



Uzbekistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, in practice the Government continued to restrict this right. The Government permits the operation of what it considers mainstream religions, including approved Muslim groups, Jewish groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various other Christian denominations, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists, and generally registers newer religions. Christian churches generally are tolerated as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks; however, the law prohibits or severely restricts activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction.

There was a slight decline in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued its campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups suspected of extremist sentiments or activities. The Government arrested numerous alleged members of these groups and sentenced them to lengthy jail terms. Most of these were suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a banned extremist Islamic political movement. The Government pressured the banned Islamic group Akromiylar (Akromiya), especially in Tashkent and Andijon, with those actions spilling over into violence and deaths in Andijon in May 2005. During the period covered by this report, the Government released 361 prisoners of conscience as part of a large-scale amnesty. The number arrested continued at higher levels than 2002-03; however, they remained far below the levels reported 1999-2001. The Government took into custody several hundred individuals following three terrorist bombings in Tashkent on July 30, 2004; the overwhelming majority of detainees were identified as having belonged to HT or other so-called "Wahhabi" groups. Most of these were released after questioning, but eventually approximately 115 were convicted on terrorism-related charges, and unknown numbers remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report. A number of minority religious groups, including congregations of a variety of Christian confessions, had difficulty satisfying the strict registration requirements set out by the law. As in previous years, Protestant groups with ethnic Uzbek members reported operating in a climate of harassment and fear. Even some registered groups experienced raids and harassment, including de-registration and closing of several groups. A small but growing number of "underground" mosques, such as those that were tolerated during the Soviet Union, operated under the close scrutiny of religious authorities and the security services. After the May 2005 violence in Andijon, the number of congregants at these mosques declined significantly.

The generally amicable relationship among religions contributed to religious freedom; however, ethnic Uzbek Christians continued to face harassment. This was particularly true for recent converts and for residents of smaller communities, who often faced pressure from neighbors, family, and employers. HT continued to circulate strongly anti-Semitic leaflets, the texts of which often originate from sources outside the country; however, these views are not seen as representative of the sentiments of the vast majority of the population.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy is actively engaged in monitoring religious freedom and maintains contact with government and religious leaders and human rights activists. The Embassy sponsored exchange and educational programs designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom. The programs include the 3-year University of Washington partnership program for Cultural and Comparative Religious Studies, the program on Cultural and Religious Pluralism in Uzbekistan and the United States, and a Community Connection group on the topic of Islam in a Religiously Diverse United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 172,742 square miles and its population is estimated to be 26.9 million. Approximately 80 percent of the population is ethnic Uzbek, 5.5 percent Russian, 5 percent Tajik, 3 percent Kazakh, 2.5 percent Karakalpak, and 1.5 percent Tatar. There are no official statistics on membership in various faiths; however, it is estimated that 88 percent of the population is nominally Muslim. Approximately 9 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox; this percentage is steadily declining as the number of ethnic Russians and other Slavs remaining in the country decreases. A growing number of Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents actively practice their religion. Outside of Tashkent, Muslim believers may now outnumber nonbelievers. Since 1991, when the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence, particularly in the Fergana Valley and the southern provinces, of the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam. During the decades of Soviet rule, most persons did not practice religion openly; however, it remained an important cultural factor in the lives of many, particularly Muslims.

The remaining 3 percent of the population includes small communities of Korean Christians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas. In addition, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Ashkenazi and Bokharan Jews remain in the country, concentrated in the main cities of Tashkent, Bokhara, and Samarkand. At least 80,000 others have emigrated since independence to Israel and the United States.

The law prohibits proselytizing, which constrains the activities of foreign missionaries, particularly those who seek to minister among the Muslims. In practice, many ignore the restriction. There is no significant immigrant community.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and for the principle of separation of church and state; however, in practice the Government restricted these rights. The Government is secular and there is no official state religion. Religious groups are prohibited from forming political parties and social movements.

Although the laws treat all religious confessions equally, the Government shows its support for the country's Muslim heritage by funding an Islamic university, 10 other Islamic educational institutions, and 2 Islamic centers. As in prior years, the Government provided logistical support for 4,000 selected Muslims who completed the Hajj, but the pilgrims paid their own expenses. The Government promotes an indigenous, moderate version of Islam through the control and financing of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (the Muftiate), which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials. Kurbon Hayit and Roza Hayit are holy days that are also considered national holidays.

The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations requires all religious groups and congregations to register and provides strict and burdensome criteria for their registration. Among its requirements, the law stipulates that each group must present a list of at least 100 citizen members to the local branches of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). This provision enables the Government to ban any group by finding technical grounds for denying its registration petition. This has had the effect of suppressing the activities of those Muslims seeking to worship outside the system of state-sponsored mosques.

After a post-independence increase in the number of mosques from 80 to 4,000 in the years from 1989-92, new registration requirements have decreased the number to around 2,000. New mosques, as well as those closed in the early 1990s, continued to face difficulties gaining registration.

To register, groups also must report in their charter a valid legal address. Local officials on occasion have denied approval of a legal address to prevent religious groups from registering. The MOJ also has cited this requirement in explaining local officials' decisions. The Jehovah's Witnesses Tashkent congregation had its registration application denied on these grounds. The Jehovah's Witnesses Fergana congregation encountered problems renting property when a new city administration cancelled its rental agreement. Some groups, such as the Tashkent International Church, have been reluctant to purchase property without assurance that their registration would be approved. Others claim that local officials arbitrarily withhold approval of the addresses because they oppose the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

Some Christian groups applied for registration at local, regional, and national levels and were denied or never received an official answer during the period covered by this report, including the Greater Grace Christian Church in Samarkand, the Mir (Peace) Presbyterian Church in Nukus, the United Church of Evangelical Christians/Baptists in Tashkent, the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church in Andijon, the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Emmanuel, once the only registered Protestant church in Nukus, was deregistered by the MOJ in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan and ordered to close on May 4. Some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, do not apply for registration because they do not think local officials will register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, have reported that they prefer not to bring themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously does not meet legal requirements. There are a few groups that refuse on principle to seek registration because they challenge the Government's right to require registration.

As of April 1, 2005, the Government had registered 2,154 religious congregations and organizations--a drop from 2,169 since December 2004, possibly reflecting de-registrations. The specific reason for the difference was not forthcoming from the Government. Muslim groups comprised 1,978 of the total registered, an increase of 13, while the number of registered Christian groups dropped by 12. The 176 registered minority religious groups include 60 Korean Christian, 31 Russian Orthodox, 22 Baptist, 20 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 11 Seventh-day Adventist, 8 Jewish, 6 Baha'i, 4 Lutheran, 4 "New Apostolic," 4 Roman Catholic, 2 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 Krishna Consciousness group, 1 Temple of Buddha, 1 Christian "Voice of God" Church, and 1 Armenian Apostolic.

A 2003 decree of the Cabinet of Ministers outlining new registration requirements for international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has restricted the activities of faith-based entities. Several workers of these NGOs were asked to leave and were denied registration. Statements by government officials, as well as documents disseminated to the NGOs by the MOJ, indicated that the new requirements are intended, in part, to curtail the activities of international NGOs that proselytize as part of their charitable activities.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 Religion Law) provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state, and the right to establish schools and train clergy; however, the law also severely limits religious activity. It restricts religious rights that are judged to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, bans religious subjects in public schools, prohibits the private teaching of religious principles, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. Article 14 of the law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" in public places by all except "those serving in religious organizations." This provision did not appear to have been enforced during the period covered by this report.

The Criminal Code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those that are not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups, such as the Islamic political party HT, Tabligh Jamaat, and other groups branded with the general term "Wahhabi" that are banned altogether. The code makes it a criminal offense punishable by up to 5 years in prison to organize an illegal religious group or to resume the activities of such a group after it has been denied registration or ordered to disband. In addition, the code punishes participation in such a group with up to 3 years in prison. The code also provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison (if the crime results in "grave consequences") for "organizing or participating" in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. In practice, the courts ignore the distinction between illegal and prohibited groups and frequently convict members of unapproved Muslim groups under both statutes.

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

The law prohibits groups that do not have a registered religious center from training religious personnel. There are seven centers that may legally train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law permits no private instruction and provides for fines for violations. Authorities closed an unlicensed Islamic kindergarten in Fergana Region on March 26, 2005, according to Uzbek newspaper Voice of Uzbekistan. There are 10 madrassas (including 2 for women), which provide secondary education. In addition, the Islamic Institute in Tashkent provides university-level instruction. The curriculum in these facilities is oriented towards those planning to become imams or religious teachers. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassas equivalent to other diplomas, thus enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level.

Shi'a Islamic education is restricted; the Government does not formally recognize the training of Shi'a imams outside the country, and no such education is available inside the country. There is no officially sanctioned religious instruction for those students who are simply interested in learning more about Islam. An increasing number of imams informally offer religious education; although this is technically illegal, local authorities are unlikely to take legal action. The Russian Orthodox Church operates two monasteries (one for women, one for men) and a seminary and offers Sunday school education through many of its churches. The Government "Jewish school" operates in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy District. Other faiths offer religious education through their religious centers.

The law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools, the private teaching of religious principles, and the teaching of religion to minors without parental consent. A course called "Comparative Religion" was taught at the Andijon Foreign Languages Institute during the year covered by this report.

In 2003, a panel of experts convened by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), reviewed the 1998 Religion Law and associated criminal and civil statutes and concluded that they were in violation of international norms. The OSCE submitted a number of recommendations, including lifting the bans on proselytizing and private religious instruction and decriminalizing activities of unregistered religious organizations. The Government, through its Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), agreed to consider the ODHIR recommendations but had taken no action to enact them by the end of the period covered by this report.

The main laws under which citizens are charged for religious activity are section 159 (anti-constitutional activity); section 244, paragraph 1 (inciting mass disorder); and section 244, paragraph 2 (production and distribution of materials which create a threat to public security and public order) of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code. Citizens charged under these sections are frequently charged with being members of the extremist Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), which promotes hate and praises acts of terrorism, although it maintains that it is committed to nonviolence. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature and websites call for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia, to be replaced with a world-wide Islamic government referred to as the Caliphate.

Because HT is primarily a political, not a religious, organization and because of its encouragement of terrorism, authorities' actions to restrict HT and prosecute its members are not a restriction on religious freedom per se (although the failure to observe due process and other norms constitute human rights violations). However, in thousands of cases authorities have asserted HT membership based solely on outward expressions of devout belief or have made false assertions of HT membership as a pretext for repressing the innocent expression of religious belief. Estimates from credible sources suggested that as many as 4,500 of the estimated 5,000 to 5,500 political prisoners being held in detention were members of the political movement HT. It is difficult to estimate precisely the number of persons arrested on charges of extremism and difficult to know how many of those were innocent but under suspicion because of their religious observance. The number of those arrested increased in comparison with last year; however, the number of individuals taken into custody remained well below the highs from 1999 to 2001. As in

previous years, a large percentage of those taken into custody on charges of extremism were arrested arbitrarily.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were significant governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government, by continuing to deny registration to some religious groups and by de-registering some religious organizations, deprived them of their legal right to worship. The Government restricted many religious practices and activities and punished some citizens because they engaged in religious practices in violation of the registration laws. Ethnic Russians, Jews, and foreigners generally enjoy greater religious freedom than Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks. Christian churches are for the most part tolerated as long as they do not attempt to win converts among ethnic Uzbeks. Ethnic Uzbek Christians are often secretive about their faith and sometimes do not attempt to register their organizations. Christian congregations of mixed ethnic background often face difficulties in registering or are reluctant to list their ethnic Uzbek members on registration lists for fear of incurring harassment by local officials.

The Government, for national security reasons, has conducted a repressive campaign against persons perceived as Islamic extremists. The result is an atmosphere of intimidation in which many young Muslim men say they do not feel safe even observing basic religious duties such as praying five times each day. Government workers, particularly teachers, generally feel less free to perform their religious responsibilities than do independent small traders.

While supportive of moderate Muslims, the Government is intolerant of Islamic groups it perceives to be extremist. A small but growing number of unofficial, independent mosques are allowed to operate quietly under the watch of official imams. Some sources have claimed that imams of registered mosques are required to submit lists of individuals in their congregations who may have extremist tendencies. There have also been reports that in some areas, mahalla (neighborhood) committees, and--in fewer instances--imams have come under pressure to provide names of persons who pray daily. Observers claim that this has led to a tendency on the part of some imams to submit names of unusually devout believers, who may have no extremist tendencies. There were credible reports that the heads of mahalla committees have told persons to say their daily prayers quietly at home to avoid being reported to the security services for unusual devotion. The Government controls the content of imams' sermons and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials.

The Government's harsh treatment of suspected religious extremists has generally suppressed outward expressions of religious piety. Following the May 2005 violence in Andijon, some journalists and human rights activists were arrested on charges that cited religious extremism. There were also credible reports of mahalla committee chairmen delivering special lectures to community gatherings in which they actively discouraged worshipping in mosques. Although many young men attend Friday prayers, hardly any are bearded. It is impossible to say to what extent this is a personal choice and reflects the largely secular society or to what extent it is because the Government considers wearing a beard to be a sign of extremism.

In the weeks immediately following the July 30, 2004, terrorist attacks, Muslim women reported feeling unease about wearing the hijab. There were credible reports of instances where students were prohibited from wearing headscarves at schools, leading many to speculate that the new regulation establishing school uniforms is being used as a pretext to require young girls to wear secular clothing. Following the bombings, there were reports from a credible source that some female students were suspended from Tashkent's Pedagogical University for wearing the hijab.

The Government does not consider repression of persons suspected of extremism to be a matter of religious freedom, but instead to be directed against those who want to foment armed resistance to the Government. However, authorities are highly suspicious of those who are more religiously observant than is the norm, including frequent mosque attendees, bearded men, and veiled women. Reports suggest that law enforcement and national security officers actively monitor and report on mosque activities and those of worshippers.

Some mosques continue to have difficulty registering. The Panjera mosque in Navoi has been trying unsuccessfully for 6 years to register, as have several mosques in the southern and eastern Fergana Valley. Approximately 500 persons meet for prayer at the mosque on feast days. In late 2003, several dozen residents of the Akhunbabayev District of Fergana demonstrated to protest local authorities' repeated refusal to register the locally funded Tuman mosque. A civil court in Fergana later ruled in favor of the mosque's registration, arguing that the district authorities had unlawfully impeded its application. The mosque has since opened and was registered over the end of 2003-beginning of 2004-time period.

Local authorities have continued to block the registration of evangelical Christian congregations, particularly those that attempt to minister to ethnic Uzbeks. On January 7, 2005, congregants of the Pentecostal Church in Chirchick reported that the Department of Justice in Tashkent Region denied their Church's registration application because of "grammatical errors in the Uzbek text of their charter." A Baptist congregation had its registration revoked without explanation in 2003, making the last successful Baptist registration in 1999. The Peace Church in Nukus, Karakalpakstan, which also was stripped of its registration in 2000, has been unable to reregister, as have the Hushhabbar ("Good News") Church in Guliston, the Pentecostal Resurrection Church in Andijon, and the Baptist Church in Gazalkent. Church leaders report that officials cite a multitude of reasons for refusing to register them, ranging from claims of falsified congregation lists to problems certifying addresses, "technicalities," and improper certification by fire inspectors, sanitation workers, and epidemiologists. The Mir (or Peace) Church of Nukus, the Hushhabbar Church in Guliston, the Pentecostal Church in Andijon and the Baptist Church in Gazalkent remain unregistered. All of these churches have ethnic Uzbek members.

Baptist churches associated with the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, a denomination that rejects registration on principle, continued to come under pressure from local authorities. The International Church of Tashkent, a Protestant nondenominational church that ministers exclusively to Tashkent's international community, has been unable to obtain registration, despite several years of effort. The MOJ and the CRA have signaled a willingness to assist the International Church but note the law requires at least 100 congregants be citizens. The International Church meets regularly, without obstruction, but continues to experience difficulties renting a place of worship. As a result, the congregation met in a hotel, restaurant, and school during the year covered by this report.

The Jehovah's Witnesses continue to focus their registration efforts on obtaining registration in Tashkent. The Tashkent City authorities have refused to approve the address of the Jehovah's Witnesses' place of worship. Out of the 11 Jehovah's Witnesses' churches in the country, those in Chirchik and Fergana remained the only registered congregations. In Fergana, they continued to pursue a new legal address with a larger space, because they have encountered some difficulties holding larger meetings. Many in the Government remain suspicious of the Jehovah's Witnesses, viewing it as an extremist group. Internal police training documents have listed the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and HT, as security threats. There were some signs that this attitude might be softening in Tashkent, as illustrated by the Yakkasaroy District prosecutor's office and Tashkent City police's January 2005 decision not to pursue charges of proselytizing against Jehovah's Witness Dilshod Akhmedov. However, in general local officials and representatives of the religious establishment continued to express apprehension about the group's missionary activities.

The Government monitored a Presbyterian church in Tashkent Oblast, visiting approximately every 3 months to discuss church activities, reiterating that proselytizing is illegal, and scrutinizing the pictures and names of new church members. The Government requires the church to file monthly reports on its activities.

In December 2004, a Protestant medical student, Ilkas Aldungarov, was allegedly expelled from the Nukus branch of the Tashkent Pediatric Medical Institute due to his Christian faith, according to Forum 18 News Service. Other Protestant students were expelled in 2004 at Berdakh Karakalpak State University. In September 2004, Forum 18 reported that two students were expelled from the medical institute in Nukus for their affiliation with the Church of Christ. In July 2004, Forum 18 also reported that three Hare Krishna devotees were expelled from Urgench State University.

During the period covered by this report, authorities did not permit two Russian Orthodox Church saints' relics to enter.

There were credible reports that the heads of mahalla committees have told converts that if they did not stop attending church, they would not be given a cemetery burial.

Evangelical pastors generally preach in Russian while offering limited services in the Uzbek language--the official national language and the one linked most closely to the majority Muslim population. The control over publication and distribution of religious literature has been used to restrict the distribution of the New Testament and scriptures in the Uzbek language; however, the CRA has made some concessions on publication and distribution of Uzbek-language materials. Some Biblically themed coloring books have been translated into Uzbek. The Government requires the Bible Society to file regular reports on its printing, importing, and translating activities. The government also places restrictions on the quantity of religious literature the Society can import, permitting shipments of up to 300 copies of religious materials three times per year.

The Government requires that the religious censor approve all religious literature; however, in practice a number of other government entities, including the customs service, police, and National Security Service, may suppress or confiscate religious literature of which they do not approve. The CRA, in accordance with the law, has given the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious organizations. Seven such offices have been registered to date: a nondenominational Bible society; two Islamic centers; and Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic offices. However, the Government discourages and occasionally has blocked registered central religious organizations from producing or importing Christian literature in the Uzbek language, even though Bibles in many other languages are available in Tashkent bookstores. Religious literature imported illegally is subject to confiscation and destruction.

The CRA sporadically issues an updated list of all officially endorsed Islamic literature. The list contains 510 titles. Books are no longer published with the phrase "permission for this book was granted by the CRA," but are now published with the phrase "this book is recommended by the CRA." Bookstores are not allowed to sell Islamic literature that does not appear on the list; however, in practice Islamic bookstores in Tashkent sell dozens of titles not included on the list, including works published by the state-owned Sharq Publishing House and a small number of works in Arabic imported from abroad. More controversial literature, when available, is not displayed on shelves. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists may lead to arrest and prosecution. HT leaflets are prohibited categorically.

Baptists belonging to an unregistered congregation in Tashkent claimed that on March 6, 2005, police confiscated more than 1,000 religious booklets that had been approved by the CRA. Seven members were detained and questioned for 6 hours before being released. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that a member was detained for several hours and religious literature confiscated while making a delivery to other members in Samarkand in August 2004. During the period covered by this report, Jehovah's Witnesses received two large shipments of Russian language Bibles, which were approved by the CRA. The Government reportedly destroyed Bibles belonging to members of a Baptist church in Tashkent. On February 14, 2004, according to press reports, police in Karakalpakstan confiscated religious literature from a Jehovah's Witness in Nukus. On January 4, 2004, the home of a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Jizzakh was searched and religious literature was

confiscated, although charges were later dropped.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to commit numerous serious abuses of religious freedom. The Government's campaign against extremist Muslim groups, begun in the early 1990s, which followed an earlier Government effort to encourage a rebirth of Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, resulted in numerous serious human rights abuses during the period covered by this report. The campaign was directed at three types of Muslims. The first included alleged Wahhabists, in particular those educated at madrassas abroad and followers of Imam Abduvali Mirzaev of Andijon, who disappeared in 1995, and Imam Abidkhan Nazarov of Tashkent, who is widely believed to have fled abroad in 1998 to avoid arrest. The second group includes those suspected of being involved in the 1999 Tashkent bombings or of being involved with the IMU, whose roots are in Namangan and is designated by the U.S. Government as an international terrorist organization. The third, and largest, group includes suspected members of the extremist Islamic political party HT. The campaign resulted in the arrest of many observant Muslims who were not extremists. The campaign also resulted in allegations that hundreds, perhaps thousands, have been physically mistreated or tortured; dozens of these claims have been confirmed. Persons accused of involvement with the organization, which often involves nothing more than having attended one of its meetings or passing along banned HT leaflets, continued to be subject to prison sentences of up to 15 years.

The Government is also resolute to prevent the growth of other extremist Islamic organizations and of extremist forms of Islam that it broadly labels under the rubric of Wahhabism. The authorities appear to suspect that Muslims who meet privately to pray or study Islam are extremists. People accused of "Wahhabism" faced abuse ranging from job loss to physical abuse and long imprisonment.

The Government branded an Islamic missionary group, Tabligh Jamaat ("Outreach Society"), an "extremist" organization. The group's worship, dress, and grooming practices are in accordance with their interpretation of how things were during the Prophet Muhammed's time. According to various religious experts, there is no indication that Tabligh seeks to overthrow the regime; members claimed to be exclusively religious and apolitical.

Between July and December 2004, Tabligh members were placed on trial three separate times in the Fergana Valley. On October 18, 2004, in Andijon, 11 persons were sentenced to 5-year prison terms. Two other followers of Tabligh tried in November 2004 were only sentenced to 6 months, 4 of which were credited as time served. The Tashkent trial of eight members of Tabligh concluded when seven of the eight defendants were amnestied on January 7, 2005, a very unusual action. One defendant, Jamoliddin Aminov, was not released. Radio Liberty reported in March 2005 about a trial of six more Tabligh members, four of whom were amnestied and two of whom were fined.

The Islamic group Akromiylar (Akromiya) has been denied registration by the Government since 1997. According to religious experts, Akromiylar is a religious movement that promotes business, not extremism. Courts in Andijon, Tashkent, and Surkhandarya charged members of these groups with extremism and anti-constitutional activity. On March 29, 2005, a court in the Syrdarya region sentenced seven successful food vendors from the town of Bakht to prison sentences of 8 to 9 years on charges of anti-constitutional activity, religious extremism, and tax evasion, based on their alleged membership in Akromiylar. Family members of the defendants claimed that the men were not members of Akromiylar, and that the court's decision was based entirely on confessions that the defendants had been forced to sign. The decision was upheld by an appellate court on May 3, 2005, and by the Supreme Court on May 21, 2005.

Intermittent peaceful demonstrations, conducted since February 2005 outside of Andijon's Oltinkul District Court in support of 23 alleged Akromiylar members, provoked civil unrest there in May and June 2005. In early February 2005, in Andijon, a case was opened against these 23 men of the Islamic group Akromiylar on charges of anti-constitutional activity, possession of banned religious materials, and extremism. In March 2005, Radio Liberty reported an investigation of an additional 17 persons on similar charges. Protestors subsequently staged public demonstrations in Andijon for 2 to 3 months, demanding justice and the release of the accused. On the evening of May 12, 2005, an unknown number of individuals, possibly supporters of the men facing trial, attacked a police garrison, seized weapons, and broke into a nearby prison and released several hundred inmates. On the evening of May 13, according to the testimony of several witnesses, military vehicles drove into Bobur Square, where up to 3,000 persons had gathered, and fired indiscriminately into the crowd without warning on more than one instance. There were credible reports of many more civilians killed while fleeing the scene of the protests. The total number of dead as a result of the violence was variously estimated at between 170 and more than 700. In public statements about the events, the Government referred to all on trial and in prison, as well as all those killed on May 13, as "religious extremists."

Following the terrorist attacks of March-April and July 2004, the Government took into custody at least 500 persons, the overwhelming majority of whom were identified as having belonged to HT or various Wahhabi groups. The arrests were made for national security reasons, but in conducting its operations, the police and security services reportedly relied on a list of approximately 1,000 individuals who had been convicted of extremism and subsequently amnestied. The Government also took into custody relatives of persons currently in jail on charges of extremism. The majority of those taken into custody were released after questioning. Approximately 115 persons were convicted on terrorism-related charges during the period covered by this report. There were some credible allegations of torture. Trials of the first terrorist suspects began in August 2004. As of the end of this reporting period, all 85 of those charged in connection with the terrorist acts of March and April 2004 had been convicted. While some were sentenced to probation, most were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 to 18 years.

Persons arrested on suspicion of extremism often face particularly severe mistreatment in custody, including torture, beatings, and particularly harsh prison conditions, and were typically sentenced to between 7 and 12 years in jail. Prison authorities reportedly did not allow many prisoners suspected of Islamic extremism to practice their religion freely and, in some circumstances, did not allow them to own a Qur'an. Prison routines often did not permit inmates to pray five times a day, and work and eating schedules were often not adjusted to account for the Ramadan fast. Authorities reportedly punished inmates who attempted to fulfill their religious obligations against prison rules, or who protested the rules themselves, with solitary confinement and beatings. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of individuals already in prison in connection with extremist activities prior to Andijon dying as a result of beatings or torture. In March 2004, Abdurrahman Narzaulayev, a convicted religious extremist serving a 16-year sentence in Karshi prison, died of a pulmonary infection after prison authorities allegedly attempted to break his hunger strike by force-feeding him. Although specific information is difficult to obtain, human rights and other observers maintain that prisoners frequently die of diseases directly related to the conditions of their confinement. There were no developments in the investigation of the deaths of Mirzakomil Avazov and Khusnuddin Olimov (August 2002), convicted HT members who were boiled to death after being caught praying in Jasyk prison.

On September 24, 2004, the Supreme Court issued a decree definitively banning the use of evidence obtained by torture or other illegal means. The Government has since taken limited administrative steps to eliminate torture in detention. In October 2004, international observers monitored the trial of 23 alleged extremists in which witnesses and defendants stated that their testimonies had been elicited through torture. The presiding judge did not investigate the allegations of torture. All 23, including one woman, were convicted; no one received the death penalty.

Also in October 2004, Forum 18 reported that the imam of a Navoi mosque and 16 members were given sentences from 12 to 16 years on criminal charges, although the defendants admit only to being adherents of Islam. Another Forum 18 report states that in February 2005, two followers of Sufi Islam were given 6-year sentences; the defendants claimed that HT leaflets were planted on them during their arrest and that they were tortured.

Unlike in fall 2003, there were no reported demonstrations during the month of Ramadan in 2004. There were numerous credible reports that authorities in several prisons mistreated prisoners in connection with the 2003 demonstrations. According to relatives of prisoners and local human rights activists, well over 100 inmates jailed on charges of extremism staged hunger strikes and other protests in 2003 to demand that prison authorities adjust labor and eating schedules to accommodate the Ramadan fast. The protests took place in the Jasyk prison in Karakalpakstan, as well as in Karshi, Zarafshan, and Navoi. In response, several prisoners were reportedly beaten in Jasyk, while in Karshi more than 100 prisoners were placed in special punishment cells, and many reportedly were beaten. Relatives of prisoners in Navoi reported that inmates who participated in the protest actions were subject to additional reprisals in early March and April 2004. Among those participating in these prison demonstrations was Abdurrahman Narzaulayev, whose death is mentioned above.

In May 2004, Husnuddin Nazarov reportedly disappeared on the way to evening prayer services. His family alleged that members of the security services detained Nazarov. Husnuddin Nazarov is the eldest son of Imam Abidkhan Nazarov, an influential religious figure in Tashkent who was dismissed from his position at the Tokhtabay mosque in 1995; he also disappeared without reported notice to his family. Imam Nazarov's followers were principal targets of the Government's effort to end extremism. His mother was reported to have appealed to human rights activists for help on this case in March 2005.

Family members of persons wanted in connection with Islamic political activities, or already jailed in connection with those activities, often are harassed or arrested. In some cases, the relatives themselves are involved in what the Government considers illegal religious activities, such as attending meetings or being members of illegal religious groups, but in many cases the relatives' guilt is only by association.

Human rights activists have reported numerous cases of persons convicted of extremism who have been punished harshly for refusing to accept the moderate interpretations of Islam presented by imams visiting their prisons. There were also credible reports that prisoners who refused to sign letters renouncing what the authorities deemed religious extremism were beaten or put in isolation cells. On April 11, 2005, nine persons were convicted of religious extremism and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 6 to 13 years, amid allegations they had been tortured to confess.

In November 2004, Fergana Region resident Abduvohid Abduvahobov was sentenced to 7 years in a minimum-security prison, according to the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Activists of Uzbekistan. He was accused of Wahhabism and found guilty of anti-constitutional activities, possession of banned religious materials, and religious extremism. On August 8, 2003, the Chirchik City Court added 3 years to the sentence of Tolib Khaidarov for violating prison rules. Khaidarov complained that many of the alleged prison violations used to extend his sentence were false and that a prison administrator attempted to force him to write a confession letter. Khaidarov was originally imprisoned for anticonstitutional activities and belonging to an illegal religious organization.

Forum 18 reported that in July 2004, the National Security Service raided the home of Normurod Zhumaev, who was arrested for leading a group of Muslims who studied the Qur'an at his home. On January 20, 2005, in Tashkent City Court, eight Muslims were accused of using and distributing banned Islamic audio recordings.

Women continued to be detained for participating in or organizing demonstrations demanding the release of male relatives jailed on suspicion of Islamic extremism; however, unlike in past years, no women were convicted for such activities. Most of those detained were simply driven home or released after a short period of time with an administrative fine. There were reports that

police insulted or forced some of these women to remove their head coverings. Although the police generally did not arrest women simply for taking part in this type of demonstration, many Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) offices maintained a list of women who participated in protests and detained many for questioning in the aftermath of the March, April, and July 2004 bombings. According to the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Activists of Uzbekistan, four women who had been charged with anti-constitutional activity, possession of banned religious materials, and religious extremism were amnestied in December 2004.

As in previous years, there were reports that police planted narcotics, ammunition, and religious leaflets on citizens to justify their arrests. According to human rights activists, the police arrested many of those whose religious observance, sometimes indicated by their dress or beards, made them suspect to the security services.

As in last year, there was a report that evangelical Christians were beaten. In recent months, the religious press has carried stories that some of these groups have been threatened. On April 3, 2005, according to a posting by the Internet reporting service Forum 18, police and NSS officers failed to respond to Christian convert Khaldibek Primbetov's complaint that villagers in Yanboshkala outside of Nukus had beaten him and told him to "return to Islam" or leave the village. In June 2004, an NSS officer in Khorezm questioned two members of an unregistered Baptist church. Forum 18 reported that one of the men was hit during questioning, although local authorities strenuously denied the allegations.

On the other hand, there were more allegations during the year, especially during the last quarter of the reporting period, that Christian evangelicals were detained. Even if they are not taken into custody, pastors who conduct unauthorized religious services still run the risk of arrest, which can have an effect on their activities. For example, Bakhtier Tuichiev, the pastor of a Full Gospel Pentecostal church in Andijon continued to face harassment from local officials.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. Police occasionally broke up meetings of unregistered evangelical congregations and detained their members. In October 2004, a district court in Tashkent fined a Baptist pastor \$65 (65,000 soum). Twenty of the 125 members of the unregistered Baptist church in the Surkhandarya Region were detained and questioned in May 2005, although none was charged with a crime. During the year covered by the report, six parishioners of Vifaniya ("Bethany") Baptist congregation in Tashkent were detained and received administrative punishment for meeting as an unregistered organization. Credible reports alleged that in June 2005, two Baptist pastors and four church members were arrested after plainclothes police officers raided their church in Tashkent. On April 7, 2005, Baptist Farkhod Khamedov was sentenced to 10 days of administrative punishment; the appellate court was to decide whether his Bible should be destroyed as punishment for conducting a religious meeting in Tashkent, according to Forum 18 News Service. These arrests followed similar events in 2003, when Baptists in Khalkabad were imprisoned and fined for worshipping privately, and a Baptist pastor in Urgench was fined administratively for allegedly conducting religious work among children without their parents' permission.

Raids on other Christian denominations continued as well. On March 9, 2005, police raided an unauthorized Protestant meeting involving citizens and South Korean missionaries outside Tashkent; the citizens were fined. In a separate incident on March 10, 2004, a criminal court fined six members of a Protestant church in Tashkent for holding unauthorized religious meetings in a private home. In September 2004, authorities disrupted a prayer meeting of the Greater Grace Church in Samarkand and forced members to sign confessions. Officers confiscated Bibles and papers, including officially approved literature. The Bibles were returned in November 2004. When the pastor traveled abroad, he was warned by the Government not to return, and he and his family were threatened. In October 2004, police disrupted the church services of an unregistered Christian denomination in Tashkent. Although none of the parishioners was arrested, several dozen were questioned at the church. In August 2003, police in Nukus raided the Peace Protestant Church, reportedly for the fourth time, and fined two of the Church's leaders for holding illegal religious services. According to Forum 18, in September 2003, police in Chirchik disrupted the Sunday services of the unregistered Friendship Protestant Church.

During the period covered by this report, police also entered the homes of relatives of Pentecostal Pastor Bakhrom Nazarov without properly identifying themselves. Christian literature was confiscated and destroyed. On October 19, 2004, the Sherabad District Criminal Court in the Surkhandarya Region found Nazarov guilty of proselytizing and fined him \$312 (326,500 soum). On July 14, 2004, the criminal court in Termez sentenced Nazarov to 10 days in prison and fined 10 ethnic Uzbek congregants \$5 to \$31 (5,440 to 32,680 soum). According to recent reports after the violence at Andijon, the pastor of a registered church was detained, taken to court and fined under Article 240 of the Administrative code, "violation of religious legislation--proselytizing."

Although the authorities tolerate the existence of many Christian evangelical groups, they enforce the law's ban on proselytizing. The Government often monitors and harasses those who openly try to convert Muslims to Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses have come under particular scrutiny. In September 2004, Jehovah's Witnesses member Dilshod Akhmedov was charged with proselytizing. He was detained on January 28, 2005, but was released the same day. Yakkasaroy District prosecutor's office and Tashkent City police decided not to pursue the charge against him. In December 2003, two members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi were arrested while preaching door-to-door. In July 2004, one member was detained for distributing religious literature, but the court in Takhiatash quickly closed the case.

Throughout the period covered by this report, members of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and fined for illegally teaching religion and proselytizing. In July 2004, police questioned six Jehovah's Witnesses members in Kogon, and ordered one to pay an administrative fine of \$10 (10,900 soum) for providing unauthorized religious instruction. In August 2004, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kogon was levied an administrative fine of \$13 (14,170 soum) for allegedly conducting illegal religious

teaching. On January 26, 2005, authorities raided an unauthorized religious meeting in Karshi and questioned 42 members. Two members, Alisher Ruziev and Valeriy Khrekov, were sentenced to 10 days in prison, while seven were fined in relation to the gathering. On March 24, 2005, more than 200 members were detained during various raids in Tashkent, 38 in Kogon, 28 in Bokhara, 25 in Samarkand, 24 in Navoi, and 10 in Bikobod. One hundred twenty persons were questioned in Angren. Police also reportedly confiscated religious materials. Most detainees were released in the early morning on March 25, 2005. In Tashkent, the two who remained in custody were released 24 hours after the arrest. Authorities brought 26 administrative cases against Jehovah's Witnesses in relation to the March 24, 2005, raids. On March 29, 2005, at Tashkent's Akmal Ikramov District Court, one member was fined \$6 (6,500 soum) and another was ordered to pay \$4.50 (5,000 soum) resulting from the nationwide March 24 operation. An additional three Jehovah's Witnesses members, who were also picked up in the March 24 sweep, each received an official warning. These events were similar to those the Jehovah's Witnesses experienced in the city of Zhuma and Tashkent reported in 2003 and again in 2004. On June 23, 2005, the Karshi city procurator's office brought criminal cases against three Karshi-based Jehovah's Witnesses members, charging them with proselytizing, meeting as an unregistered group and distributing banned religious materials.

In February 2004, Vladimir Kushchevoy, a Jehovah's Witness resident in Samarkand, was sentenced to 3 years of corrective labor, later reduced to 1-year probation, for providing unauthorized religious instruction. In June 2004 in Uchkuduk, Jehovah's Witness member Tolkin Hankildiev was detained for approximately 12 hours and fined \$26 (27,200 soum).

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In the first half of 2003, after years of banning his writings, the Government allowed former Mufti Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf to publish 3 volumes of a projected 30-volume compendium of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith). During the year covered by this report, the former Mufti published an additional 6 volumes. He created a popular Islamic website, which is not blocked by the Government. He also published books against religious extremism, as well as on Sufism and Islamic theology. The Government allowed him to publish minor monthly works. The former Mufti, a revered figure in the country, has also been permitted to continue hosting a popular radio program on Islam and to teach at the Islamic University. Muhammad Yusuf broke from the Government in 1993, insisting that its attempts to control the content of Islam were counterproductive and only fed extremism. He continued to argue that greater opportunities for religious education are the only hope for ensuring that the people have a proper understanding of Islam.

Authorities have allowed a small but growing number of unregistered mosques to reopen, both in cities and in the countryside. In addition, unofficial imams began working, particularly in rural areas, under the close watch of religious officials. Some of these provide informal religious instruction, which, while technically illegal, is increasingly tolerated in some areas. Following the 1999 Tashkent bombings, most unregistered mosques were shut down. These mosques, many of which had been functioning underground throughout the Soviet period, served the spiritual needs of the people in ways that the large, registered mosques were often unable to do. The unregistered mosques first began to reopen in late 2001 and early 2002.

The national television channel aired three religious programs--the Islamic University-produced "Enlightenment," the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan-produced "Palace of Life," and "Religion and Social Progress." Each provided a better understanding of moderate Islam, the education of young people, and guidance on how to live. Formal Islamic education in schools was not mentioned in these programs. The CRA hailed the programs as revolutionary for Uzbekistan, explaining that previously only mosques provided information on Islam.

The CRA announced and released its new Qur'an in Braille and ordered 8,000 copies of the first edition.

Since 2002, Uzbeks have not been required to pass an exam before being allowed to go on the Hajj. Previously, a quasi-governmental board selected pilgrims in a testing process widely viewed as corrupt. However, the Government still exercises considerable logistical control over Uzbek pilgrims. The standardized cost for citizens who go on the pilgrimage, \$ 2,200 USD (2,398,000 soum), is quite substantial. Approximately 1,500 of the 4,200 Uzbek pilgrims who made the Hajj in 2005 were women, an increase over years past.

The Government continued to respect the military pacifism of Jehovah's Witnesses. The draft board routinely gave exemptions.

On April 30, 2005, an official at the MVD confirmed reports that a Chilonzor District inspector was disciplined in connection with a case involving actions taken against Baptist members Flyura Valitova and Farkhod Khamedov. The District station also reportedly planned to conduct "reeducation" courses for its officers.

In March 2005, the Government completed an amnesty of 361 prisoners of conscience in the 2004-05 amnesty, the vast majority of whom had been convicted of Islamic extremism. This followed an amnesty in 2003-04 of 704, as well as the 2002-03 amnesty of 923 such prisoners.

Imams of registered mosques continue to visit prisons, where they have met with prisoners convicted of extremism. While the effect of these visits has been undermined by the actions of prison authorities (prisoners who argue with the imams have reportedly been subject to severe mistreatment), the visits themselves are a welcome development. Imams have also met with amnestied prisoners convicted of extremism upon their return to their communities. Previously, no known attempts were made to persuade suspected extremists with religious instruction.

While some women reported feeling unease about wearing conservative Muslim attire following the March-April and July 30, 2004 terrorist attacks, overall there continued to be increased tolerance for the use of head coverings by Muslim women. During the period covered by this report, the hijab was seen more frequently in Tashkent and the more religiously conservative parts of the Fergana Valley and the southern provinces of Kashkadaria and Surkhondaria. *In October 2004, authorities in Karshi encouraged Nigora Jalilova to stop wearing the hijab in public, according to a Forum 18 News Service report.* The CRA has taken the position that women should not be barred from educational institutions on the basis of their religious dress and has actively assisted some women who had been previously expelled to gain readmission to their universities. During the period covered by this report, it was more common to see women wearing the hijab and, less frequently, the veil on the street.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

There was no pattern of discrimination against Jewish persons. Synagogues function openly; Hebrew education, Jewish cultural events, and the publication of a community newspaper take place undisturbed. Many Jews have emigrated to the United States and Israel, but this is most likely because of bleak economic prospects and because of their connection to families abroad, rather than anti-Jewish sentiment. Anti-Semitic leaflets of unknown origin arrived in the mail after the July 2004 bombings at the U.S. and Israeli Embassies; however, these views were not representative of the feelings of the vast majority of the population. One of the clearest examples of the Jewish community's continued standing in society is the government school in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy District, officially known as the "Jewish school." There are Jewish kindergartens in Tashkent and Samarkand, which officially teach Jewish "culture."

Christians were generally well tolerated, provided they did not actively proselytize. There were reports of discrimination against Muslims who converted to Christianity. Difficulties that evangelical Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbeks face often reflect societal attitudes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy actively engages in monitoring religious freedom issues and maintains contact with government and religious leaders and human rights advocates. Members of Congress and other high-level legislative and executive branch officials met with Uzbek officials abroad and in the country during the period covered by this report and expressed strong concerns regarding human rights, including the U.S. stance on freedom of religious expression.

The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officials met with local religious leaders, human rights activists, and country officials to discuss specific issues of human rights and religious freedom. Officials in Washington met on several occasions with Embassy officials of the country to convey U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom. U.S. officials traveled around the country meeting with religious leaders and groups as well as with government officials. Embassy officials maintain regular contact with the CRA, as well as with religious leaders and human rights activists. On October 25, 2004, during Ramadan the Ambassador hosted the third annual Iftar, providing an intimate forum for frank discussion with government and religious leaders.

When the Embassy received information concerning difficulties faced by religious groups, it intervened on their behalf just as in the past. This included observant Muslims, Baptists, Grace Church in Samarkand, the Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country, and several faith-based foreign aid organizations. All but 2 of the approximately 50 Jehovah's Witnesses detained in Tashkent's Chilonzor District on March 24, 2005, were released within hours, a fact they credited to the Embassy presence.

Embassy officials met with numerous Muslim clergymen. In October 2004, nine alumni of the Community Connections program "Islam in a Religiously Diverse United States" met with Embassy officials in Urgench to talk about their visit to the United States. On April 20, 2005, Embassy officials met with Cultural and Religious Pluralism alumni at Kok Gumbaz mosque in Qarshi. Religious leaders shared impressions of their visit to the United States. Embassy officials pressed the Government to take action against security force members implicated in the torture of individuals arrested on suspicion of Islamic extremism. Embassy officials repeatedly urged the Government to allow more freedom of religious expression and to allow more mosques to be registered. U.S. officials, both in Washington and in Tashkent, have encouraged the Government to revise its laws on religion, including repealing the ban on proselytizing, lifting restrictions on the import and publication of religious literature, and eliminating legal provisions prohibiting the private teaching of religion, which the U.S. Government believes is an essential element for preventing further radicalization of young Muslims.

The U.S. sponsors exchange and educational programs that are specifically designed to promote religious tolerance and to expand religious freedom. In September 2004, the "Religion in a Secular Society" International Visitors Program sent the deputy mufti and head imams from Samarqand and Surkhondarya to the United States to view for themselves the role that religious organizations play in American society and the separation of religion and state. The Community Connections and Cultural and Religious Pluralism projects, programs conducted in cooperation with the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), brought 70 local Islamic leaders to the U.S. during the reporting year, exposing them to the diversity of religious practice in the United States. A 3-year Comparative Religious Studies Program, funded by the Embassy and managed by the University of Washington, provides for exchange of experts and professors from five local universities. One of the major goals of the project is the development of school curricula that foster religious tolerance. In all of these programs, the central premise is that religious tolerance and political security do not conflict, but rather are complementary goals.

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