

UZBEKISTAN

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positive in certain areas, though serious concerns remain. During the year, Uzbekistan continued on a path of reform to expand religious freedom in the country. Notably, in May 2018, Uzbekistan's parliament adopted a road map to improve religious freedom conditions, incorporating the recommendations made by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and pledged to rewrite the oppressive 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Despite the positive developments originating at the highest levels of the government, severe violations of religious freedom persisted. Thousands of Muslim religious prisoners remained behind bars on allegations of religious extremism. Of the prisoners who have been released under the administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, none of them have been rehabilitated for full reintegration into society, and the government has yet to provide a means for former prisoners to seek justice and exonerate their names. The government continued to restrict certain manifestations of Muslim piety in settings such as schools, where it has prohibited women and girls from wearing the hijab, and punished those who criticized such policies with short-term detentions, fines, or—in the case of at least one public figure—dismissal from employment. At the same time, local authorities continued to target Christian

communities for failing or being unable to register, possessing and distributing religious literature, and engaging in missionary activities, despite government assurances that efforts were underway to decriminalize acts that posed no threat to public safety. This inability to rein in local authorities and police forces throughout the country demonstrates the government's ongoing lack of capacity to fully implement and enforce top-down changes. On the contrary, during the year, police forces and members of Uzbekistan's State Security Service (SSS) continued to harass, intimidate, raid, fine, and detain members of Christian communities, particularly Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Based on these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Uzbekistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State moved Uzbekistan from its list of designated CPCs and placed the country on its "Special Watch List," a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA. Unlike a CPC designation, the Special Watch List carries no penalties, sanctions, or other commensurate actions. USCIRF acknowledges the government's willingness and interest to reform, but nevertheless recommends that the State Department redesignate Uzbekistan as a CPC under IRFA and use available tools to leverage sustainable improvements in religious freedom conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to ensure long-lasting improvements to religious freedom;
- Work with the Uzbek government to revise the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations to ensure it is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage the Uzbek government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the distribution and possession of peaceful religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Urge the Uzbek government to close the notorious Jasliq Prison, where many religious prisoners of conscience are held, and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Uzbek government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Uzbekistan

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION*

32,653,900

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam, Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), and Judaism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY**

93% Muslim (92% Sunni Muslim and 1% Shi'a Muslim)

4% Russian Orthodox

3% Other (including the Baha'i faith, Buddhist, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic)

*Information sourced from the government of Uzbekistan.

**Estimates compiled from the U.S. Department of State.

BACKGROUND

Uzbekistan's constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief, but also limits it where it encroaches on the "lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society." Religious freedom is also regulated and controlled by the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, as well as the administrative and criminal codes. The 1998 law requires religious groups to register with the government and criminalizes any unregistered religious activity. Such failure to register often results in police raids, detainment, arrests, or fines many times the average monthly salary. The private teaching of religion, proselytism, and other missionary activities are strictly prohibited. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) under the Cabinet of Ministers is the government body responsible for the oversight of registered religious activity. As official approval is required for the content, production, and distribution of religious publications, the CRA is also tasked with the review and censorship of religious materials.

Control of religious activity in Uzbekistan is generally based on security grounds, requiring authorities to combat religious extremism and terrorism, which has served to justify the State Security Service's (SSS) involvement in monitoring and

policing religious communities. However, international human rights organizations contend that the government has regularly used dubious allegations of links to extremist or terrorist organizations as a means to suppress dissent, and members of the SSS have been accused of using torture to extract confessions. In January 2018, Rustam Inoyatov, the head of the National Security Service (NSS) that was later renamed the SSS, was dismissed following President Mirziyoyev's criticism that "every ordinary issue has been considered a threat to national security." In February 2018, Aydarbek Tulepov was similarly dismissed from his post as the deputy chairman of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU). The NSS reportedly had tasked him to monitor the MBU. The work of others assigned to watch the activities of mosques was also temporarily discontinued.

Throughout 2018, the government under President Mirziyoyev continued to pursue an ambitious agenda of political and economic reform. Government officials highlighted efforts to address human rights concerns and emphasized a commitment to end torture, although allegations of torture persisted during the year despite a 2017 presidential decree banning the use in court of evidence obtained through torture.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Positive Developments

Throughout 2018, the government of Uzbekistan continued to publicly address religious freedom concerns in the country and engage with the international community about ongoing steps for reform. In May 2018, the parliament adopted a joint resolution on a “road map” to ensure freedom of religion or belief in direct response to the October 2017 visit and February 2018 recommendations made by UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Ahmed Shaheed. Among the stated goals included in the road map were: improving the legislative framework and rewriting the 1998 law; improving the process of registration for religious organizations, including by reducing fees and lowering the minimum number of founders from 100 to 50; introducing changes to the criminal and administrative codes regarding freedom of religion or belief; reviewing the overly broad definition of “extremism”; and reviewing the cases of individuals charged with “religious extremism,” “anti-constitutional activity,” or “membership in an illegal religious group.”

The government of Uzbekistan also took positive steps to relax some longstanding restrictions on the private and public practice of Islam, which has generally been closely monitored and controlled as a purported means to combat Islamist extremism. In keeping with trends from 2017, the government continued to expand some freedoms by increasing access to religious education and permitting greater religious expression in the public sphere. In January 2018, the Justice Ministry registered the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, the first institution of higher education dedicated entirely to Islamic studies. The government also sponsored Qur’an and *hadith* recitation contests, a move seen as a significant departure from previous practices censoring public displays of piety.

In December 2018, the UN General Assembly [adopted](#) a resolution introduced by Uzbekistan on “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance,” which calls on members to eliminate intolerance and discrimination and protect freedom of religion or belief.

Arbitrary Accusations of Islamist Extremism

Government officials frequently attribute the need for strict regulation and monitoring of religion and religious activity to the persistent threat of religious extremism. While the government has legitimate concerns about radicalization and terrorism, particularly given the number of Uzbek citizens reported to have joined or supported the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in recent years, accusations of religious extremism have tended to be excessively vague, unfounded, or spurious at times. Despite the removal of an estimated 16,000 names from a government blacklist of alleged religious extremists and the release of a number of political prisoners at the end of 2017, thousands of individuals remain imprisoned on charges of religious extremism or

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membership in a banned religious group—some estimates range between 1,500 and 7,000 individuals. According to human rights groups, many of them have been behind bars for approximately two decades.

In February 2018, court proceedings began against local human rights activist Musajon Bobojonov, who faced extremism charges under article 244(1) of the Criminal Code. Police claimed to have discovered “extremist” materials on Bobojonov’s computer. In an interview with Radio Ozodlik, Bobojonov explained that the materials were for his work “conduct[ing] research on the negative impact of radical literature” on Islam, and that he had published a number of books on the subject before. In March 2018, he was convicted of the “production, storage, distribution or demonstration of materials containing a threat to public safety and public order” and sentenced to three years’ probation. In June 2018, G’ayrat Ziyahodjaev was similarly convicted for possessing religious texts downloaded online. While he did not receive any jail time, both his phone and his parents’ computer were ordered destroyed.

In February 2016, Aramais Avakian, a Christian fish farmer, was sentenced to seven years in prison for allegedly “plotting unconstitutional activities” and participating in a religious extremist organization. Avakian’s family claims he was targeted by local authorities

as a means to seize his profitable fish farm. Local and international human rights organizations have stated that Avakian was subjected to torture in attempts to extract a confession. In May 2018, Avakian was relocated to a less strict prison facility in his home region of Jizzakh and informed that he would be released within two months. At the end of the reporting period, Avakian remained imprisoned.

Jahongir Kulijanov, a member of Uzbekistan's Shi'a Muslim minority community, also remained imprisoned throughout 2018 for his conviction for allegedly participating in an illegal religious organization and the possession and dissemination of extremist religious materials. Kulijanov was one of 20 Shi'a Muslims originally detained in Bukhara in February 2017 for holding an illegal religious meeting in a local café and sharing Shi'a Muslim literature. According to Forum 18, Kulijanov's peers believe he was targeted after he was tapped to replace the imam of a local Shi'a mosque. In February 2019, after the reporting period, Kulijanov was reportedly granted a reduction of his term and released from prison, though the details of his release could not be confirmed. In November 2018, Human Rights Watch identified Ruhiddin Fahriddinov (Fahrutdinov), Nodirbek Yusupov, and Askar Ahmadiy as religious prisoners; reports suggest Yusupov may have been released after the reporting period.

Restrictions on Muslim Religious Activity

Despite some positive developments as discussed above, violations of religious freedom targeting the Muslim community persisted throughout the year. This is particularly true for individuals and religious communities that espouse views or lifestyles that deviate from state-backed norms, such as Muslims who support and promote a more conservative interpretation of Islam. In August 2018, the government introduced new guidelines regulating the dress and appearance of students and explicitly prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols at schools,

including hijabs, yarmulkes, and crosses. The ban on religious clothing reportedly was implemented taking into account the ethnic and religious diversity of Uzbekistan and the country's secular nature—a justification suggestive of social conflict the government of Uzbekistan often uses to limit or restrict religious freedom. Other regulations less overtly related to religious expression were also criticized as limiting Muslim religious practice, such as a requirement that the length of boys' pants extend below the ankle. In September 2018, reports emerged about female students who were forced to remove their headscarves in order to enter the recently established International Islamic Academy. School authorities pressured students, many of whom chose to wear wigs and tie scarves around their necks in order to be admitted. Others who refused to remove their headscarves were denied entry and unable to attend class. At least four students reportedly were dismissed from the academy for refusing to remove their hijabs.

Similarly, voicing public support for a greater

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role and place for Islam in society, and thereby opposing government policies limiting Muslim manifestations of religious expression, continued to be punished in Uzbekistan.

In August and September 2018, at least eight bloggers—Miraziz Ahmedov, Tulkin Astanov, Sulaymon Erkin, Dilshodbek Halilov, Adham Olimov (who writes under the pseudonym “Musannif”), Ziyavuddin Rahmon, Hurshidbek Muhammad Rozikov, and Otabek Usmanov—were arrested in various cities in response to their writings and criticisms of the government regarding religious issues, such as restrictions on wearing hijabs. However, as many as 30 people in total reportedly were detained, but chose not to go public about their detention for fear of further retribution against either themselves or their families. In social media posts shared primarily on Facebook, some of the bloggers called for protests against the government for banning the headscarf at schools, prompting the government to lash out in what was likely an attempt to quash

further dissent. Preceding the arrests, both police and SSS officers raided bloggers' homes without obtaining a warrant and confiscated computers, mobile phones, and books. Many of the bloggers were subsequently fined and given jail sentences of 15 days, and authorities in Tashkent prohibited a public demonstration that planned to protest hijab restrictions in early September 2018.

In addition, Fazliddin Parpiev, an imam at Tashkent's Omina Mosque, was dismissed from his position in September 2018 after posting a video to Facebook in which he made an appeal to President Mirziyoyev. In the video, Parpiev asked the president to lift the ban on religious clothing, citing restrictions on wearing Islamic headscarves for women and growing beards for men. Although the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan did not specify the reason for Parpiev's dismissal, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that an official reproached Parpiev for "deviat[ing] from the script" by publicly criticizing state policies. At the end of 2018, Parpiev and his family left Uzbekistan for an undisclosed country after prosecutors warned him against continuing to share "political" posts on social media outlets.

Furthermore, citizens wishing to perform the Muslim hajj or umrah are required to obtain permission from the government, which reportedly maintains quotas separate from and lower than those established by Saudi Arabia for each pilgrimage. In October 2018, the government also announced that Uzbek citizens will be prohibited from utilizing private travel agencies to secure their visas and plan their trips; rather, they must join tours organized by the CRA, which requires that individuals meet certain criteria regarding their finances, health, religious knowledge, and standing in their communities in order to participate. While the government claimed to make the process of performing the hajj and umrah easier through its services organizing flights and providing for the more rapid processing of visas, it limited the ability of Muslims to make religious pilgrimages, as many more Muslims apply than government-mandated quotas permit.

Repression of Christians

Christian groups in Uzbekistan—particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses—endure harsh restrictions on nearly all aspects of their religious activity. Although the government has pledged to revise strict

legislation limiting the practice of religious belief, authorities continue to persecute Christian groups regarding registration, the distribution or possession of religious literature, and missionary activity. Because the

Uzbek government views proselytism as an inherent threat to social stability, missionary activity is also strictly prohibited.

According to the February 2018 [report](#) issued by UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed, complex requirements for registration in Uzbekistan discriminate against religious minorities, such as Christians, that cannot meet prerequisites necessary to obtain registration. The law stipulates that in order to register, a religious community must have a minimum membership of 100 adult Uzbek citizens, residing in Uzbekistan, who are willing to provide their personal information to the government—a requirement that precludes the registration of many small Christian communities. Moreover, many Christian communities are prevented from applying for registration with the Ministry of Justice because they fail or are unable to obtain the mandatory, preliminary approval of the *mahalla* (local community) committee, which issues—in effect—a completely arbitrary decision. In September 2018, Jehovah's Witnesses applied for registration with seven *mahalla* committees but were rejected in each case. While some committees did not provide a reason for the denial, others cited a general disapproval for the religious group, claimed that the presence of other registered Christian denominations in the area was sufficient, or alleged that the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses would lead to divisions and conflict within the community. To date, Jehovah's Witnesses have only been able to register in Chirchik, a small city outside of Tashkent.

In addition to registration issues, Christian communities continued to experience regular police

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intimidation and harassment, raids, fines, and detention. Throughout 2018, the Baptist Council of Churches experienced systematic persecution by authorities in the provinces of Navoiy, Qashqadaryo, and Xorazm, and the city of Tashkent. Police reportedly raided Baptist places of worship, homes, and businesses; searched, seized, and destroyed property without a warrant; and threatened Baptists with jail time for the peaceful practice of their religion. In January 2018, police reportedly took the eight-year-old son of Baptists from his school in Navoiy for questioning without the knowledge or presence of his parents. In November 2018, the military for the first time participated in a raid against Baptists in the Yashnobod District of Tashkent in what was characterized as a “special operation.” Authorities confiscated approximately 7,800 pieces of literature and media and took 14 people to a police station, temporarily detaining them. In addition to Baptists, police have also raided a number of other Protestant congregations, including an ethnic Korean church in Tashkent in September 2018.

Some Uzbek officials have publicly expressed regret for the raids, attributing recent police conduct to challenges with the implementation of laws at the local level. Nevertheless, the Uzbek government was unable to effectively restrain this persistent and longstanding practice. Moreover, it is often the police’s Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department (SETD) that conducts the raids. After a raid conducted on a Protestant home in December 2018, the SETD in Urgench reportedly called a woman’s mother-in-law to the police station and instructed her to beat her daughter-in-law until she signed a statement implicating local Protestants of holding “unauthorized religious meetings.”

Other Religious Minorities

In May 2018, local authorities announced plans to appropriate part of the grounds of the “Compassion” Buddhist Temple located on the outskirts of Tashkent. Described as the only active Buddhist temple in Central Asia, authorities claimed the land was needed to expand the nearby road. In October 2018, officials in Tashkent intervened and the expansion plans were allegedly changed to circumvent the temple. However, at the end of the reporting period, reports again emerged that local authorities intended to move

forward with the original plans to expand the road into the territory of the temple.

U.S. POLICY

Bilateral relations between the United States and Uzbekistan have focused on regional security in Central and South Asia, including combating terrorism, illegal narcotics, and human trafficking. Uzbekistan has also served as an important partner for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, which rely on Uzbekistan as a critical route for supplies as part of the Northern Distribution Network. In March 2018, Uzbekistan hosted the Tashkent International Conference on Afghanistan, which then Under Secretary for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon Jr. [attended](#), to discuss the ongoing peace and reconciliation process. Uzbekistan contributed to efforts to stabilize Afghanistan through both infrastructure development and economic assistance, and is a participant in the [C5+1](#) diplomatic forum for dialogue between the countries of Central Asia and the United States.

In May 2018, President Mirziyoyev [visited](#) the White House to meet with President Donald J. Trump, the first visit of a president of Uzbekistan to the United States since 2002. President Trump noted the progress Uzbekistan has made in terms of recent political, economic, and social reforms, and highlighted the positive steps taken so far to improve the human rights conditions in the country. Both sides collaborate on defense through participation in a five-year military cooperation plan, and continue to pursue closer trade relations, signing an estimated \$4.8 billion in business deals over the course of President Mirziyoyev’s visit. That same month, the United States announced the beginning of a [new era of strategic partnership](#) with Uzbekistan that will focus on regional security, human rights reform, and economic cooperation.

In July 2018, Uzbek diplomats attended the State Department’s inaugural [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#). In his [remarks](#) delivered at the Ministerial, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo applauded the steps Uzbekistan had taken to expand religious freedom. Also, in September 2018, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [visited](#) Uzbekistan to assess the state of religious freedom and encourage legislative reform. In November

2018, the State Department removed Uzbekistan from the CPC list and [placed](#) it on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated “severe violations of religious freedom.” This marked progress for Uzbekistan, which had previously been designated as a CPC from 2006 through November 2018. While encouraged by the government of Uzbekistan’s sincere intent to reform and improve religious freedom conditions, there was not sufficient positive progress made during the 2018 reporting period to warrant removal from the CPC list. Therefore, USCIRF recommends maintaining the CPC designation as a means to engage, encourage, and advise the government of Uzbekistan as it makes historic efforts to improve freedom of religion or belief for all.