

UZBEKISTAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for separation of religion and state. It guarantees freedom of conscience and states everyone has the right to profess or not to profess any religion. The law provides for freedom of worship and freedom from religious persecution, but provides for restricting religious activities when necessary to maintain national security, the social order, or morality. The law requires religious groups to register with the government and declares religious activities of unregistered groups to be illegal. It bans a number of religious groups as “extremist.” The law prohibits proselytizing, efforts to involve minors in religious activities, and the teaching of religious subjects in public and private schools. In 2015, independent human rights groups estimated between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals were imprisoned on charges related to either “religious extremism” or membership in an unregistered religious group; attempts by independent groups to verify this figure have been unsuccessful. According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) sources, there were several deaths of prisoners in custody which the NGOs reported were due to torture or physical abuse of individuals arrested on suspicion of “religious extremism” or who participated in underground Islamic activity. According to media sources, law enforcement officers closely monitored and raided meetings of unregistered religious groups and detained their members. Courts continued to sentence members of minority religious groups to administrative detention and fines following searches of their homes. The government limited access to religious publications and arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission as well as individuals in possession of literature deemed by the government to be extremist. Minority religious groups continued to experience difficulties registering and conducting religious activities.

NGOs and private individuals continued to report social pressure on individuals, particularly among the majority Muslim population, to not change religions. Religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian Churches, stated they continued to face greater societal scrutiny and encountered discrimination. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity reportedly suffered continued harassment and discrimination, including pressure upon them from national and local authorities to repudiate their new faith and on their family members to convince them to do so. A number of independent media organizations continued to publish articles critical of

proselytism and critical of members of minority religious groups they regarded as “nontraditional.”

The Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and other high-level officials from the Department of State met with government officials and recommended tangible steps the government could take to improve its record on religious freedom, including easing restrictions on religious practice and increasing tolerance of minority religions. Embassy officers urged the government to include religious prisoners of conscience in its annual amnesty and met with government officials to discuss the nonregistration of religious communities, limitations on religious expression, and restrictions on the publication and dissemination of religious literature. Since 2006, Uzbekistan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.5 million (July 2016 estimate). According to government figures from the 1989 census, the latest available, approximately 93 percent of the population is Muslim. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School; the government states approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 4 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, according to news reports, and Russian migration statistics indicate this number continues to decline as ethnic Russians and other ethnic Slavs emigrate. The government states the remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Roman Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. The Jewish community estimates 6,000 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharan Jews remain, concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley. The Jewish population continues to decline because of emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for separation of religion and state. It states religious organizations and associations shall be separate from the state and equal before the law and the state shall not interfere in the activity of religious associations.

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and states everyone has the right to profess or not to profess any religion. The law provides for freedom of worship and freedom from religious persecution, but grants the government authority to restrict these freedoms when the government deems such restrictions “necessary to maintain national security, social order, life, health, morality, and the rights or freedoms of other citizens.”

The law requires all religious groups to register. Among the requirements, the law states each group must present a membership list of at least 100 citizens, age 18 years or older, belonging to the group and a charter with a legal, physical address to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). It also requires notarized documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith, the group’s sources of income, and the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA, which reports to the Cabinet of Ministers) concurrence to registration. The law requires local governments to concur in registration of groups in their areas and that the group present a “guarantee letter” from local government authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements (including statements from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and locally selected neighborhood committees). By law, the MOJ may take one to three months to review a registration application. The MOJ may approve or deny the registration, or cease review without the issuance of a decision. Registration of a central administrative body requires registered religious groups to be present in at least eight of the country’s 14 administrative units, which may include Karakalpakstan and Tashkent city. The religious groups thus registered may expand throughout the country and have appropriate buildings, organize religious teaching, and possess religious literature.

The law limits the operations of a registered group to those areas where it is registered. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy.

The criminal code distinguishes between “illegal” groups, which are those not registered properly, and “prohibited” groups viewed as “extremist.” It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four million to eight million som (\$1,200-\$2,400), to organize or participate in an illegal religious

group. The law also specifically prohibits persuading others to join illegal religious groups with penalties of up to three years in prison. The criminal code provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. Aside from joining an extremist group, charges of religious extremism may include the offenses of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and terrorism.

In 2015, the latest year for which figures were available, there are 2,238 registered religious groups representing 16 denominations. There are 2,064 Muslim groups (affiliated with mosques, educational institutions, and Islamic centers). Among the Muslim groups are several Shia congregations. Registered minority religious groups include ethnic Korean Christian, Russian Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal (Full Gospel), Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Catholic, Bahai, Lutheran, New Apostolic, Armenian Apostolic, Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishna Consciousness, Temple of Buddha, and Christian Voice of God Church communities, as well as one interconfessional Bible society.

The CRA oversees registered religious activity. The Council for Confessions, under the CRA, includes ex-officio representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, and discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights, and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion.

The criminal and administrative codes contain penalties for violating the law and other statutes on religious activities. The law punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison. It proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without the permission of their parents and prohibits the wearing of religious attire in public places by all except clergy and individuals serving in leadership positions of officially recognized religious organizations. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. After an offender is punished for a violation under the administrative code, a repeat offense may be tried under the criminal code.

Under the law, state bodies, including neighborhood committees and nonstate and noncommercial public organizations have wide-ranging powers to combat suspected "antisocial activity" in cooperation with police. These powers include preventing the activity of unregistered religious organizations, ensuring observance of rights of citizens to religious freedoms, prohibiting forced propagation of religious views, and considering other questions related to observance of the law.

The law requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. It limits the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious groups and only following approval by the CRA. Under a Cabinet of Ministers decree, the CRA must conduct a review of any “religious materials” imported, produced, or distributed. The decree defines religious materials as books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, leaflets, audiovisual items (including animated material), CDs, DVDs, and materials posted to the internet “describing the origins, history, ideology, teachings, commentaries, and rituals of various religions of the world.” The decree also requires the CRA to compile an annual list of religious materials banned for import, production, or distribution.

According to the law, individuals in possession of literature by authors the government deems to be extremists or of any literature illegally imported or produced are subject to arrest and prosecution. The administrative code punishes “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage of 130,240 som (\$40) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage. The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labor of up to three years for these offenses for acts committed subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code.

The law allows only those religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel. Nine specialized Islamic training schools, including one for women, and an Orthodox and a Protestant seminary may officially train religious personnel.

The law requires imams to graduate from a recognized religious education facility and register for a license with the government. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan assigns a graduate to a particular mosque as a deputy imam before becoming an imam later.

The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. Otherwise, the law prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. It does not permit nonstate approved private religious instruction and imposes fines for violations.

Nine madrassahs, including one for women, provide secondary education on a full range of secular subjects. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. In addition, the Tashkent Islamic Institute and the Tashkent Islamic University, which is a secular institution, provide higher education religion programs. There is no other officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam.

The law allows those who object to military service on the basis of their religious beliefs to perform alternative civilian service.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political parties based on religious principles as well as political parties and public associations advocating religious hostility.

The law restricts the activities of faith-based NGOs. It prohibits religious activities outside of formal worship, as well as religious gatherings intended for children under 16 years old, and the creation of faith-based activity groups deemed by the government to be unrelated to acts of worship.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to describe religious extremism as a threat to domestic security and stability. According to several NGO sources, there were several reported deaths of prisoners in custody due to torture or physical abuse of persons arrested on suspicion of “religious extremism” or who participated in underground Islamic activity. NGOs reported authorities continued to pressure the families in such cases to bury the bodies before medical professionals could examine them. The government continued to imprison individuals on charges of religious extremism for advocating replacement of the current secular government laws based on religious principles. In 2015, based on their research of prosecution of religious people by authorities, independent human rights groups estimated a high number of prisoners – between 5,000 and 15,000 – remain in detention on charges related to “religious extremism” or membership in an unregistered religious group, though attempts by independent groups to verify this figure have been unsuccessful. Law enforcement officers continued to raid meetings of unregistered religious groups and detain their members. According to media sources,

authorities closely monitored social gatherings where religious issues were discussed and made several arrests based on participation. Officials continued to search homes, offices, and spaces belonging to members of minority religious groups, often without valid search warrants, and courts sentenced members of such groups to administrative detention or fines, including for possession of Bibles. The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications and arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission as well as individuals in possession of literature deemed by the government to be extremist. Minority religious groups said they continued to experience difficulties registering and conducting religious activities because of harassment by local authorities. State-controlled media accused missionaries and others engaged in proselytizing of posing a danger to society.

Family members reported deaths in custody of prisoners accused of religious extremism. They stated the bodies of prisoners showed signs of torture, beatings, or other abuse. For example, on February 11, the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported that Doston Abdurakhmanov died due to what his family said was severe torture at penal colony number 64/48 in Zarafshan City, Navoi Region. On February 12, IGIHRDU reported authorities returned the body to his family and demanded immediate burial the next day in the morning. Abdurakhmanov was serving his prison term pursuant to a conviction for religious extremism and attempting to overthrow the constitutional order.

In February Ozodlik Radio (the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) reported that police officers brought the body of Makhmudjon Khasanov, who was in penal colony 64/46 under charges that he was affiliated with the banned religious organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir, to his family without official forensic examination records. The police demanded immediate burial. According to *Fergana News*, the death resulted from torture.

In 2015, independent human rights groups estimated between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals remained in prison on charges related to religious extremism or membership in an illegal religious group. The government did not disclose relevant data or provide independent observers access to prisoners. Human rights groups continued to estimate the government imprisoned approximately 200 individuals annually for participation in unregistered religious groups or engaging in religious “extremism,” but acknowledged difficulties in obtaining accurate numbers. NGO sources reported the government continued its physical abuse of

persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of “religious extremism” or who participated in underground Islamic activity.

On December 19, Forum18 reported that on July 5 Tashkent City police officers raided the Sunnatullayev family’s apartment early in the morning. Three police officers entered the apartment, seized a laptop computer, detained Ziyodullo Sunnatulayev, and took him to the police station where he was beaten and tortured to obtain a confession of extremist religious activity. Surat Ikramov of IGIHRDU told Forum18, Sunnatulayev was so severely beaten that it took a week for him “to come to his senses” after he was released from detention. After 15 days of arrest, Sunnatulayev was released after the police “understood he was not a religious person.”

The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as extremist and criminalized membership in such groups, which included Akromiya, Tablighi Jamaat, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also banned Nur, founded by Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi and associated with the religious teachings of Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not a matter of religious freedom, but rather a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

On February 19, the Djizzakh Regional Criminal Court sentenced ethnic Armenian Christian Aramais Avakyan as well as Furkat Djuraev, Bektemir Umirzokov, Akmal Mamatmurodov, and Dilshod Alimov from seven to 12 years in prison for charges related to terrorism, attempts to overthrow the state, production and distribution of materials containing threats to public security and public order, and the creation of, leadership, and participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organizations. During the court hearing, Avakyan and others reported the use of torture to extract false confessions by Djizzakh regional National Security Service (NSS) and police officers. The men said they were held incommunicado by security services for 40 days and denied access to legal counsel. In response to questions regarding the case, the government denied this account and stated an internal investigation found the torture claims groundless. According to news media accounts, Avakyan and his employees were arrested because the Pakhtakor District governor wanted to expropriate his fish farm and saw a religious conviction as a convenient way to do so.

In August Ozodlik Radio and Forum 18, an international NGO promoting religious freedom, separately reported that on June 1 the Karakul District Criminal Court in

the Bukhara Region handed down four-year prison terms to four leaders of a Sufi Naqshbandi Muslim community, who were convicted of establishing and running illegal religious organizations. The four leaders were among 15 Sufis arrested in Karakul District following a police raid on a home where a community was performing the *zikir*, a devotional practice of reciting sacred phrases. On July 16, the same court fined 11 other members of the same community up to four million som (\$1,200) each under the same charges.

On February 17, Ozodlik Radio reported the arrests of Akmal Urinov, Temur Siddikov, Aybek Salikhov, and Davran Kayumov. These individuals were accused of belonging to a prohibited Salifist organization and producing and distributing religious materials. If convicted, the accused could face 10 to 15 years' imprisonment.

Prison administrators reportedly continued to charge prisoners convicted of religious extremism with organizing extremist cells while in prison or with other offenses which served as grounds for extending their prison terms. Reports from independent media and rights activists continued to state that administrators charged prisoners incarcerated for religious extremism with alleged internal prison violations, making them ineligible to apply for an amnesty for which they otherwise would be eligible.

According to news sources, on November 8, authorities released on parole Tohar Haydarov, an ethnic Uzbek convert to Christianity, after he served six years and 10 months in jail. A court found Haydarov guilty in March 2010 on drug charges, which local Baptists stated were fabricated. According to the NGO Release International, his arrest followed a request by relatives that local police help force him to return to Islam.

In April Forum 18 reported that Latipjon Mamajanov, a Protestant who was arrested and jailed on March 12 in Fergana for 15 days, was released from jail on March 28. According to the report, police raided Mamajanov's home in Fergana, searching for religious literature. Authorities reportedly imprisoned Mamajanov in the Kuva District Police Detention Center, Fergana Region where up to seven inmates were put in a cell designed for two people, without sanitary and hygienic conditions, and were fed only once a day. Mamajanov and other prisoners, who proclaimed their innocence, were tortured repeatedly, the NGO reported.

According to Forum 18, on July 5, the Tashkent Regional Court confirmed five-year prison sentences for cousins, Jonibek Turdiboyev and Mansurkhon

Akhmedov, whom authorities jailed on May 29 for allegedly possessing an Islamic sermon on a music CD. The court jailed a third Muslim for seven years after extradition from Russia for possessing social media sermons. Forum 18 said they were tortured and a human rights activist said their trial was “a farce.”

On February 3, Samarkand police officers arrested three female Jehovah’s Witnesses for hosting a religious study meeting in a private home. On March 15, judge Zafar Kholikulov of Samarkand City Court fined each 50 times the minimum monthly wage, 6,512,000 som (\$1,980) for possessing “illegal literature” found after authorities raided their meeting. According to a Jehovah’s Witnesses statement to Forum 18 on April 25, police held the women at a Samarkand Police Station for almost 24 hours before releasing them in the afternoon of February 4. The same source reported that while in detention, two of the women were “physically abused” and another female Jehovah’s Witness was “subjected to sexual harassment.”

On September 30, Forum 18 reported Baptist Pastor Stanislav Kim from Urgench, Khorezm Region, had been fined for a second time within a year for having Christian books at home, which state officials regard as “illegal.” As this was a second instance, Kim was convicted under the criminal code to a two-year corrective labor sentence. Kim’s first offense was in July 2014, when Urgench police raided his home while he was visited by two other members of the Church.

Religious groups and human rights activists reported armed law enforcement officers continued to raid meetings of unregistered groups and detained their members. Courts continued to sentence members of minority religious groups to administrative detention following searches, often without valid search warrants, of homes and offices.

The *Darakchi* newspaper reported on September 15 only one registered Jehovah’s Witness house of worship existed in the country and that was in Chirchik in the Tashkent Region. The report said one of the members, a resident of Tashkent City, Natalya Shamsuddinova, was fined for illegally keeping religious literature at home.

On January 6, the progovernment *12news.uz* web site reported a raid on a gathering of followers of a Korean Protestant church in Tashkent Region’s Yangiyol District. According to the report, law enforcement agencies accused three residents of illegal possession and distribution of religious literature of the church. After completing the search, the authorities found and confiscated seven books, a

brochure, two notebooks with notes, and 130 CDs and DVDs containing religious content. No further information was available by the end of the year.

On February 7, police in Okdarya District, Samarkand Region, raided the home of Malika Khidirova, a Christian. Officers confiscated one Bible and one copy of the New Testament. According to the NGO Forum18, Khidirova, along with Munis Oblakulov, Sanobar Aripova and Khudoyor Muhamadiyev, were brought to court under charges of possessing religious literature and teaching religious beliefs without specialized religious education or permission from the central organ of a registered religious group. On March 22, Judge Shohmurod Begmatov of Okdarya District Criminal Court fined Oblakulov 60 times the minimum monthly salary (7,814,400 som or \$2,400); Khidirova 20 times the minimum monthly salary (2,604,800 som or \$790); and Aripova and Muhamadiyev 10 times the minimum monthly salary (1,302,400 som or \$400) each. Begmatov also ordered the formal confiscation of the Bible and New Testament.

On January 9, customs officials detained Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev, an ethnic Uzbek with Russian citizenship, at Tashkent Airport for carrying “extremist” religious materials on his mobile phone, Association for Human Rights in Central Asian and International Partnership for Human Rights NGOs reported. No further information was available at the end of the year.

On March 10, Forum 18 reported a male citizen was detained for a day at Uchteppa District Police Station, Tashkent Region, for possession of an Arabic-language Quran, which was confiscated as it did not have a stamp from the state's Religious Affairs Committee. According to the report, officials could find no other literature in the man's home, and released him the next day.

Media reported authorities closely observed social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, and made several arrests based on participation. In one case, the police raided a private home where three Baptists gathered for a birthday celebration and not for private worship. No religious material was found. Police issued a fine for illegal worship outside a registered premise.

On March 13, customs officials stopped Boris Prokopenko, a Baptist from Kazakhstan, at the Gisht-Kuprik border crossing with Kazakhstan for carrying Christian materials on an electronic book reader and memory stick, as well as a leaflet with the word “Christ” in his pocket. Officials held him for two days at Tashkent Regional Customs Department. They released him after opening an

administrative case against him. No further information was available at the end of the year.

According to human rights activists and religious adherents, the government reviewed the content of imams' sermons as well as the volume and substance of Islamic materials published by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (Muftiate). The government ensured its control over the Muftiate through the CRA and by selecting staff for the Muftiate. The government also informally restricted the volume of public calls to prayer

The government stated most prisons continued to set aside special areas for inmates to pray, and prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible. Family members of prisoners reported, however, prison authorities did not allow prisoners suspected of religious extremism to practice their religion, including reading the Quran or praying privately. Reported restrictions included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. There also continued to be reports authorities punished prisoners for "violating internal prison regulations" if they prayed at scheduled times for Islamic prayers.

Authorities continued to fine representatives of registered religious groups, or of groups which had unsuccessfully attempted to register, for engaging in religious activities, including fining members of Jehovah's Witnesses for congregating in a place other than their sole registered congregation in Tashkent Region. According to Forum 18, on January 27, 30 Jehovah's Witnesses in the Bukhara region were punished for meeting for worship and possessing religious literature officials said was "illegal." They received fines totaling more than 1,050 times the minimum monthly wage or 136,752,000 som (\$41,600). According to Forum 18, two of the Jehovah's Witnesses – Andrei and Yelena Yu – were fined 30 times the minimum monthly wage each and given 10-day jail terms.

Minority religious groups continued to experience difficulties registering.

Some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, stated they stopped applying for registration because they continued to expect local officials would not register them. Other groups, including those with less than 100 members, said they did not submit registration applications that they knew would not meet legal requirements as a means of avoiding the attention of the authorities. Some groups did not attempt to register, they said, because they did not want to provide the authorities with a list of their members' names. They stated local

authorities harassed their members, especially ethnic Uzbek members, through pressure on them and their families to renounce their faith in favor of traditional Islamic beliefs during previous attempts to register. A few groups said they refused to seek registration because they challenged the government's right to require it.

As in previous years, the MOJ continued to explain denials of registration by citing alleged failures of religious groups to report a valid legal address, or to obtain the guarantee letters and other necessary permits from all local authorities. Some groups stated they did not have addresses because they continued to be reluctant to purchase property without assurance their registration would be approved. Other groups stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. In response, some groups reported providing congregation membership lists with Russian sounding last names only.

Churches that previously attempted to register reported they remained unregistered. These included the Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal church in Chirchik; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Gulistan; the Pentecostal church in Andijon; and the Adventist church, Greater Grace Christian Church, Central Protestant Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand. Catholic congregations in Navoi and Angren have been unable to register their churches after attempting to do so for 10 years.

Despite continued efforts to engage with the government, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported no success in registering new groups.

According to Forum 18, authorities placed restrictions on public religious activities during Ramadan in July. The Tashkent City Administration banned mosques and restaurants from serving an iftar during Ramadan. Religious officials said people should break their fasts at home with their families, whereas one human rights activist said that the government's objective was to prevent public displays of faith.

Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious groups reported they continued to have particular difficulties conducting religious activities in Karakalpakstan because all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities continued to lack legal status there.

Anecdotal reports said a small number of unregistered “neighborhood mosques” continued to function for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live in close proximity to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques remained limited in their functions, and registered imams were not assigned to them.

The Jewish community continued to be unable to register a central office because they did not have synagogues in at least eight provinces of the country’s 14 administrative units, as required by law. Despite the community’s efforts to have additional rabbis recognized, the MOJ provided accreditation for only one rabbi – a Bukharian Sephardic – in the country in 2014, following a seven-year gap and cancellation of the residency permit of the community’s previous rabbi. The Ashkenazi Jewish community lacks rabbinical services. Members of the Jewish community said the rabbi shortage limited faith practices, religious interest, and growth of the community. Jewish people have expressed concern over the future of their congregations once the current generation of adherents either emigrates or passes away.

The government continued to deny permission to train Shia imams inside the country and did not recognize training received outside the country.

The media reported security services continued surveillance of religious communities by filming participants at Friday prayer services at local mosques. The same surveillance activity was reported by parishioners at Catholic masses in English and Russian. Other congregations, such as the Lutherans and Jehovah’s Witnesses, reported surveillance of their facilities, including attempts by authorities to install closed circuit television for Lutheran services.

The government and local imams continued to discourage public displays of religious adherence considered to be foreign-influenced. Media reported authorities questioned women in Tashkent and the Fergana Valley for wearing the hijab and encouraged them to remove it or wear it in the more traditional Uzbek style of tying the scarf at the back of the neck.

State-controlled and state-influenced media continued to accuse missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord.

Mahalla (neighborhood) committees and imams continued to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion.

The government continued to provide logistical support, including charter flights, for a limited number of selected Muslims to participate in the Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages, although pilgrims paid their own expenses. The government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,200 generally older citizens considered by the government to be “politically reliable,” which was less than 20 percent of the country’s allotted number of pilgrims. Local *mahalla* committees, district administrations, the NSS, and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the Muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. According to reports from sources in the human rights community in the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan, it was exceedingly difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and bribery.

The government continued to control access to Islamic publications and to require a statement in every domestic publication indicating the source of its publication authority. According to marketplace shoppers, it remained possible, although uncommon, to obtain a few imported works in Arabic from book dealers, but any literature not specifically approved by the CRA was only occasionally found and usually in second hand stores or flea markets.

A number of government entities, including the Ministry of Interior (MOI), NSS, Customs Service, and local police, continued to confiscate, and in some cases destroy, religious literature and the equipment used to produce it.

The international post office in Tashkent reportedly continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. If the CRA banned the material, it mailed a letter to the intended recipient and the sender explaining the rejection. The CRA continued to deny the importation of both Christian and Islamic literature.

According to media and NGO reports, the authorities continued to confiscate, and in some cases destroy, religious literature in the Uzbek and Russian languages imported legally or produced in country, as well as religious items such as prayer beads or incense.

Members of registered minority religious communities reported they continued to encounter difficulties when entering and leaving the country because authorities seized religious literature for alleged customs violations.

The government continued to block access to several websites containing religious content, including Christian- and Islam-related news sites.

Groups allowed by the government to publish, import, and distribute religious literature included the Bible Society of Uzbekistan (BSU), the Muftiate, Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic Churches.

Media and religious groups reported authorities continued to prohibit children and teenagers under the age of 16 from practicing religion. There were several media reports of the government filing charges against Christian and Muslim groups where the government cited the presence of children during religious services as an incriminating factor. Media reports also said local officials continued to pressure imams to prevent children from attending prayers, and teachers and police officers continued to turn young students away from prayer services. According to Forum 18, there were reports of schoolteachers and police stationed at the entrance of mosques in Tashkent who were preventing children under 18 from entering during Ramadan in July. Authorities in Andijan sent a letter to parents in May instructing them to not send their children to mosques during their summer vacation, and said they would enforce the directive legally. An official from the Andijan Regional Education Department said that children can be “misled” in mosques, but did not explain. There were media reports school officials continued to discourage both Muslim and Christian parents from sending their children to mosque or church services, and some school officials reportedly questioned students about their religion and why they attended services.

Representatives of a registered Christian group and of the Bahai community stated children were able to attend church-sponsored activities and services with the permission of their parents, such as Sunday school. Witnesses continued to report large numbers of children in attendance at both places of worship.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites.

Human rights organizations and international media reported continued government harassment in the media of members of Akromiya (Akromiylar), an organization characterized by some scholars and human rights groups as an informal association promoting business according to Islamic principles, but classified as a terrorist organization by the government. Government media continued to publish negative articles about the group and its members. According

to authorities, the group had attempted to overthrow the government through armed rebellion in Andijon in 2005.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs, there continued to be social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to change religions. Ethnic Russians, Jews, Catholics, and non-Muslim foreigners said they felt less societal pressure against choosing and changing their religion from members of their own ethnic community or from the Uzbek Muslim community. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity, however, reportedly continued to face harassment and discrimination, particularly from neighborhood officials applying pressure on them, their family members, and employers to convince converts to not involve themselves with what they were told were “alien religious beliefs.” Religious groups perceived as proselytizing religions, including evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian churches, said they faced greater social scrutiny and their neighbors called the police to report their activities. Other groups, including Catholics, Jews, Russian Orthodox, and members of the Bahai community, report harmonious interfaith and community relations with the members and leadership of the predominate-Muslim faith.

A number of media NGOs continued to publish articles critical of proselytism and critical of members of minority religious groups deemed by media outlets to be “nontraditional.” A popular tabloid magazine criticized missionaries for proselytizing, labeled the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Full Gospel believers “totalitarian sects” and “evil ideologies” and stated it was the “duty” of all citizens to prevent the “deleterious” effects of such groups, especially on youth.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, the Secretary of State, and other senior officials from the Department of State including the Deputy Secretary of State, Undersecretary for Political Affairs, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central Asia, and the Special Envoy to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation addressed religious freedom issues with the country’s leadership. They raised issues such as prisoners of conscience, registration of religious groups, and antiterrorism statutes with the president, foreign minister, and CRA. U.S. officials urged the government to adopt the Religious Freedom Action Plan with provisions to allow minority religious groups to practice their faith freely; provide protection against abuses and expand

opportunities for legal redress; and promote tolerance among groups. Officials have also urged the government to commit to implementing United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, including holding workshops on religious freedom and tolerance.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with the foreign minister to discuss restrictions on religious freedom and recommend opportunities for improving conditions. In response, the MFA provided letters from 12 major religious societies and organizations in which religious leaders denied any form of religious intolerance in the country. The Ambassador at Large expressed interest in engaging on specific restrictions such as the inability of several groups to register, broad definitions of religious extremism that may prevent or criminalize peaceful religious activities, and bans on proselytizing and certain religious literature and the foreign minister invited the Ambassador at Large to visit the country to continue discussing religious freedom. U.S. officials continued to engage the MFA to identify concrete steps that can be pursued in a collaborative manner to address challenges and implement recommendations for improving religious freedom conditions.

Embassy officials met with several government officials, including the National Human Rights Center and the CRA, to raise concerns about the imprisonment of individuals for their religious beliefs. They also discussed the difficulties faced by religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations with regard to their registration and the destruction of their religious literature.

Embassy representatives frequently discussed religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring court cases and contacting government officials for updates on police cases.

Embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society, as well as with relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Embassy engagement included meetings with the leaders of the Baptist and Catholic Churches to discuss issues related to registration of congregations, members of the Jehovah Witnesses to address their concerns about increasing police raids of parishioner homes, expatriate Bukharian Jews as well as Bukharian Jews still living in Bukhara to discuss their concerns about the future of their community, as well as reaching out to other communities to discuss security measures imposed by the government.

Since 2006, Uzbekistan has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.