

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positively. The government took notable steps to address some of the long-standing and significant religious freedom concerns that had led USCIRF to recommend Uzbekistan's designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), every year since 2005, including in April 2019. Throughout 2019, the government by and large successfully enforced a ban on law enforcement authorities raiding and harassing religious communities, and in August announced the closure of the notorious Jasliq Prison, a course of action USCIRF had [recommended](#). The government also continued to engage closely with the United States and other international partners to improve religious freedom. However, some issues saw little to no improvement or experienced backsliding. Thousands of religious prisoners—mostly observant Muslims—are estimated to remain behind bars on fabricated charges of "religious extremism" or membership in a banned religious group. Many religious prisoners subjected to multiple arbitrary extensions of their prison terms under the previous government continued to serve those sentences, and claimed to have experienced torture, which remains [widespread and routine](#).

Some incidents throughout 2019 reinforced concerns that the government continued to restrict Muslim religious practice not in line with the state-prescribed interpretation of Islam. The government opposes Muslims growing beards or wearing hijabs as expressions of their religious beliefs, and both local government and law enforcement officials singled out and violated the rights of visibly religious Muslims. In separate episodes in the cities of

Tashkent and Namangan, authorities rounded up and forced more than 100 men to shave their beards. Other government officials embarked on a campaign to actively discourage girls and women from wearing the hijab, with some authorities reportedly compiling lists of hijab-wearing girls and women for monitoring purposes. In a number of instances, Fergana Regional Governor Shuhrat Ganiev expressed open hostility toward Muslims, including by [threatening](#) subordinates who tolerated the hijab.

The Uzbek government also failed during 2019 to fulfill its May 2018 pledge to revise the restrictive 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 religion law), which continues to regulate and restrict all religious activity. The Ministry of Justice and other government officials continued to work on a revised draft of the law and sought some international feedback on their changes. Throughout the year, government officials stated that many of the law's most demanding and burdensome provisions would remain, including the mandatory registration of religious groups; the requirement that religious groups secure the approval of the *mahalla* (local community) to register; state review and approval of all religious literature; and bans on proselytism, missionary activity, the private teaching of religion, and any unregistered or unapproved religious activity. After the reporting period, however, government officials informed USCIRF that they intended to remove the *mahalla* from the registration process. Although eight minority communities were registered during the year, many religious minorities, such as some Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants, remained unable to register because of their small numbers or local opposition.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Uzbekistan on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law to comply with international human rights standards, and encourage the government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs; and
- Press at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** Tashkent and Fergana in September 2019
- **Staff visit:** Tashkent, Samarqand, and Bukhara in May 2019
- **Country Update:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)

Background

The government of Uzbekistan estimates that between 93 and 94 percent of the country's [estimated](#) population of 33 million identifies as Muslim. The majority adheres to Sunni Islam, and approximately 1 percent identifies as Shi'a Muslim. Around 3.5 percent of the population identifies as Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 3 percent comprises atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, Catholics, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Protestants.

Under the administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev beginning in late 2016, Uzbekistan has taken some positive steps to allow for religious freedom. Uzbekistan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief; however, it also allows for its limitation where it encroaches on the "lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society." Other legislation—such as the 1998 religion law, the Administrative Code, and the Criminal Code—facilitates government control of all religious activity, such as by requiring registration of all religious groups, criminalizing unregistered religious activity, and subjecting all religious literature and other materials to state approval.

Religious Prisoners

It is impossible to definitively ascertain the number of prisoners incarcerated in Uzbekistan in connection with their peaceful religious beliefs or practices. Estimates from international and local human rights organizations generally range from 1,500 to 5,000 prisoners. According to human rights activists in Uzbekistan, many of the remaining religious prisoners were sentenced in connection with real or fabricated membership in the Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Uzbekistan. However, they contend that few were legitimately guilty of committing or inciting violence. Religious prisoners Aramais Avakian and Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov, who have been covered in previous USCIRF Annual Reports and are listed in USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), remained imprisoned through the end of 2019. However, Avakian was released in February 2020, after the reporting period.

In a positive development, President Mirziyoyev [announced](#) in August 2019 that the government would close the infamous Jasliq Prison, an isolated facility in the country's northwest that is notorious for [torture](#) and the incarceration of religious prisoners. Uzbekistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs [stated](#) that approximately 10 percent of Jasliq inmates were imprisoned for crimes connected with "religious extremism." By the end of the year, however, [concerns remained](#) that Jasliq Prison would not be closed completely, and would instead be transferred to the control of local authorities to be used as a pretrial detention center.

Government Control of Religious Practice and Expression

Throughout the year, high-level government officials from Uzbekistan made commitments—both in Uzbekistan and during visits to the United States—to ensure greater religious freedom for all citizens. However, the government continued to wield extensive control and influence over all aspects of religious activity throughout the country. Although the government pledged to revise the 1998 religion law with the parliament's adoption of a "road map" on freedom of religion or

belief in May 2018, the restrictive law still governs the everyday practice and activities of all religious groups. According to interlocutors in Uzbekistan, many non-Muslim religious minorities, such as some Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, and Protestant communities, were unable to acquire [legal registration](#).

The government remained primarily concerned with controlling the practice of Islam out of fear of the potential for "radical Islam" and religious extremism. This position was exemplified by the government's decisions in August and September 2019, respectively, to [reassign](#) then deputy chairman of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Nuriyman Abulhasan to the Department for Combating Terrorism and Extremism in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and to [appoint](#) Abdujafur Ahmedov from the State Security Service (SSS) to lead the CRA. Authorities continued to target Muslims who adhere to a more conservative interpretation of Islam or are outwardly observant. In August, law enforcement [detained](#) around 100 men in a market in Tashkent and forced them to shave their beards, ostensibly to bring their appearances in line with their biometric passports so they could be identified by smart cameras. At least one other such [incident](#) also took place in Namangan the following month. Similarly, during the year, there were reports that officials instructed school administrators to [confiscate](#) girls' hijabs at the gates of schools, and [compiled lists](#) of girls who wore the hijab to be monitored. In June, Uzbekistan's Supreme Court [dismissed](#) the case of Luiza Muminjonova, a 19-year-old student expelled from the International Islamic Academy in Tashkent the previous year for refusing to remove her hijab.

The government reportedly places its own limitations on hajj and umrah pilgrimages separate from the quotas and requirements established by Saudi Arabia. Muslims who wish to perform the hajj or umrah must secure permission from the government, which has allegedly [excluded](#) particularly religious Muslims and enforces an unofficial age limit. Moreover, pilgrims are required to use state-approved travel agencies and are barred from joining tours organized by other companies. In August, the SSS reportedly [detained](#) and interrogated a group of 35 pilgrims, who had completed the hajj through a private company based in the United Arab Emirates, in Tashkent International Airport.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan cooperate closely on issues of regional stability and security, including combatting terrorism. In April 2019, the U.S. Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance program [sponsored training](#) for 13 Ministry of Internal Affairs participants. Uzbekistan also participates in the [C5+1](#) forum with the other countries of Central Asia and the United States, and in May it hosted a workshop on religious tolerance and countering violent extremism sponsored in part by the United States Institute of Peace. Human rights and religious freedom remain a priority for the United States in the bilateral relationship. In February, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells [visited](#) Uzbekistan, where she raised religious freedom issues and specifically [cited](#) the release of prisoners of conscience as a positive step. The State Department removed Uzbekistan from the CPC list and placed it on the Special Watch List for the first time in December 2018, and [did so again](#) in November 2019.