mirzaev. Most confessed in full or in part to the Government's charges of robbery, murders, terrorism, and conspiracy against the constitutional order, but human rights observers believed that the Government persuaded some members to confess to conspiracy and terrorism in order to discredit Mirzaev.

In January 1999, the Tashkent city court convicted Oqihon Ziehanov and four other defendants allegedly associated with Imam Nazarov of conspiracy against the constitutional order.

In February 1999, just after the terrorist bombing in Tashkent, authorities detained Nazarov's wife, Minnura Nasretdinova, for 10-days on charges of hooliganism. An associate of Nazarov's, Mukhtabar Akhmedova, was arrested and sentenced to 10 days imprisonment for assaulting an undercover police officer who had broken into her courtyard. In March 1999, Nazarov's brother, Umarkhon Nazarov, his uncle, Ahmadali Salomov, and his brother-in-law, Abdurashid Nasretdinov, were arrested and charged with planning a coup d'etat. Umarkhon Nazarov and Abdurashid Nasretdinov subsequently were sentenced to 11 years in prison and Amadali Salomov to 4 years. Police reportedly planted Islamist literature on the Nazarov relatives in order to justify their arrest and beat them during interrogation.

The February 1999 Tashkent bombings prompted the Government to reinvigorate its campaign against Islamic fundamentalism. Although no group claimed responsibility for the bombings, the President blamed Islamic extremist groups. He said that up to 3,000 youths had been corrupted by studying Islam at foreign madrassas (Muslim religious schools), where they may have received terrorist training. He pledged to bring charges against these persons--and against their fathers--if they did not confess and repent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. By the end of April, the Government claimed, over 1,000 had taken advantage of this offer.

As after the Namangan murders, from February to April 1999 police detained, without due process, scores of those whose religious piety made them suspect in the eyes of the security services. The majority of those detained were released after questioning and detention that lasted as long as 2 months. On June 28, 1999, the Supreme Court sentenced six men to death for their role in the bombings. Prison sentences were handed out to 16 others.

Beginning in April 1999, the Government launched a series of unannounced trials throughout the country of members of Hezbut Tahrir. Police allegedly had planted

narcotics and weapons on many of them in order to justify arrest. By the summer of 1999, the number convicted was believed to exceed 100. The total number in pretrial detention is unknown but could be several hundred. Most defendants have acknowledged membership in the group but claim that they believe in peaceful change. Others appear not to be members of the group but to have been caught in the net because of their religious piety. While the Government has not charged that Hezbut Tahrir was involved in the bombings, group members usually are accused of acting to overthrow the constitutional order and of belonging to a prohibited religious organization.

The Government does not consider this repression to be directed against religious freedom itself but instead against those who desire to overthrow the secular order. However, authorities are highly suspicious of those who are more pious than is the norm: frequent mosque attendees; bearded men; and veiled women. In practice this approach results in mistreatment of many devout Muslims for their religious beliefs. The Government closed several hundred nonauthorized mosques during 1998 and they remained closed during the period covered by this report.

In 1998 Human Rights Watch compiled a list of 20 confirmed and 35 unconfirmed cases in which university and secondary school students were expelled for wearing religious dress. Several of these students from Tashkent's Oriental Studies Institute brought suit in civil court to be reinstated but were unsuccessful. A further group of 15 female students at Ferghana State University were harassed and ultimately forced to leave school in March 1999.

The authorities also have attempted to silence human rights activists who criticize government repression of religious Muslims and others. On May 12, 1999, police arrested Ravshan Hamidov, a houseguest of human rights activist Mahbuba Kasimova. During their search of Hamidov's belongings in Kasimova's house, police allegedly planted narcotics, a grenade, and literature linking him to the "Islom Lashkarlari" religious extremist organization. Hamidov has family ties to leaders of the banned political opposition group, Birlik (Unity).

After the arrest, authorities launched a campaign of harassment against Kasimova and other activists, including the chairman of the Independent Human Rights organization of Uzebekistan (IHROU), Mikhail Ardzinov. Newspaper and television reports falsely accused Kasimova and Ardzinov of supporting religious extremists and advocating the creation of an Islamic state.

On June 25, 1999, Ardzinov allegedly was beaten severely by police who also ransacked his apartment. Ardzinov, who is not a Muslim, claimed that during the subsequent interrogation, the investigator accused him of being a Wahhabist.

The Government is often intolerant of a second set of religious groups: those that officials believe are cults; engage in missionary activity (proselytism); or otherwise do not conform to the requirements of the religion law.

Although authorities tolerate many Christian evangelical groups, the Government often harasses those that openly try to convert Muslims to Christianity. Although the distribution of religious literature by duly registered central offices of religious organizations is legal, missionary activity and proselytizing is not. Some evangelical churches found it difficult to obtain registration and reregistration. Among those religious groups whose applications for legal registration have not been approved are 20 Jehovah's Witnesses congregations throughout the country, the International Church of Tashkent (Protestant), the Word of Faith Pentecostal Church near Tashkent (whose leader, Denis Podorozhny, continued to try to regain the registration his group lost in 1998, and who was arrested twice and spent 12 days in jail in 1996), at least 7 Baptist congregations throughout the country (Almalik, Chirchik, Yangi Bazor, Guliston, Urgench, Yunusobod, Angren--all areas with a relatively high proportion of ethnic Russians), the Full Gospel Church in Nukus, a Pentecostal church in Guliston, and Hare Krishna groups throughout the country. According to press accounts, the leaders of the Chirchik and Almalyk congregations have been fined and face prison sentences if they continue to lead

activities at these churches without being registered. Mission of Mercy head Olga Avetisova tried for 7 years to register her Christian Humanitarian Association despite receiving death threats from local officials in 1996. She finally left the country late that year. Government officials stated that many of the unregistered groups could not meet the requirement of 100 Uzbek members. They added that Jehovah's Witnesses were denied because they proselytize and do not recognize secular authority, that the Hare Krishnas employed hypnosis, and that another unregistered group, the Reformed Baptists, simply refused to register.

On the other hand, the Committee on Religious Affairs has approved the registration of at least six Baptist congregations, as well as Jewish, Russian Orthodox, Seventh-Day Adventist, Baha'i, Presbyterian, Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), and other Christian churches. Several of these congregations had fewer than the required 100 members but received exemptions from the requirement. The Roman Catholic Monsignor reports that his church has received permission to operate, but that formal registration was pending the resolution of some difficulties regarding documentation.

On numerous occasions during the period covered by this report, the Government restricted the right to religious freedom through use of the religion law and other statutes. The Committee on Religious Affairs reports to local law enforcement authorities the identity of groups not approved for registration. Police often break up meetings of such groups. Pastors or group leaders can be subject to fines.

For example, as many as 10 Jehovah's Witnesses congregations have been fined for illegal gatherings, dissemination of printed matter, or missionary activity. A judge of the city court of Karshi said on state television on March 28 and 30, 1999, that Jehovah's Witnesses were a dangerous sect bent on usurping government power. One member of Jehovah's Witnesses, Sergei Brazgin of Uchkuduk, reportedly was arrested on February 22, 1999, shortly after police broke up a Bible reading in his home. He was subsequently sentenced to 2 years in prison on three counts of illegal religious activity. Police had declared a Bible discussion in which he participated on February 14, 1999, to be an illegal activity.

In March 1999, authorities in Nukus arrested Pastor Rashid Turibayev of the unregistered Karakalpak Full Gospel Christian Church and his associates, Farkhad Yangibayev and Yasif Tarashev. Police allegedly planted narcotics on them to justify the arrests. After the Embassy expressed interest in the case in April 1999, the Committee on Religious Affairs sent an observer to Nukus to investigate. However, the court convicted all three on June 9. Turibayev was convicted of the narcotics charge as well as three counts of violating the religious law and sentenced to 15 years in prison. His associates were sentenced to 10 years each for narcotics but were not charged with religious offenses. Turibayev previously had been sentenced to 2 years of hard labor in May 1997 for leading illegal church services, but subsequently he was amnestied and released. Press reports indicate that a Christian was arrested in June 1999 after reportedly giving out several Christian tracts in the Karakalpak language at an airport. Reportedly, he was fined but not imprisoned.

Na'il Asanov of the Bukhara Church of Christ was arrested in May 1999 after police allegedly planted narcotics on him. He was sentenced on June to 5 years in prison. Pastor Ibrahim Yusupov of an unregistered Tashkent Christian church was sentenced in June 1999 to 1 year in prison for proselytizing.

Central government officials, as well as many Christian leaders, view these and other incidents of harassment as isolated cases of local officials misapplying the law.

In view of the authoritarian nature of the State and the absence of a free press, an accurate estimate of the number of religious prisoners and detainees cannot be obtained. One activist has compiled a list of 229 Muslims arrested and illegally imprisoned and a further 54 arbitrarily detained over the past several years.

The absence of free speech in the country also affects religious believers. There is no

public dissent of any kind, including in religious matters. Religions may not form political parties. The Committee on Religious Affairs refuses to permit the importation of religious materials in the Uzbek language, including a translation of the Song of Solomon. However, it has permitted the import of Russian-language Bibles.

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are amicable relations between the various religious communities. There is no pattern of official discrimination against Jews. Synagogues function openly; Hebrew education (long banned under the Soviets), Jewish cultural events, and the publication of a community newspaper take place undisturbed. However, many Jews are emigrating because of the perception of bleak economic prospects and their connection to families abroad.

Members of ethnic groups which traditionally are associated with Islam who convert to Christianity sometimes encounter particular societal and low level governmental hostility.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy is engaged actively in monitoring religious freedom issues and problems and maintains contact and an active dialog with both government and religious leaders.

The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor discussed the arrests in the Ferghana Valley with the Foreign Minister at the U.S.-Uzbek Joint Commission in February 1998.

Congressman Bob Livingston discussed religious freedom with the President in March 1998, as did Senator Sam Brownback in April 1998. Congressman Joseph Pitts expressed U.S. concerns to the chairman of the National Center for Human Rights in December 1998.

The Ambassador met with the Foreign Minister in April 1998 to discuss the disappearance of Imam Abidkhon Nazarov. The Deputy Chief of Mission discussed religious freedom and the treatment of Muslims with the Deputy Foreign Minister in May 1998.

In June 1998, the Ambassador met once with the Foreign Minister and again with the acting Foreign Minister to discuss the shortcomings of the new religion law.

The special advisor to the Secretary of State for the Newly Independent States (NIS) discussed the religion law and issues of religious freedom with the President and Foreign Minister in November 1998.

The deputy special adviser to the Secretary of State for the NIS met with the Foreign Minister in February 1999 to discuss religious detainees and religious freedom.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met in May 1999 in Tashkent with senior government officials, including the Minister of Justice and the Chairman of the Uzbek Committee for Religious Affairs, to discuss religious freedom. He urged them to register unregistered groups and emphasized the importance of religious freedom in U.S. relations with Uzbekistan. The Ambassador at Large raised a number of human rights cases of particular concern. In these meetings, government officials stressed security concerns but indicated that a newly instituted appeals process for religious groups that had been denied registration would be used flexibly. In response

to the expression of concern about the reported police practice of planting narcotics and other illegal items on persons to justify their arrest, Justice Ministry officials indicated that they were looking into this issue.

The Ambassador at Large also met with leaders of Uzbek Christian groups and with prominent nongovernmental organization leaders active in the pursuit of religious freedom.

The Charge d'Affaires met with the Foreign Minister in May 1999 to discuss political and religious prisoners and detainees.

The Embassy's human rights officer discussed religious freedom with the Deputy Director of the Committee on Religious Affairs in the Cabinet of Ministers in September and October 1998 and in April and May 1999. There are no registered nongovernmental organizations in Uzbekistan that deal specifically with issues of religious freedom. The Embassy's human rights officer maintains regular contact with unregistered human rights activists on these and other issues.

The Ambassador met with the leader of the Lutheran community in December 1998, with the Muslim Mufti in January and April 1999, with several Jewish leaders in January and February 1999, and with the Catholic Monsignor in February 1999.

[End of Document]

Table of Contents | Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor | Department of State