

AFGHANISTAN

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced legal restrictions and was deferential to prevailing societal opinion on religious tolerance or lack thereof. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Although the constitution proclaims, “Followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law,” it also states Islam is the “religion of the state” and that “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.” The lack of government responsiveness to the needs of or protection for minority religious groups and individuals contributed to constraints on religious freedom. No individuals were in detention on religious grounds at the end of the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Residual effects of years of civil strife, Taliban rule, and popular suspicion regarding outside influence and the motivations of foreigners led to negative societal opinion of international community efforts and donor projects. These were often incorrectly associated with Christianity and proselytism. Within the majority Muslim population, relations among the different sects continued to be difficult. Although the Shia minority continued to face some societal discrimination, its relationship with the Sunni majority showed slight improvement. Non-Muslim minority groups, particularly Christian, Hindu, and Sikh groups, continued to be targets of persecution and discrimination. Conversion from Islam was interpreted by Shia and Sunni Islamic clergy, as well as many citizens, to contravene the tenets of Islam. Conversion, considered an act of apostasy and a crime against Islam, could be punishable by death if the convert did not recant. Local Hindu and Sikh populations, although allowed to practice publicly, continued to encounter problems obtaining land for cremation. They also continued to face discrimination when seeking government jobs and harassment during major celebrations. Most local Baha’is and Christians did not publicly state their beliefs or gather openly to worship, out of fear of discrimination, persecution, detention, or death.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom, religious tolerance, and combating extremist voices with government officials as part of its overall policy

to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy continued to send Afghan political, civil society, and religious leaders to the United States, and Muslim Americans and foreign Muslims to Afghanistan to participate in programs aimed at increasing understanding of religious tolerance, human rights, and gender rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Reliable data on religious demography is not available because an official nationwide census has not been conducted in decades. Observers estimate that 80 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 19 percent Shia Muslim, and 1 percent other religious groups. According to self estimates by minority religious communities, there are approximately 2,000 Sikhs, more than 400 Baha'is, and approximately 100 Hindus. There is a small Christian community estimated between 500 and 8,000 persons. In addition, there are small numbers of adherents of other religious groups. There is one known Jewish citizen.

Different religious groups are concentrated in specific regions. Sunni Pashtuns dominate the south and east. The homeland of the Shia Hazaras is in the Hazarajat, the mountainous central highland provinces around Bamyan province. Ismaili populations are normally clustered in the northeast. Other areas, including Kabul, are more heterogeneous and include Sunni, Shia, Sikh, Hindu, and Baha'i populations. The northern city of Mazar-e Sharif includes a mix of Sunnis (including ethnic Pashtuns, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Tajiks) and Shia (Hazaras and Qizilbash), including Shia Ismailis. Nuristanis, a small but distinct ethno-linguistic group living in a mountainous eastern region, practiced an ancient polytheistic religion until they converted to Islam in the late 19th century. Some non-Muslim religious practices survive today as folk customs throughout remote areas.

In the 20th century, small communities of Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, and Sikhs lived in the country, although most members of these communities emigrated during the civil war and Taliban rule. By 2001, non-Muslim populations had been virtually eliminated except for a small population of native Hindus and Sikhs. Since the fall of the Taliban, some members of religious minorities have returned, but others have since left Kabul due to economic hardship and discrimination. Estimates from Hindu and Sikh religious leaders indicate that their population shrank in the past year as compared to the year before.

There are three active gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) in Kabul and 10 in other parts of the country; there were 64 gurdwaras throughout the country before the

mujahideen era, when many were seized. There are five remaining Hindu mandirs (temples) in three cities: two in Kabul, one of which shares a wall with a mosque, one in Jalalabad, one in Helmand, and one in Kandahar. Eighteen others were previously destroyed or rendered unusable due to looting during the civil war.

There are four synagogues, one in Kabul and three in Herat, which are no longer in use for lack of a Jewish community. There are no public Christian churches. Chapels and churches for the international community of various faiths are located on several military bases, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and at the Italian embassy in Kabul. Buddhist foreigners are free to worship in Hindu temples. Afghan Christians worship alone or in small congregations in private homes. Some Afghan citizens who converted to Christianity as refugees in third countries have returned.

Followers of the Baha'i Faith have practiced in the country for approximately 150 years. The community is predominantly based in Kabul, where reportedly more than 300 Baha'i members live; another 100 live in other parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies expressly restrict religious freedom. Full and effective enforcement of the 2004 constitution is a continuing challenge due to its potentially contradictory commitments and the lack of a tradition of judicial review. The constitution explicitly states followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.” However, the constitution also declares that Islam is the official “religion of the state,” that “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam,” and that “the provisions of adherence to the fundamentals of the sacred religion of Islam and the regime of the Islamic Republic cannot be amended.”

The constitution also includes a mandate to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to “create a prosperous and progressive society based on social justice, protection of human dignity, protection of human rights, realization of democracy, and to ensure national unity and equality among all ethnic groups and tribes.”

Although the constitution expressly protects free exercise of faith for non-Muslims, in situations where the constitution and penal code are silent, including apostasy and blasphemy, courts relied on interpretations of Islamic law, some of which conflict with the country's international commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The constitution states that when there is no provision in the constitution or other laws that guide ruling on an issue, the courts' decisions shall follow Hanafi jurisprudence in a way that best serves justice. Judges decide whether they will use Hanafi jurisprudence when other laws are deemed not to be clear. The Office of Fatwa and Accounts within the Supreme Court interprets Hanafi jurisprudence when a judge needs assistance in understanding its application. The constitution also grants that Shia law be applied in cases dealing with personal matters where all parties are Shia. There was no separate law applying to non-Muslims.

The constitution requires that the president and vice president be Muslim and does not distinguish in this respect between Shia and Sunni. This requirement was not explicitly applied to government ministers or members of Parliament, but each of their oaths includes swearing allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam.

The first version of the Shia Personal Status Law (SPSL) was passed in April 2009. Some prominent Shias praised the law for officially recognizing Shia jurisprudence, and some groups hailed the law for officially recognizing the Shiite minority. However, it was controversial both domestically and internationally for its failure to protect women's rights, specifically to protect women from marital rape. Additional articles of particular concern in the law included polygamy, limits on inheritance rights, limits on the right of self-determination, restricted freedom of movement, guardianship rights, and forced sexual obligations to one's husband. After reviewing the law, the Ministry of Justice removed some of the controversial articles in the original version; President Karzai signed the amended version in July 2009, which became public law. Many observers within and outside the country continue to object to articles in the law that conflict with women's constitutionally protected rights and international human rights treaties and conventions to which Afghanistan is a signatory.

Conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death under some interpretations of Islamic law in the country. The criminal code does not define apostasy as a crime, and the constitution forbids punishment for any crime not defined in the criminal code; however, the penal code states that egregious crimes, including apostasy, should be punished in line with Hanafi religious

jurisprudence and handled by the Attorney General's office. Converting from Islam to another religion is considered an egregious crime under Islamic law. Male citizens over age 18 or female citizens over age 16 of sound mind who convert from Islam have three days to recant their conversions or possibly face death by stoning, or deprivation of all property and possessions, and/or the invalidation of their marriage.

Although there is no reference in the penal code to spoken or written utterance of insults or profanity against God, religion, sacred symbols, or religious books, blasphemy--which in the Afghan context can include anti-Islamic writings or speech, or the "defamation" of Islam--is a capital crime under some interpretations of Islamic law in the country. The civil law is silent on blasphemy and the courts therefore rely on Islamic law to address this issue, based on Article 3 of the constitution. An Islamic judge may impose a death sentence for blasphemy, if committed by a male over age 18 or a female over age 16 of sound mind. Similar to apostates, those accused of blasphemy are given three days to recant or face death.

The General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court ruled in May 2007 that the Baha'i Faith was distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy. It held that all Muslims who converted to the Baha'i Faith were apostates and all Baha'is were infidels. Baha'is who accepted the Muslim declaration of faith, however, were not expected to be subject to the ruling. The ruling created uncertainties for the country's small Baha'i population, particularly on the question of marriages between Baha'i women and Muslim men. Citizens who converted from Islam to the Baha'i Faith faced risk of persecution, similar to that of Christian converts, in theory up to and including the death penalty. Also unclear is how the government would treat second-generation Baha'is born into Baha'i families. Although technically not converts, second-generation Baha'is could still be viewed by some as having committed blasphemy. The ruling is not expected to affect foreign national Baha'is.

The government does not designate religion on national identity cards and does not require individuals to declare belief in Islam in order to receive citizenship; however, the state, including the courts, traditionally considers all citizens to be Muslim. Therefore, some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims are not explicitly codified. As a result, non-Muslims are not exempted from Islamic jurisprudence and can be tried, like any Muslim, under Hanafi law when the constitution does not provide guidance. In practice, courts do not always accord Muslims and non-Muslims the same rights. For example, non-Muslims can be

married to each other as long as they do not publicly acknowledge their non-Muslim beliefs. In addition, judges stated that a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not “of the book,” meaning neither Christian nor Jewish. Moreover, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man.

The government continued to update the existing criminal and civil legal codes to bring them in line with the country’s international treaty obligations. The 1976 penal code addresses “Crimes against Religions” and states a person who attacks a follower of any religion shall be sentenced to a short-term prison sentence of not less than three months and a cash fine of between 3,000 and 12,000 Afghanis (\$62 and \$240), although it does not address blasphemous remarks. The penal code also says persons who forcibly stop the conduct of religious rituals of any religion and those who destroy or damage permitted places of worship where religious rituals are conducted or who destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion shall be subject to a medium-term prison sentence (defined in the criminal code as confinement in a jail for not less than one, nor more than five years) and/or a fine of between 12,000 and 60,000 Afghanis (\$240 and \$1,200).

The constitution protects freedom of expression and of the press; however, the Mass Media Law of Afghanistan (media law), passed in 2006 and amended in 2009, includes articles detrimental to the freedoms of religion and expression. The media law prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam. Many authorities and most of society view proselytizing by adherents of other faiths to practicing Muslims as contrary to the beliefs of Islam.

Article 45 of the media law prohibits production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of the following materials: works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam; works and materials offensive to other religions and sects; works and materials humiliating or offensive to real or legal persons; works and materials considered libelous to real and legal persons and that may cause damage to their personality and credibility; works and materials contrary to the constitution and considered a crime by the penal code; publicizing and dissemination (promotion) of religions other than Islam; disclosure of identity and pictures of victims of violence and rape in a manner that damages their social dignity; and articles and topics that harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and adolescents. Also under the media law, the proprietors of newspapers, printers, and electronic media companies must be licensed by and registered with the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes offensive material offers the potential for restrictions on and abuse of press freedom and intimidation of journalists. These rules also apply to non-Muslims and foreign-owned media outlets. An amendment to the media law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), the state run media outlet, to provide balanced broadcasting that reflects the culture, language, and religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. According to the law, RTA was obligated to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles and national and spiritual values.

The Ulema Council is a group of influential Sunni and Shia scholars, imams, and Muslim jurists from across the country. Its senior members meet regularly with the president and advise him on Islamic moral, ethical, and legal problems. The Council is nominally independent of the government, but its members receive financial support from the state. Through contacts with the presidential palace, the Parliament, and ministries, the council or its members advise on the formulation of new legislation or the implementation of existing law. Although it is well represented in provincial capitals, the council has much less outreach in villages and rural areas, where decisions are made based on tradition and local interpretations of Islamic law.

The council urged individuals to avoid conduct that could be perceived as insulting local traditions and religious values on the grounds that “safeguarding our national honors and Islamic values is the obligation of every citizen.”

The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs is the primary ministry handling religious affairs. The ministry’s responsibilities include sending citizens on the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, collecting revenues for funding religious activities, identifying and acquiring property for religious purposes, providing religious teaching to children, issuing fatwas, testing imams, and raising public awareness of religious problems. Both Sunnis and Shias are permitted to go on pilgrimages, and the government imposes no quota for either group. During the year, an estimated 30,000 pilgrims made the Hajj.

The licensing and registration of religious groups is not required, although the government registered mullahs (religious leaders). Mullahs working for the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs are generally proposed for registration by local residents and approved by the ministry. The number of mullahs working in the country is unknown, but estimates range up to 120,000. The Ministry of Hajj has registered approximately 3,500 imams, who receive a government monthly salary of 3,350 Afghanis (\$70). The ministry hired 160 additional mullahs during

the year. In some registered provincial mosques, local residents paid the salaries of mullahs. Many other mullahs are not registered due to lack of capacity and funding to support more mullahs at mosques, as well as security problems in the provinces. New mosques are opened or built based either on the government's development plans or on proposals by local residents, which must subsequently be approved by the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs.

There are no explicit restrictions on religious minority groups to establish places of worship or to train clergy to serve their communities; however, very few public places of worship exist for minorities due to a strapped government budget and small congregations.

The Ministry of Education's Directorate of Curriculum Development has responsibility for creating curriculum guidelines for public schools. A member of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission participates in these meetings. Since 2007 the government has run its own madrassahs to reduce the number of children studying at extremist madrassahs abroad and to counter the influence of extremist elements operating in the countryside, including through independent madrassahs. A number of government-affiliated madrassahs in the capital and other provinces where there is sufficient security offer Islamic and secular education in accordance with Ministry of Education curricula that include 60 percent religious education and 40 percent general education. There are 800 Ministry of Education-sponsored madrassahs throughout the country, including several in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat provinces. Of these, 30 madrassahs are devoted to teaching female students and 80 others are registered, but do not receive government funding. Graduates from government madrassahs are eligible to attend state universities. The country has 60 higher level madrassahs (madrassahs that bestow a degree equivalent to a bachelor degree), including four for female students.

The Ministry of Education requires that independent madrassahs be accredited and disclose their funding sources. During the year, there were no additional madrassahs built using private funds; however, it is difficult to account for all madrassahs, since many continue to operate without registering with the government. Madrassahs must route funding from private or international donations through the ministry or risk being banned. This system allows the government to monitor assistance to institutes of learning funded by known entities. According to the Ministry of Education, the government solicited donations for the support of madrassahs at all levels from Muslim countries and

private individuals. Saudi Arabia and other countries have supported madrassahs in the past.

The educational curriculum, which survived more than 30 years of war, places considerable emphasis on religion. The constitution states, “The state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, and in accordance with academic principles, and develop the curriculum of religious subjects on the basis of the Islamic sects existing in Afghanistan.” The public school curriculum includes Islamic content, but no content from other religious groups. The national curriculum and textbooks that emphasize moderate Islamic terms and principles steadily replaced the preaching of jihad in schools. However, late in the year, media reports and independent analysts suggested that departments of education at the district level had made agreements with the Taliban to teach the pre-2001 curriculum in provincial schools in return for halting attacks against students and teachers, including attacks on girls’ schools. The Ministry of Education denied those reports. There is no restriction on parental religious teaching, and non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools.

There are schools for Sikh children in Ghazni and Helmand, and one in Kabul that teaches a few classes. The government provides limited funding for Sikh schools, including for teachers for the basic curriculum. For example, the government assigned one teacher to a Sikh gurdwara in Kabul to teach Dari and mathematics to Sikh and Hindu children. However, the Sikh community is responsible for hiring a teacher to address religious subjects. A few Sikh children attend private international schools. There are no Christian schools in the country. Hindus do not have separate schools, but sometimes their children attend Sikh schools. The government took limited steps to protect and integrate Hindu and Sikh children into the classroom environment.

The government has not banned any political parties for religious reasons. The constitution allows for political parties provided that “the program and charter of the party are not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam.”

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Prophet Mohammed’s Birthday, First Day of Ramadan, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-e-Qurban, and Ashura. The Shia community openly celebrated the birthday of Imam Ali.

Government Practices

There were no new reports of abuses of religious freedom or new religious prisoners and detainees at the end of the year. However, members of minority religious groups continued to suffer discrimination under the law and the government often did not protect minorities from societal harassment. Two Christian converts mentioned in the previous report were no longer detained.

The government enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom selectively and in a discriminatory manner. During the year, there were no incidents involving individuals attempting to proselytize, but some faith-based NGOs reported continued monitoring by government entities.

The right to change one's religion was not respected either in law or in practice. Muslims who converted from Islam risked losing their marriages, rejection from their families and villages, and loss of employment. Legal aid for imprisoned converts from Islam remained difficult due to most Afghan lawyers' personal objection to defending apostates. By the end of the year, according to the Attorney General's office, there were no reported cases of national or local authorities imposing criminal penalties on converts from Islam. All known previously detained converts had been freed by the end of the year.

During the year, there were no reports of the death penalty being implemented for blasphemy.

There were unconfirmed reports of harassment of Christians thought to be involved in proselytizing. There were reports of international aid organizations being falsely accused of or affiliated with proselytizing. Some Christians avoided situations where they might be perceived as seeking to spread their religion to the larger community.

As in previous years, Hindus and Sikhs complained of not being able to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs, due to interference by those who lived near the cremation sites. The government did not protect Hindus' and Sikhs' right to carry out cremations. However, a Sikh senator requested the intervention of the Ministry of Interior to provide protection and escort to Hindus and Sikhs in the event of cremations within their communities. Subsequent to the senator's intervention, they were able to cremate the remains. The community continued to petition the government for land on which to carry out cremations. Baha'is also could not attend to their dead in accordance with their customs, but lodged no formal complaints because they sought to avoid government attention. Although community representatives expressed concerns over land disputes, they

often chose not to pursue restitution through the courts for fear of retaliation, particularly when powerful local leaders occupied their property. There were no known reports of targeted discrimination against Hindus or Sikhs by the government, as opposed to apostates and Baha'is. An Afghan Sikh man, who was deported from Britain in 2010, was in detention during the year on charges of falsely claiming Afghan citizenship.

Although a Hindu serves as senior economic advisor to President Hamid Karzai and one member of Sikh community continues to serve as a member of the Upper House of Parliament, the Hindu and Sikh communities lobbied unsuccessfully to have one seat each designated for a Hindu and a Sikh representative in Parliament. They noted that 10 seats are reserved for the ethnic minority Kuchi community and that their communities should also have reserved representation.

The government provided free electricity to mosques. The Hindu and Sikh communities did not receive free electricity for their mandirs and gurdwaras, and mandirs and gurdwaras were charged as business entities, paying a higher rate. As of the end of the year, the government had not addressed repeated requests from the two communities to receive the same treatment as mosques.

Although Hindus and Sikhs had recourse to dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Special Land and Property Court, in practice the communities felt unprotected. A Sikh senator tried to obtain improved property rights for both Sikhs and Hindus and access to property lost during the mujahideen era, but there was no reported progress.

There have been no cases cited under the 2007 Supreme Court ruling declaring the Baha'i Faith distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy.

Hazaras accused the government of providing preferential treatment to Pashtuns and of ignoring minorities, especially Hazaras. However, the government made efforts to address historical tensions affecting the Hazara community.

Although four Ismailis serve as members of Parliament, some members of the Ismaili community complained of being marginalized from positions of political authority.

In June, the Ulema Council called for the cancellation of a Turkish soap opera, "Forbidden Love," which the council believed had a corrupting effect on youth. The Ulema Council also publicly called for Tolo TV, which broadcast the

program, to be shut down. However, after complying with the cancellation of “Forbidden Love,” Tolo TV remained on the air. Also in June the Ulema Council asked the president to shut down the independent newspaper Hasht-e-Subh, in part because of charges of “anti-religious content” stemming from its reporting on the radicalizing influence of girls’ madrassahs. The minister of information and culture summoned the heads of a number of other media outlets to the ministry, where he warned them not to broadcast programs containing content that contravenes Islam or Afghan tradition. These included a number of foreign soap operas dubbed into Dari or Pashto, broadcast on Tolo TV, One TV, and Afghan TV, and a number of shows that were produced by Tolo TV and One TV, such as the “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” game show. Tolo TV lobbied with the government and resumed broadcasting the game show under a different name, but with the same content.

The government recognizes the equal rights of men and women in the constitution; however, in practice and due to societal pressure the national and local government did not fully implement women’s rights. For example, in March the Helmand deputy governor was fired in response to societal outrage for allowing female singers to perform without head scarves in a local concert.

The government continued to emphasize ethnic and intrafaith reconciliation indirectly through support to the judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different ethnic and Islamic religious (Sunni and Shia) groups. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs worked together to give women the opportunity to attend mosques.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

During the year there were reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations, including al-Qaida and Taliban networks. As in previous years, killings of religious leaders and attacks on mosques were attributed to al-Qaida and Taliban members. Sources reported antigovernment elements continued to target religious leaders based on their links to the government or their particular interpretations of Islam. Members of the Taliban also monitored the social habits of local populations. For example, in August the Taliban banned the sale of frozen chickens in Ghazni province, claiming the meat was slaughtered in a manner inconsistent with Islam. On December 6, worshipers observing the Shia religious holiday Ashura were the victims of simultaneous terrorist attacks in Kabul, Kandahar, and Mazar-e Sharif in which more than 50 people were killed. The

Taliban denied responsibility, and media reports suggested it was an outside terrorist group that carried out the attack. Sunni and Shia religious leaders and government political leaders, including the president, unanimously denounced the attack as an attempt to create sectarian violence.

Insurgents attacked schools primarily for political and not religious reasons. During the year there were fewer attacks on schools; media reports and independent analysts suggest this was due to an informal agreement between the Taliban and provincial departments of education, which the Ministry of Education denied.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, especially in the case of the Hazara ethnic group, which is predominantly Shia, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

Relations between the different branches of Islam remained somewhat strained, despite improvement over the last few years. Historically, the minority Shia faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. As Shia representation increased in government, overt discrimination by Sunnis against the Shia community decreased. However, Sunni resentment over growing Shia influence was expressed widely and often linked to claims of Iranian efforts to influence local culture and politics. Most Shia are members of the Hazara ethnic group, which was traditionally segregated from the rest of society for a combination of political, historical, ethnic, and religious factors, some of which resulted in conflicts. Although there were reported incidents of unofficial discrimination, and treatment varied by locality, Shia generally were free to participate fully in public life.

Although there was some harassment of Ismailis during the year, prominent Ismailis were lauded in the news media for funding the inauguration of the world's largest Qur'an .

Non-Muslim minorities such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians continued to face social discrimination and harassment and in some cases violence. This treatment was not systematic, but the government took no action to improve conditions during the year. Public opinion continued to be openly hostile toward Afghan

converts to Christianity and to proselytizing by Christian organizations and individuals, even in cases where groups were falsely accused of proselytizing. Practicing Muslims and charities operated by Afghan Muslims have been wrongly accused of proselytizing about Christianity or conversion to Christianity as a way for their enemies to win personal disputes or vendettas.

Public protests occurred in several provinces in April, with the largest in Mazar-e Sharif after a Christian pastor burned a Qur'an in a third country in March. The protests turned violent and the crowd killed seven UN staff.

One Christian-affiliated NGO that had lost its office space when neighbors requested that its landlord evict them in 2010 moved back to its old location during the year.

The Hindu population, which is less visibly distinguishable than the Sikh population (whose men wear a distinctive headdress), faced less harassment, although both groups reported being harassed by neighbors in their communities. The Sikh and Hindu communities, although allowed to practice their religion publicly, reportedly continued to face discrimination, including intimidation.

Many in the Sikh and Hindu communities did not send their children to public school because of reported abuse, harassment, and bullying by other students. In previous years, Hindus and Sikhs sent their children to private Hindu and Sikh schools, but many of those schools closed since the community's deteriorating economic circumstances and shrinking population have made private schooling unaffordable for most families.

Local religious officials continued to confront women regardless of religion over their attire and behavior. In rural areas and some urban areas, many women wore a burqa (dress that covers the full body and face, including the eyes) in public. Since the fall of the Taliban, many women in urban areas no longer wore the burqa, but almost all wore some form of head covering either by personal choice or due to societal pressure.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government is committed to working with the Afghan government to promote religious freedom and tolerance, introduce the public to diverse perspectives, and enhance the capacity of the government to counter extremist discourse. The U.S. government discussed religious freedom, religious tolerance,

human rights, and how to combat violent extremism with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. representatives met regularly with government officials and with religious and minority figures in a continued dialogue regarding the political, legal, religious, and human rights context of the country's reconstruction. The U.S. government worked with civil society organizations to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

The U.S. embassy established a working group on countering violent extremism. The working group drafted a report that included a catalogue of all mission activities that counter extremist messages and a proposal of new activities. These proposals include working more closely with madrassahs by providing teacher training and distribution of secular textbooks along with working with influential community and religious leaders, women, and young people to develop methods that counter the appeals of insurgents.

The U.S. embassy's public affairs section continued to assist the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs to create a database to register mosques in Afghanistan. The section also continued to fund an NGO to train ministry staff in basic management and work-flow tasks, improve infrastructure, and provide advisers to the minister and two deputy ministers. Another NGO is rebuilding the capacity of a provincial Ulema Council that had been decimated by years of assassinations. These capacity building projects and U.S. embassy outreach allowed the ministry, which has responsibility for all religions, to run more effectively and efficiently.

The U.S. embassy actively promoted professional and cultural ties between local citizens and the United States. The public affairs section coordinated a variety of exchange, speaker, artistic, and information programs to generate an exchange of ideas between Americans and local citizens on democracy and civil society, human rights and religious freedom, Islam in America, and other subjects. The embassy funded travel by local journalists, academics, politicians, government officials, religious scholars, community leaders, women, youth, and NGO officials to engage with their U.S. counterparts. The embassy also sent madrassah instructors and education officials from around the country to participate in an International Visitor and Leadership Program in the United States. The public affairs section funded the visits of prominent Muslim American activists to Afghanistan and supported the visits of Muslim scholars from other countries to conduct seminars and speaking tours for religious leaders and civil society organizations to discuss religious tolerance and human rights principles.

Some Provincial Reconstruction Teams provided assistance through the U.S. military's Commander's Emergency Response Program funds to assist local communities to repair madrassahs. During the year, the U.S. military assisted in repairing, refurbishing, or providing supplies, equipment, and facilities upgrades to six madrassahs and an unspecified number of mosques, including the Blue Mosque in Mazar-e Sharif. The embassy's public affairs section also awarded a grant to refurbish the historic Ulya Madrassah in Kabul and a grant to stabilize and landscape the historic Noh Gunbad mosque in Balkh province; the chief of mission attended the reopening. The Noh Gunbad mosque is a holy site visited by both Sunni and Shia Muslims. The public affairs section funded the creation of a storage facility for the preservation of Buddhist sites at Mes Aynak until a permanent location can be built. The preservation grant also includes the restoration of paintings found nearby. Field-based U.S. government staff conducted outreach to provincial community and religious leaders and routinely included them in their local initiatives. In addition, a U.S. military Muslim chaplain travelled throughout the country to meet local Islamic leaders to promote religious understanding. The embassy's public affairs section administered the English language micro-scholarship program for students at five madrassahs in Kabul.

The U.S. government worked with civil society organizations to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through its Rule of Law Stabilization Program (RLS) (focusing on traditional dispute resolution) trained local practitioners to incorporate gender and human rights concerns into community decisions. Another component of the program engaged with the Sharia faculty (as well as the law and political science faculty) of Kabul University in legal clinic programs that cover outreach on human rights issues. USAID also funded an NGO, Afghan Women Services and Education Organization, to distribute materials to community leaders and elders, including religious leaders, to encourage them to discuss and address women's rights and the importance of education for girls. USAID through the RLS program sent the deans of Sharia university faculties and programs to visit Al-Azhar, one of the prominent institutes of Islamic learning, located in Cairo, Egypt. In an effort to improve the rule of law, the deans of the country's nine Sharia faculties were sent on a two-week study tour in March.