



UZBEKISTAN

Key Findings

Particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Uzbekistan through government efforts to enforce a highly restrictive religion law and to impose severe restrictions on all independent religious activity. The government imprisons individuals who do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or who it claims are extremist, including as many as 12,000 Muslims. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2015 that Uzbekistan be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the State Department has so designated Uzbekistan since 2006, most recently in July 2014, it has also indefinitely waived taking any punitive action since 2009.

Background

With an estimated total of 28.7 million people, Uzbekistan is the most populous post-Soviet Central Asian state. According to local data, 93 percent of its population is Muslim, mostly Hanafi Sunni with about one percent Shi’a, mostly in Bukhara and Samarkand. Some four percent is Russian Orthodox. The other three per-

cent of all religious groups and facilitates Uzbek government control of religious activity, particularly of the majority Muslim community. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production and distribution of religious publications; bans minors from religious organizations; and allows only clerics, and not laypeople, to wear religious clothing in public. Many religious groups are unable to meet registration requirements, which include a permanent representation in eight of the country’s 13 provinces. In 2014, a detailed new censorship decree went into effect banning materials that “distort” beliefs or encourage individuals to change religions.

The Uzbek government actively represses individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or for alleged association with extremist political programs. While Uzbekistan faces security threats from groups using violence in the name of religion, the government has arbitrarily used vague anti-extremism laws against peaceful religious adherents and others who pose no credible security threat. In addition, the Uzbek government’s harsh campaign against independent Muslims continues. Particular targets include those linked to the May 2005 protests in

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cent includes Roman Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha’is, Hare Krishnas, and atheists. An estimated 6,000 Ashkenazi and 2,000 Bukharan Jews are in Tashkent and other cities.

Uzbekistan’s 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations severely limits the rights

of all religious groups and facilitates Uzbek government control of religious activity, particularly of the majority Muslim community. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production and distribution of religious publications; bans minors from religious organizations; and allows only clerics, and not laypeople, to wear religious clothing in public. Many religious groups are unable to meet registration requirements, which include a permanent representation in eight of the country’s 13 provinces. In 2014, a detailed new censorship decree went into effect banning materials that “distort” beliefs or encourage individuals to change religions.

Andijon of the conviction of 23 businessmen for alleged membership in the banned Muslim group *Akromiya*; 231 are still imprisoned in connection with the Andijon events; 10 prisoners have died. The Uzbek government continues to pressure countries to return Uzbek refugees who fled after the Andijon tragedy.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2014-2015

New Surveillance Regime

A new law that went into effect in August 2014 established a Preventive Register that lists all previous convicts for at least one-year of “preventative measures.” It authorizes state agencies to prolong Register listings beyond one year and allows local authorities to work with unofficial informers to “prevent the activity of unregistered religious groups.”

Application of Extremism Laws

The Uzbek government continued its decade-long policy of arresting and imprisoning, some for as long as 20-year terms, individuals who reject state control over religious practice or for their suspected religious affiliation. Many are denied due process and are tortured; some are detained in psychiatric hospitals. Observers estimate that upwards of 12,000 Uzbek Muslims are in jail on these related charges. In 2013, approximately 200 religious believers were arrested, according to the Uzbek Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights

also cannot leave Uzbekistan for an unknown period. In an RFE/RL Uzbek interview, Hamidov reportedly praised his prison conditions. The other five – Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov, and Kudratullo (last name unknown) – were pardoned only after they repented and asked President Karimov for forgiveness, thereby in effect admitting their guilt, according to the independent Forum 18 News Service. They were jailed because they met to study the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. There are unconfirmed reports that other religious prisoners were amnestied in the run-up to the March presidential election in Uzbekistan.

A prominent Uzbek imam, known as Shaykh Abdullah Bukhoroy, a critic of Uzbekistan’s government viewed as a radical Islamist, was shot dead in Istanbul on December 10, 2014. In 2014, President Karimov urged religious leaders to protect Uzbeks from the influence of those who wish to establish an Islamic caliphate, according to RFE/RL. The Uzbek government has also used state television to justify its overly broad anti-extremism policies. For example, in late 2014, Uzbek state

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Defenders. The government claims that many detainees are associated with extremist groups that it labels “Wahhabi” or “jihadist,” but often without evidence of use or advocacy of violence. These terms can refer to a range of Muslim individuals or groups, including violent extremists, political opponents, those with foreign education, and others.

In 2014, several Muslims, including Tajik citizen Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov and Uzbek citizen Zoirjon Mirzayev, were sentenced to five-year prison terms after police found Qur’anic verses and allegedly “extremist” sermons on their cell phones; as of July 2014, the Tajik citizen was held practically incommunicado in a Tashkent Investigation Prison, 10 months after sentencing.

In February 2015, the Uzbek government amnestied six known Muslim prisoners of conscience, including Hairulla Hamidov, a well-known sports journalist and Muslim commentator. As a release condition, Hamidov had to write an apology to President Islam Karimov; he

TV ran a half-hour show on what it alleged is a new method of treason. The program focused on six Uzbek citizens who were granted refugee status in Norway but had returned to Uzbekistan and were in detention. The show made unfounded allegations not only that the six were religious extremists but also homosexuals who had belonged to a supposed underground religious extremist organization reportedly led by an imam in Oslo.

Detention Conditions

The Uzbek human rights group *Ezgulik* has reported on torture of female detainees, including many jailed for religious beliefs. Despite the Uzbek government’s claims, torture remains endemic in prisons, pretrial facilities, and police precincts, and reportedly includes the threat or use of violence, including rape, and the use of gas masks to block victims’ air supply. Torture allegedly is used to force adults and children to

renounce their religious beliefs or to make confessions. In early 2013, the International Committee for the Red Cross halted its work in Uzbekistan due to lack of official cooperation. Despite a UN Committee Against

a car from two Baptists who refused to pay court fines for religious activity.

In May 2014, police and tax officials raided a Protestant-run drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in

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Torture appeal, Muslim believer Khayrullo Tursonov was returned by Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan; sentenced to a 16-year term in June 2013, he is now in a TB-infected camp. Nilufar Rahimjanova, 37, died in detention in September 2014 in the women's labor camp near Tashkent, according to Forum 18 News Service. She was three years into a 10-year prison term. Reportedly, she was jailed to punish her Iran-based husband and her Tajikistan-based father, both Muslim theologians.

Restrictions on Muslims

The Uzbek government tightly controls Islamic institutions and prohibits their independent practice. In the Fergana Valley, the government has confiscated several mosques and banned children from attendance. The government-controlled Muslim Spiritual Board oversees the training, appointment, and dismissal of imams, and censors the content of sermons and Islamic materials. Despite these restrictions, attendance at registered official mosques is high, and the country's former chief mufti, Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, runs a popular website that includes reports on human rights outside Uzbekistan.

Charges against Non-Muslims

The government often brands evangelical Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists" for practicing religion outside of state-sanctioned structures, and they face massive fines, detention, and arrest for "illegal religious activity." Authorities raid meetings of registered and unregistered Christian and Baha'i groups. In three known cases in 2014, local officials supported imams' refusals to allow non-Muslim burials in secular state-owned cemeteries, Forum 18 reported. In May 2014, court bailiffs in the Samarkand region confiscated

Tashkent, closing the center and evicting 20 residents. Criminal charges for alleged financial crimes were brought against the center's founder, Vladislav Sekan; a teacher, Pyotr Tikhomirov, was fined for "illegally" storing religious texts. Both belong to Tashkent's Full Gospel Presbyterian Church. Sekan, who fled the country with his family in June 2014, told Forum 18 that he believed the prosecution was linked to his efforts to unite various Protestant churches in an alliance. In another incident in the same month, police raided an Adventist home in Samarkand; they seized religious texts and computers, reportedly in retaliation for a July registration application. The state-controlled media encourages prejudice against minority religious groups and has equated missionaries with religious extremists.

Restrictions on Religious Materials

The Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) censors religious materials. The religion law prohibits the importing, storing, producing, and distributing of unapproved religious materials. Members of religious communities reportedly destroy their own sacred texts due to fear of confiscation during police raids. In 2013, a CRA official told Forum 18 that Uzbek law only allows religious texts to be read inside buildings of registered religious groups. In May 2014, a Tashkent court fined a couple for "illegally storing" religious texts at home and ordered the books destroyed. In another case, police ignored a court order to return confiscated texts. In July 2014, a Baptist from Tashkent was detained after he posted posters with Bible verses; a court ordered property destruction and a fine. In August 2014 in Navoi, police, without a warrant, searched the home of Baptists while they were worshipping, seized all religious texts from another Baptist home, and warned them not to store Christian texts. The

government also maintains an extensive list of banned international websites, particularly on human rights and religious freedom.

Restrictions on Religious Instruction and Travel

Religious instruction is limited to officially-sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors, and only six registered religious communities have met the requirement to conduct religious education that they must have eight legally-registered regional branches. In 2013, a woman was fined for her 12-year-old son's "illegal" religious education; he took art lessons from two Protestants. Private religious education is punished. In 2010 Muslim religion teacher Mehrinisso Hamdamova was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for teaching women about Islam; as previously reported, she continues to need medical attention. The government also restricts international travel for religious purposes, and has a long list of those banned from such travel.

U.S. Policy

Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country and shares borders with the four other former Soviet Republics in Central Asia as well as Afghanistan. It is central to the regional rail system built during the Soviet period that also connects with Russia. Because of this centrality, in recent years, U.S. policy in Uzbekistan has focused on the country's key position in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a supply route for U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is the NDN hub, but at times has not been cooperative. Uzbekistan's NDN role will remain important in 2015 as the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces accelerates.

In 2004, Congress prohibited U.S. assistance to the Uzbek central government unless the Secretary of State reports that Uzbekistan is making substantial progress in meeting human rights commitments, establishing a multi-party system, and ensuring free and fair elections. Since 2004, some U.S. aid to Uzbekistan had been withheld due to a lack of progress on democratic reforms. In 2008, Congress adopted a measure blocking Uzbek officials from entering the United States if they are deemed responsible for the 2005 Andijon violence or other human rights violations.

In recent years, however, military assistance has increased. As of 2009, Uzbekistan reportedly has

allowed "case-by-case" counter-terrorism operations on its territory. In 2010, Congress permitted expanded military education and training programs for Uzbekistan. In 2012, the State Department certified on national security grounds that military aid to Uzbekistan should resume for six months, despite its human rights assessment citing numerous concerns, such as severe limitations on religious freedom, persistent torture, and no independent probe into the 2005 Andijon events. Such aid includes training border troops and possibly providing military supplies. In a January 2015 VOA interview, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State (DAS) for South and Central Asia Affairs Dan Rosenblum said that as of late 2014 Uzbekistan had received excess U.S. military mine-resistant and armored vehicles under the Excess Defense Articles program to support the country's counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts.

The United States instituted Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with each Central Asian state in 2009. The most recent U.S.-Uzbekistan ABC was in Tashkent in December 2014. The U.S. delegation was led by Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal. DAS Rosenblum told the VOA that the human rights issues discussed included prison conditions, treatment of prisoners, restrictions on civil society and media, labor rights, and religious freedom. According to Rosenblum, the ABC for the first time also included an NGO roundtable on prison conditions. He also informed USCIRF staff that the U.S. delegation called for the release of specific religious and political prisoners.

Since 2006, the State Department has designated Uzbekistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its systematic, egregious, ongoing violations of religious freedom. The CPC designation was most recently renewed in July 2014. The State Department continued its policy of indefinitely waiving any action as a consequence of CPC designation, stating that this waiver is in the "important national interest of the United States" pursuant to IRFA section 407.

Recommendations

In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate Uzbekistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government, under section 405(c) of IRFA,

on steps it can take to be de-listed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail or Uzbekistan not uphold its promises in the agreement, lift the waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation, in place since January 2009, and impose sanctions, as contemplated in the IRFA legislation;

- Consider making U.S. assistance, except humanitarian assistance and human rights programs, contingent on the Uzbek government's adoption of specific actions to improve religious freedom conditions and comply with international human rights standards, including reforming the 1998 religion law and permitting an international investigation into the 2005 Andijon events;
- Press for UN Human Rights Council scrutiny of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, as well as raise concerns in other multilateral settings, such as the OSCE, and urge the Uzbek government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Independence of the Judiciary, and Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such a visit;
- Ensure that U.S. statements and actions are coordinated across agencies so that U.S. concerns about religious freedom and related human rights are reflected in its public statements and private interactions with the Uzbek government, including calls for the release of religious prisoners; ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists and press the Uzbek government to ensure that every prisoner has greater access to his or her family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and a lawyer;
- Maintain the two-day duration of the Annual Bilateral Consultations to allow full discussion of relevant issues, particularly human rights and religious freedom;
- Encourage the Board for Broadcasting Governors to ensure continued U.S. funding for the Uzbek Service of the Voice of America and for RFE/RL's Uzbek Service website, Muslims and Democracy and consider translating this RFE/RL Uzbek Service material into other relevant languages;
- Use funding allocated to the State Department under the Title VIII Program (established in the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983) for research, including on human rights and religious freedom in former Soviet states, and language training.