

# UZBEKISTAN 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience to all and it states everyone has the right to profess or not to profess any religion; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The law restricts the religious freedom of unregistered groups and prohibits many activities, including proselytizing. Two new laws appeared to codify existing practice and provide a legal framework for further restricting unregistered religious activities and scrutinizing imported religious literature. There were reports of deaths in custody, beatings, mistreatment, and denial of the right to practice one's religion. Members of registered and unregistered minority religious groups faced jail terms, heavy fines, and confiscation and destruction of religious literature. The government continued to deal harshly with believers who discussed religious issues outside of sanctioned religious organizations. It was generally more permissive toward the activities of worshippers at sanctioned mosques and permitted the regular activities of religious groups historically present in the country, but less tolerant of the activities of other groups. There were reports of raids on the homes of private worshipers and interference with the activities of even registered groups if conducted away from the formal premises at which they were registered to operate. A law signed by President Karimov May 15 gives wide-ranging powers (including preventing activities of unregistered religious organizations or propagation of religious views) to state bodies, including neighborhood committees, and non-state and non-commercial public organizations to further involve themselves in combating suspected "antisocial activity" in cooperation with police.

A number of governmental and nongovernmental media published articles critical of proselytism and of believers who belonged to minority religious groups deemed by media outlets to be "non-traditional." Although the government did not prohibit persons from changing religions, there were reports of social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to do so. Some evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts reportedly encountered discrimination, and there were reports that ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced discrimination and harassment.

U.S. government representatives directly engaged with the government on religious freedom during the Annual Bilateral Consultations in Tashkent in December. Senior officials from the Department of State Bureaus of South and Central Asian Affairs and Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor raised concerns

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about religious freedom conditions. They discussed with the government tangible steps it could take to improve its record on religious freedom, including a potential training program on religious tolerance, continued interfaith dialogue, and loosening restrictive laws on religious practice. Embassy and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups, civil society, and government bodies, as well as relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Since 2006, the Secretary of State has designated Uzbekistan a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, most recently reaffirming that designation in July.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.9 million (July 2014 estimate). Local statistics indicate that approximately 93 percent is Muslim. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School; approximately 1 percent is Shia, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 4 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, a number that is declining as ethnic Russians and other Slavs continue to emigrate. 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, Hare Krishnas, and atheists. An estimated 6,000 Ashkenazi and 2,000 Bukharan Jews remain concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley; however, the Jewish population continues to decline due to emigration.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience to all and states everyone has the right to profess or not to profess any religion. The law provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of religion and state, and the right of religious groups to establish schools and train clergy. The law grants these rights, however, only to registered groups.

The law restricts religious rights when the government deems such restrictions “necessary to maintain national security, social order, life, health, morality, and the rights of freedoms of other citizens,” although the law does not specify what such

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actions may be. The law prohibits proselytizing, requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials, and limits the operations of a registered group only to those areas where it is registered.

The government prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), a government agency accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve all religious literature. The Council for Confessions, under the CRA, includes representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, and discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion.

The law requires all religious groups to register and provides stringent criteria for doing so. Among its requirements, the law stipulates each group must present a list of at least 100 citizens age 18 years or older and a charter with a legal address to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). It also requires notarized documents regarding the religious education of founding members, sources of income, and a document showing CRA concurrence to registration. The law requires a “guarantee letter” from local government authorities stating that the legal and postal address of the organization conforms to all legal requirements (including statements from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and neighborhood committees). Any application may be reviewed within a timeline of one to three months. Based on a decision by an MOJ specialist, the registration may be approved, denied, or its review ceased without the issuance of a decision.

The CRA oversees registered religious activity. There are 2,236 registered religious groups representing 16 denominations. There are 2,051 Muslim groups (including mosques, educational institutions, and Islamic centers). Among the Muslim groups are several Shia congregations. Registered minority religious groups include the 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 criminal and administrative codes contain severe penalties for violating the law and other statutes on religious activities. The criminal code distinguishes

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between “illegal” groups, which are those not registered properly, and “prohibited” groups viewed as “extremist.”

The government classifies as religious extremists those groups or individuals advocating replacement of the current secular government and laws with a government and laws based on strictly sectarian religious principles. It describes religious extremism as a threat to domestic security and stability. The government’s policy is to ban Islamic groups it broadly defines as extremist and to criminalize membership in such groups, which include Akromiya, Tabligh Jamaat, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also bans Nur, founded by Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi and associated with the religious teachings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gulen, despite the group’s condemnations of violent extremism.

The government states that its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism are not a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing overthrow of the secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious and ethnic instability and hatred in a multi-ethnic, multiconfessional society. Article 244 of 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.

It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four million to eight million soum (\$1,625-\$3,251) to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. In addition, the law punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison. After an offender is punished for a violation under the administrative code, a repeat offense may be tried under the criminal code. In addition to prohibited activities that include organizing an illegal religious group, the law proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without the permission of their parents and persuading others to join illegal religious groups. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

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 107,635 soum (\$44) for individuals. The fine for government officials is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage, together with confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” The criminal code also imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labor of up to three years for these offenses.

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The law limits the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious groups. These are the Bible Society of Uzbekistan (BSU), the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic Churches.

A Cabinet of Ministers decree, adopted January 20, further states that all “religious materials” imported into, produced, and distributed in Uzbekistan must first be subject to a state theological review. 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 outlines the procedures for carrying out the mandatory theological review and tasks the CRA with producing an “expert opinion” within a 10-day period upon receipt of religious materials; it also requires the CRA to compile an annual list of religious materials banned for import, production, or distribution. The decree instructs the State Customs Committee and the State Border Protection Committee to deliver all seized religious materials to the CRA and mandates that religious material may only be sold in “stationary trade outlets” equipped with cash registers.

The law allows only those religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel. Registration of a central administrative body requires registered religious groups to be present in eight of the 14 administrative units (including Karakalpakstan and Tashkent city). Nine specialized Islamic training schools (including two for women), an Orthodox and a Protestant seminary, as well as the Tashkent Islamic Institute may officially train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law does not permit private religious instruction and imposes fines for violations. The law also prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. The law prohibits the wearing of “cult robes” (religious clothing) in public places by all except those serving in religious organizations.

Eleven madrassahs, including two 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

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Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher education religion programs, although the Islamic University in Tashkent is a secular institution. There is no other officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam.

The law restricts the activities of faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including prohibition of unspecified illegal religious activities, religious gatherings intended for children, and faith-based activity groups deemed to be unrelated to acts of worship.

The government allows those who object to military service on the basis of their religious beliefs to perform alternate service.

A law signed by President Karimov May 15 gives wide-ranging powers to state bodies, including neighborhood committees, and non-state and non-commercial public organizations to get further involved in combating suspected “antisocial activity” in cooperation with police. These include taking measures to prevent 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 Religion Law.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of deaths in custody, beatings, denial of the right to practice one’s religion, and other harsh treatment of prisoners whom the government considered religious extremists. There were also reports that police beat members of unregistered religions.

The government continued to imprison individuals on charges of extremism, raid religious and social gatherings of unregistered and registered religious communities, confiscate and destroy religious literature, and discourage minors from practicing their faith.

Independent human rights groups estimate that somewhere between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals were imprisoned on charges related to religious extremism or membership in an illegal religious group. The government has not disclosed relevant data or provided access to the prisoners to independent observers. In 2004, the last year the government released data on individuals incarcerated on such charges, the government reported that the total number was 2,800 individuals.

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Independent groups were aware of approximately 200 individuals annually sentenced on such charges, but acknowledge the challenges in obtaining complete information.

Family members reported that prisoners serving sentences on charges related to what the government considered religious extremism died in custody. They also stated that the bodies of the prisoners showed signs of beatings or other abuse. Authorities reportedly pressured the families to bury the bodies before medical professionals could examine them. Reported cases that fit this pattern included the death of Abdurakhim Tukhtasinov, a prisoner charged with membership and leadership in the banned religious organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, in June.

On September 13, Nilufar Rahimjanova, sentenced in 2011 to 10 years' imprisonment for connections to terrorism, died in a female labor camp near Tashkent. According to her husband, she was imprisoned as a rebuke to her Iran-based husband and Tajikistan-based father, both Muslim theologians who drew the ire of Uzbek authorities. Authorities returned Rahimjanova's body to her brother in Tashkent, with the admonition that he should bury her quickly in Uzbekistan, without a post-mortem examination. Rahimjanova's husband stated that her family in Uzbekistan did not cooperate in establishing the facts of her death due to fear of authorities, and has avoided all contact with him since her death.

Nongovernmental sources reported the government severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of "religious extremism" or those who participated in underground Islamic activity. This included subjecting them to torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions.

There were numerous cases of arrests or convictions for membership in religious groups the government labeled "extremist." Human rights NGOs indicated that the government imprisoned a significant number of individuals for membership in prohibited Muslim groups. In July the human rights NGO Ezgulik reported that three men, Otabek Ochilov, Zafar Pulatov, and Bakhtiyor Bozorov, and three women, Lolakhon Qudratova, Nigora Ernazarova, and Aziza Mukhitdinova, were sentenced to terms of between nine and 15 years for allegedly being members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Their cases were part of a large trial that involved 66 suspects accused of terrorism in Kashkadaryo Region. NGOs questioned whether "Islamic terrorist organizations" had such a well-established presence in that region.

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The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported that six women from the Yangiyul District of the Tashkent Region were sentenced on May 8 under a law prohibiting materials deemed to threaten security and order. The authorities gave them suspended sentences, but reportedly tortured them to extract false testimony against Ugila Mirzaeva, who was accused of being a member of the religious organization Hizb ut-Tahrir.

In August IGIHRDU reported that, according to her mother, Bakhtiyor Orzikulov, who has been imprisoned since 2001 under suspicion of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, was repeatedly tortured while in custody. Authorities placed Orzikulov in solitary confinement after prolonging his sentence on what his mother said were fabricated charges resulting from alleged violations of prison rules. Authorities then denied Orzikulov's mother the opportunity to visit her son in prison.

In March the NGO Forum 18 reported the government sentenced Tajik citizen Zuboyd Mirzorakhimov to five years' imprisonment in a Tashkent prison for sermons found on his mobile phone and denied a visit from his family while he was held in an isolation cell.

Prison administrators reportedly charged prisoners convicted of religious extremism with organizing extremist cells while in prison or with other offenses that led to extended prison terms. There were also reports that administrators often charged prisoners who would otherwise be eligible to apply for amnesty with internal prison violations, rendering them ineligible to apply.

In May Vazira Alimova, the mother of 37-year-old Isroil Alimov, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2000 for membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, complained that, despite promises by authorities that her son would be part of the December 2013 amnesty, he had not been released. According to Forum 18, seven Muslim followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were freed under amnesty after receiving lengthy sentences in 2009-2010 in the Bukhara Region on extremism charges.

Most prisons reportedly had special areas set aside for inmates to pray, and prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible. Family members of prisoners reported, however, that prison authorities did not allow some prisoners suspected of religious extremism to practice their religion freely, including reading the Quran or praying privately. Restrictions included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast.

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There were also reports that authorities punished prisoners for “violating internal prison regulations” if they prayed at certain times of the day. In addition, there were reports that authorities at the prisons in Koson and Navoi isolated and punished inmates who wished to fast during Ramadan.

The government enforced the law banning unregistered religious groups from conducting religious services. Sources stated that by continuing to deny registration to some religious groups and punishing members for their activities, authorities effectively deprived individuals of the legal right to worship, as provided for in the constitution.

There were numerous reported instances that armed law enforcement officers raided meetings of unregistered groups and detained their members. In July Forum 18 reported that officers of the Namangan Regional Police raided an unregistered Jehovah’s Witnesses community in Namangan. Authorities detained 19 Jehovah’s Witnesses during the raid, and also confiscated electronic and print media. In August the government detained 16 people in a raid on an unregistered church in Chirchik, Tashkent. Twelve people also were detained that month following a raid on an unregistered religious group in Andijan. A similar raid also occurred in the Khorezm region, though the 12 people in that case were not detained, but rather charged with the administrative offense of possession of religious literature.

With a few exceptions, authorities charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines.

The government continued to pursue the extradition of suspected “religious extremists” from other countries, including those from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as those who reportedly had sought asylum. Lawyers for Mirsobir Hamidkariev, who left Uzbekistan to escape accusations that he was associated with banned religious organizations, reported to the press that, although a Russian court had on May 12 granted asylum to their client, he was kidnapped June 9 from a taxi in Moscow and forcibly returned to Uzbekistan, three days before the court decision entered into force. Hamidkariev’s lawyers stated he was kidnapped by Uzbek security services. He was subsequently put on trial in Tashkent on September 22 as an alleged member of a fundamentalist Islamic organization. The government, however, stated that Hamidkariev voluntarily turned himself in to the police on June 17, following an in absentia charge of participation in an extremist organization. On November 18, according to press

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reports, the Tashkent City Criminal Court convicted Hamidkariev of organizing and participating in the banned organization Islom Jihochilari and sentenced him to eight years in prison; however, as of December 29, the government stated that his case was still with the Tashkent Criminal Court awaiting disposition.

According to human rights sources, the government remained deeply suspicious of Muslims who worshipped outside state-approved institutions, were educated at madrassahs abroad, gathered socially to discuss religious issues, or were tied to known “Wahhabi” imams, a term the government and the press periodically used to describe Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derived from the strict teachings of prominent imams of the early 1990s. In April the website Fergana.ru reported the arrest on, March 19, of six Muslims in Tashkent – Sobirjon, Tursunov, Ikrom, Abdulaziz, Ulugbek, and Doniyor – who were accused of “making or spreading materials that contain a threat to public security and public order.” According to the website, another Muslim, Zohiddin Imomov, was arrested a month earlier.

Courts sentenced members of minority religious groups to administrative detention following searches, oftentimes without valid search warrants, of homes and offices. For example, Forum 18 reported that Igor Kulyada, a Baptist from Tashkent, was jailed for three days July 3-6. His offense was distribution of public leaflets containing Bible verses. Some of his personal items were ordered to be destroyed, including digital media and leaflets with religious content, and he was also fined.

The government continued to carry out raids against social gatherings of those belonging to registered churches, sometimes detaining participants. On July 23, the Namangan Region Anti-Terrorism Police, under the guise of a passport check, raided a worship meeting of an officially registered Baptist church held at a church member’s private home in Khalkabad village. Officials confiscated Christian literature, including Bibles and Bible study guides. On July 30, authorities in the Tashkent Region raided a summer camp run by an officially registered Baptist church and confiscated religious literature.

The authorities also fined representatives of registered religious groups, or of groups which were currently undergoing the process of registration for engaging in religious activities. On August 5, in the city of Samarkand, 12 police officers broke into a former Seventh-day Adventist church (which was deregistered in 2007, and attempted to reregister in 2014) under the guise of a fire inspection. In the basement, they broke into old chests which stored unused literature, including a

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Quran in Arabic, and Christian literature. Officials then searched a car parked nearby belonging to the pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist church registered in the Tashkent Region. He was later fined 20 times the minimum wage (1,922,000 soum, \$781) for possession of religious literature outside of his church's area of registration.

A number of government entities, including the Ministry of Interior (MOI), National Security Service (NSS), Customs Service, and local police confiscated religious literature. The authorities confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, illegally imported religious literature and materials, as well as the equipment used to reproduce it.

The government tightly controlled access to Islamic publications and required a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, compact discs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Generally, books published under the Muslim Board's imprint contained phrases indicating official approval, as did other religious works published under the imprint of the state-owned Sharq and Tashkent Islamic University publishing houses. A few imported works in Arabic occasionally were available from book dealers, but literature that would be considered controversial by the government generally was not available in the marketplace. Those in possession of literature by authors the government deemed to be extremists or of any literature illegally imported or produced were subject to arrest and prosecution. In April Forum 18 reported the arrest of Zoirjon Mirzayev at a Tashkent train station. Custom officials found Mirzayev, who returned to Uzbekistan from Russia after nine years, to be in possession of 29 recordings in his mobile phone of Muslim sermons, which the CRA deemed extremist. On April 8, Mirzayev received a five-year prison term.

Religious groups and human rights activists reported that police raided private homes without cause and seized religious materials. In March police in Samarkand raided the home of Veniamin Nemirov. They tore posters with scripture texts from the walls, and threatened Nemirov that his home could be taken away from him and his children expelled from school. On August 21, police in Tashkent raided the apartment of Maxim Kostin under the pretext of a passport check, detaining him and his spouse, both members of the registered Presbyterian church "Vera" (Faith), and confiscated 65 copies of Christian books, as well as other media and pamphlets.

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There were widespread reports that authorities imposed fines for illegally possessing or distributing religious materials. Customs officials detained Ikhtiyor Yagmurov, who was travelling from Russia's Kaliningrad Region to Tashkent, at the Tashkent airport and prosecuted him for carrying "illegal" Muslim religious materials on his phone. On March 27, he was fined 20 times the minimum monthly salary (1,922,000 soum, \$781). Three other passengers, who were each detained for three days in February following the discovery by officials of Islamic sermons on electronic devices in their possession, were released without charge.

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

Authorities also confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, religious literature in Uzbek and Russian that was imported legally, as well as articles of religious use. There were dozens of cases in which courts ordered the destruction of Bibles in Uzbek and Russian. On January 20, the NSS and the MOI's Anti-Terrorism Department raided a home in Tashkent belonging to Natalya Gaiyer. Officials confiscated hundreds of Christian books and other materials, which they ordered to be destroyed. Gaiyer was also fined three times the minimum monthly salary (288,315 soum, \$117). In February authorities reportedly fined a hotel employee in Tashkent's Miran Hotel 150 times the minimum monthly salary (14,415,750 soum, \$5,858) after they found and confiscated a Muslim prayer mat found in his possession during a January search.

The government allowed the BSU, under the close supervision of the CRA, to publish locally one book of the Bible in the Uzbek language, and the BSU anticipated completion of the translation by 2015.

The government blocked access to several websites that contained religious content, including Christian- and Islamic-related news.

Members of registered minority religious communities often encountered difficulties when entering and leaving the country as authorities frequently seized religious literature for alleged customs violations.

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There were reports that security services continued their surveillance of religious communities. Human rights activists and the press reported that filming participants in Friday prayer services at local mosques was becoming standard practice. Mosques often installed cameras, citing security concerns, but human rights NGOs stated the government also used cameras for surveillance purposes.

Authorities closely observed social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, with several arrests based on participation in such discussions reported in media articles.

The government and local imams discouraged some public displays of religion considered to be foreign influenced. In the Fergana Valley, authorities questioned women wearing the hijab and encouraged them either to remove it or alter it to reflect the more traditional Uzbek style of tying the scarf at the back of the neck.

State-controlled and state-influenced media at times accused missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord. Government-affiliated press criticized missionaries for proselytizing, labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses a "totalitarian sect," and stated it was the "duty" of all citizens to prevent the supposed deleterious effects of such groups.

According to Forum 18, local authorities told members of the Toshkuprik Mosque in Samarkand region's Pakhtachi District that one of their members could not lead prayers in the absence of their Muslim Board-appointed imam, even on a short term basis. As a result, the mosque was unable to hold weekly Friday congregational prayers.

The government enforced the law against the private teaching of religious principles. In January Forum 18 reported that three Protestant women in the Fergana Region received fines for discussing their faith with each other as they allegedly "illegally taught the Christian religion to each other."

Authorities continued efforts to discourage children from practicing religion. Several media reports of government interference with the religious practice of Christian and Muslim groups stressed the presence of children during services as a further incriminating factor. Local officials reportedly continued to pressure imams to prevent children from attending Friday prayers. Some local officials, teachers, and police officers reportedly turned students away from Friday prayer services. School officials discouraged both Muslim and Christian parents from

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sending their children to mosque or church services, and some school officials questioned students about their religion and why they attended services.

According to human rights activists, teachers and doctors from various districts of Tashkent city reported that from mid-August until the independence day holiday September 1 (when the government commonly tightens security), on the instruction of city authorities, they were mobilized to help police identify school-aged children attending mosques in Chilanzar, Yashnabod, and other districts, and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers.

The authorities continued a campaign of harassment and repression against members of Akromiya (Akromiylar), an informal association promoting business according to Islamic principles. The government-controlled media continued to publish negative personal attacks against the group and its members. According to authorities, the group had attempted to overthrow the government through armed rebellion in Andijon in 2005.

The government continued to formally ban several less well known religiously-based groups and informally ban other Muslim groups it considered “extremist.” The government often accused defendants of being “jihadists,” but it was unclear whether the government considered them members of the terrorist Islamic Jihad Union or whether the government used the term generically to mean “extremist.”

Sources reported the government continued to instruct *mahalla* (neighborhood) committees and imams to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion.

According to the CRA, it registered two mosques during the year, as well as 13 regional representatives of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. Anecdotally, a small number of unregistered “neighborhood mosques” still functioned in some areas for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live in close proximity to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques were limited in their functions, and registered imams were not assigned to them.

Minority religious groups continued to experience difficulties registering. Despite renewed efforts to engage with the government and address its concerns, no Jehovah’s Witnesses groups succeeded in registering, beyond one group previously registered in Chirchik.

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According to available reports, churches that remained unregistered after unsuccessful past attempts included Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal church in Chirchik; Roman Catholic churches in Navoi and Angren; 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.

Religious activity remained particularly difficult in Karakalpakstan, as all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities lacked legal status.

Some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, did not apply or reapply for registration because they expected local officials would not register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, reported they preferred to avoid bringing themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously would not meet legal requirements. Some groups did not want to give the authorities a list of members' names, especially ethnic Uzbek members, as they had been harassed during previous attempts to register. A few groups refused on principle to seek registration because they challenged the government's right to require it.

As in previous years, the MOJ cited the requirement for a religious group to report a valid legal address, or concurrence of all local authorities in explaining decisions to deny registration. Some groups were reluctant to purchase property without assurance their registration would be approved. Others stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

The government did not permit training of Shia imams inside the country and did not recognize such education received outside the country.

The Jewish community had no rabbinate because it did not have synagogues in eight different administrative units and therefore did not meet the requirements for a registered central office. The MOJ accredited a rabbi for the community in 2012, after a four-year gap, and has renewed his accreditation since.

The government provided logistical support, including charter flights, for a limited number of selected Muslims to participate in the Umrah and the Hajj pilgrimages,

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although pilgrims paid their own expenses. The government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,200, or less than 20 percent of the country's allowed 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 other sources of facilitation.

The government funded an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government continued to control the muftiate, which in turn controlled the Muslim hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

A number of governmental and nongovernmental media published articles critical of proselytism and of believers who belonged to minority religious groups deemed by media outlets to be "non-traditional." According to Forum 18, on August 26, Judge Oltinbek Mansurov of Navoi City Criminal Court published an article in the Russian-language newspaper *Znamya Druzhy* (*Banner of Friendship*), sponsored by Navoi Regional Administration, in which he called the Council of Baptist Churches a "destructive sect," and urged people to "be careful" and "remember that the activity of non-traditional religions is destructive." On November 13, the online media outlet 12news.uz published four different articles attacking Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising freedom of religion or belief, stating that people mentioned in the articles were "making zombies out of children." Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society, while smaller minority groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and unregistered Protestant groups reported isolated instances of intolerance.

Although the government did not prohibit persons from changing religions, there was social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to do so. Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners reportedly felt less societal pressure against choosing and changing their religion than did members of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks.

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Some evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts encountered discrimination. There were persistent reports that ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced discrimination and harassment. Sources reported that religious organizations that were perceived to proselytize faced greater social scrutiny, causing community members to occasionally call the police. This resulted in raids against the religious organizations.

Forum 18 reported three cases in which local officials backed imams who refused to allow non-Muslims to be buried in state-owned cemeteries. On April 9, the local imam, with the support of the local administration, blocked the burial of Protestant Gayrat Buriyev at a Muslim cemetery and “cursed his relatives.” In another two cases in Karakalpakstan, officials forced relatives to bury the deceased in a Russian Orthodox cemetery rather than the main cemetery despite state ownership of all cemeteries.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Senior U.S. Department of State officials from the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor directly engaged with the government on religious freedom at the U.S.-Uzbekistan Annual Bilateral consultations December 1-2. When the embassy learned of difficulties faced by religious groups or faith-based foreign aid organizations, it intervened on their behalf where possible, contacting government officials, including the National Human Rights Center and the CRA to discuss issues of registration, destruction of literature, or detentions. Embassy representatives frequently discussed religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring cases and contacting government officials. U.S. officials regularly urged the government to allow more freedom of religious expression and to include religious prisoners of conscience in the annual amnesty, consistently emphasizing that religious tolerance and political security were complementary, not contradictory goals.

Embassy and visiting U.S. officials repeatedly met with the government, representatives of religious groups, and civil society to discuss specific issues of religious freedom, including restrictions on religious literature, non-registration of religious communities, and other restrictions on worshipers. The embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. imam who spoke widely on religious issues in the United States, including religious tolerance, freedom of worship, and interfaith

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dialogue. As in past years, the U.S. Ambassador hosted an iftar, which included a discussion on religious freedom and tolerance.

In July the U.S. Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the Secretary of State issued a waiver of sanctions on the same date to “further the purposes of the act.” U.S. officials discussed with the government tangible ways in which it could improve its record on religious freedom, including liberalizing registration laws, training officials and clergy on international religious freedom standards, and guaranteeing the rights of individuals to practice their faith free of government interference.