

UZBEKISTAN 2015 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 restricts religious rights when the government deems such restrictions are 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 without the permission of their parents, and the teaching of religious subjects in public and private schools. 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. There were several reports of deaths of prisoners in custody on charges of “religious extremism” following physical abuse by prison officials. There were continued reports of law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered religious groups and detaining their members and courts sentencing members of minority religious groups to administrative detention 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.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and believers reported continued social pressure on individuals, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to change religions. Religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christian Churches, said they faced greater societal scrutiny and encountered discrimination. Ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity reportedly suffered continued harassment and discrimination including pressure upon them 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 deemed by media outlets to be “nontraditional.”

The U.S. Ambassador and visiting senior officials from the Department of State met with government officials to recommend tangible steps the government could

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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 non-registration 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 February 29, 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 29.2 million (July 2015 estimate). Local statistics indicate approximately 93 percent of the population is Muslim, although a census has not been conducted since 1989. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School; the government states approximately 1 percent 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 Slavs continue to 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, Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), and atheists. Members of Uzbekistan’s Jewish community estimate 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 due to 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.

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The constitution 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 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 its requirements, the law states each group must present a list of at least 100 citizens, age 18 years or older, belonging to the group and a charter with a legal 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) concurrence to registration. The law requires 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 neighborhood committees). By law the MOJ may take one to three months to review a registration application. An MOJ specialist may approve or deny the registration, or cease review without the issuance of a decision. Registration of a faith’s central administrative body requires registered religious groups to be present in eight of the 14 administrative units, which may include Karakalpakstan and Tashkent city.

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 soum (\$1,400–\$2,800) 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.

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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 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 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 "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except clergy and individuals serving in officially recognized leadership position of 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 non-state and non-commercial 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 theological 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,

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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 soum (\$46) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense 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 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. Eleven specialized Islamic training schools (including two for women), an Orthodox and a Protestant seminary, as well as the Tashkent Islamic University under the Cabinet of Ministers may officially train religious personnel.

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

Nine 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 Tashkent Islamic Institute and the Tashkent Islamic University under the Cabinet of Ministers, 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.

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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 and the creation of faith-based activity groups deemed by the government to be unrelated to acts of worship.

Government Practices

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. There were reports of prisoners serving sentences related to religious extremism dying in custody. NGOs reported the government continued its physical abuse of persons arrested on suspicion of “religious extremism” or who participated in underground Islamic activity. There were continued reports of law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered religious groups and detaining their members. Courts continued to sentence members of minority religious groups to administrative detention following searches of their homes. The government limited 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 continued to experience difficulties registering and conducting religious activities. State-controlled media accused missionaries and others engaged in proselytizing of posing a danger to society.

The government continued to imprison individuals on charges of religious extremism for advocating replacement of the current secular government and laws with a government and laws based on religious principles. The government continued to describe religious extremism as a threat to domestic security and stability.

Family members reported deaths in custody of prisoners accused of religious extremism. They stated the bodies of the prisoners showed signs of beatings or other abuse. For example, according to the Russian website Voice of Islam, authorities returned the body of Djavliddin Ganiev, who had been charged with

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religious extremism, from a pretrial detention center on March 11 with signs of severe beatings. The government had requested Ganiev's extradition from a Russian prison in 2014. In another case of a death while in custody, Usman Akhmedov was arrested on March 7 and accused of religious extremism; after an investigation, his family was told he had committed suicide. The medical examiner did not provide the family with a certificate stating the cause of death and the family remained doubtful he committed suicide. Authorities reportedly pressured the families in such cases to bury the bodies before medical professionals could examine them.

NGO sources reported the government continued its physical abuse of persons arrested on suspicion of "religious extremism" or who participated in underground Islamic activity.

On April 25, relatives of Abdulla Rabiev told Memorial, a Russia-based human rights organization, Rabiev had confessed to association with Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a banned religious organization, while subjected to torture in a pretrial detention facility. Lawyers for Rabiev, who had sought refugee status in Russia, reported the secret services had kidnapped Rabiev on January 28 in Moscow and forcibly returned him to the country, reportedly with the acquiescence of Russian authorities.

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 access to the prisoners to independent observers. The last official government total of prisoners incarcerated on such charges, made public in 2004, was 2,800. Human rights groups continued to estimate the government imprisoned approximately 200 individuals annually on such charges, but acknowledged difficulties in obtaining accurate numbers.

Human rights NGOs reported continued arrests and convictions of individuals for membership in religious groups the government labeled extremist, including prohibited Muslim groups. In January Fergananeews.com reported the Urgench City Criminal Court sentenced four men, Sharnazar Norboev, Bazirgon Safaev, Dilmurod Urinov, and Alisher Sayfullaev, all of whom had reportedly become more devout while working in Russia, to terms of eight years in prison for allegedly attempting to overthrow the constitutional order, organization of banned religious extremist organizations, and distribution of banned religious literature.

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Authorities in Jizzakh Region arrested fish farmer Aramais Avakyan, an Armenian Christian, along with four of his employees in September and charged all of them with religious extremism for allegedly attempting to join Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The men were held incommunicado by security services for forty days and denied access to legal counsel. While in custody, police reportedly beat them and subjected them to electric shocks. Avakyan suffered a broken leg and several broken ribs. 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. There was no resolution to the case at year's end.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported the October 29 arrest of 16 Tashkent Muslims for "spreading materials of banned religious organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir ideology among Tashkent and Tashkent Region residents." Between October and November authorities reportedly arrested approximately 160 individuals for alleged ties to Da'esh, although Hizb-ut-Tahrir members told international media up to 90 percent of the detainees were Hizb-ut-Tahrir members. As of the end of the year, there was no further information on the disposition of the case.

In February the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported the Tashkent Regional Criminal Court rejected an appeal involving three men, Asatullo Rikhsiev, Shukhrat Ilkhamov, and Davron Rakhmonov. In 2014 they were charged with and found guilty of attempts to overthrow the constitutional order; production and distribution of information materials threatening to public security and order; and organization, leadership and participation in extremist, separatist, fundamentalist, or other banned organizations.

On October 27, 12news.uz reported the Supreme Court sentenced Firdavs Salimov from Parkent District of Tashkent Region to nine years in prison and fined him 9.9 million soum (\$3,730) for distribution of pamphlets and flags of Da'esh. Salimov was found guilty of religious extremism.

In April the NGO Forum 18 reported the authorities imprisoned Baptist Donier Akhmedov for 15 days on March 16, and fined him 40 times the minimum monthly salary, totaling 5.2 million soum (\$1,820), after he offered a religious leaflet to a passerby on the street.

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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. For example, Abdulla Madmarov, son of human rights activist Ahmadjon Madmarov, received an additional prison term of three years and 14 days for unspecified violations of the prison regime. There also continued to be reports of administrators charging 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 human rights activists, the government ordered a mass release of religious prisoners prior to the presidential election in March, including the release of lay preacher and journalist Khayrullo Khamidov. Sources reported different numbers freed at individual prisons, with the IGIHRDU estimating releases as high as 10 to 20 prisoners at some prisons, but without confirmation of precise numbers. The government did not comment on the mass release; nor did it disclose the total number of prisoners freed in the amnesty.

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 certain times of the day. Authorities at the prison in Koson reportedly isolated and punished inmates who wished to fast during Ramadan.

There were continued reports of armed law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered groups and detaining 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.

Forum 18 reported in March and April the government administratively sentenced Protestants in three different locations to between seven and 15 days in prison for “illegal religious activity” and “teaching religion illegally.”

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On March 20, according to widespread news reports, law enforcement arrested 48 members of the Original Home of the Original Highest Father religious group, following a check of the organization's financial records, and charged them with proselytizing, illegal religious activity, and fraud. Authorities reportedly confiscated flash drives, CDs and computers with "missionary content."

Forum 18 also reported police in the city of Urgench, Khorezm Region, raided the home of Pastor Stanislav Kim, a member of a local Baptist church on July 20 while he was visited by two other members of the church, Mirzabek Kuranbayev and Dmitry Krasnokutsky. The officials brought all three Baptists to Urgench Police Station, interrogated them, and impounded Kim's car.

On November 2, Rakhmatullo Abdusattarov, a Fergana Region native, was detained in Domodedovo International Airport, Moscow, when he tried to board a flight to Turkey. According to Ozodlik Radio, the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, he was arrested because Uzbek law enforcement had put him on a wanted list for ostensible connections to religious extremism in January and sent an extradition request to the Russian authorities. According to Abdusattarov, contacted by Radio Ozodlik as he was being transferred to Uzbekistan, he had legally worked in Russia for three years and wanted to migrate to Turkey for economic reasons.

According to fondsp.org, the website of the Foundation for the Support of Persecuted Christians in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, on April 26 and August 2, authorities raided unregistered Baptist meetings in Karshi, videotaping and questioning participants, including children; confiscating all religious literature; and taking statements from neighbors, after reportedly advising them what to say. A person who reportedly introduced himself as Gafur Imamov of the Department of National Education spoke on camera about the evils of missionary activities. Authorities found 10 people guilty of "illegal religious activity" and "illegal production or possession of religious materials." They fined three people 6,500,000 soum (\$2,275), and seven people 3,900,000 soum (\$1,365) each.

In April Forum 18 reported the government raided the home of Gulchokhra Norbaeva in Tashkent Region ostensibly to search for illegal Islamic literature. Norbaeva had been fired from her job as a teacher three years ago for insisting on her right to wear a hijab, and according to police was now on a "preventive

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register” for citizens under closer scrutiny due to the likelihood of criminal or antisocial activities.

Media articles reported authorities closely observed social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, and made several arrests based on participation. Religious groups and human rights activists reported police raided private homes without cause in an effort to prevent private religious practice or seize religious literature. In August according to media articles anti-terrorism police raided the homes of eight Muslim men in Tashkent Region who met together to pray and share meals. Although they found nothing but a copy of the Quran, officers reportedly held and questioned the men for 15 to 40 hours, warning them they could be imprisoned or tried by a court and fined.

In February the Nukus City Criminal Court found two Russian citizens, Magomedsayid Khasayev and Alisultan Abakarov, guilty of “illegally smuggling religious materials” into the country,” after a search of the truck they were driving by customs officials at the Kungrad, Karakalpakstan, customs checkpoint revealed Muslim religious books and what the government called extremist content on their mobile phones. The pair spent 67 days in pretrial detention before their release and received a fine of 5,381,750 soum (\$1,884).

Following police raids, between February and March three separate courts fined nine members of three different families for “illegally storing” Christian literature in their homes..

Authorities also fined 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 congregations outside their sole registered congregation in Tashkent Region.

The government’s stated policy continued to be to ban Islamic groups it defined as extremist and to criminalize membership in such groups, which included Akromiya, Tabligh Jamaat, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also banned 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 stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not a matter of religious freedom but rather of preventing overthrow of the secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

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At trials of suspects accused of being members of extremist organizations, the government continued to claim they were members of previously unknown but banned extremist groups. According to accounts in government media, the government often charged defendants accused of religious extremism with membership in the “Jikhadchilar” group, i.e. “The Jihadis,” without an explanation of the group’s nature. The government, for example, did not specify whether it considered such suspects members of the Islamic Jihad Union, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization active in Afghanistan, or some other identified violent extremist organization. NGOs contended the designation, along with others like it, was a substitute for evidence of guilt.

The government continued to pursue the extradition of people it accused of religious extremism from other countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine. Among the individuals for whom the government requested extradition were some who reportedly had sought asylum in their foreign locations.

Minority religious groups continued to experience difficulties registering.

Some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, stated they continued not to apply or reapply for registration because they continued to expect local officials would not register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, said they did not submit registration applications which 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 give the authorities a list of their members’ names. They said local authorities had 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 continued to refuse on principle 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 the alleged failures by religious groups to fulfill the requirement 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

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approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

Churches which previously had 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; 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.

Despite continued efforts to engage with the government, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported no success in registering another group beyond the one previously registered in Chirchik, Tashkent Region.

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.

There were anecdotal reports 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 did not have synagogues in eight different administrative units and therefore continued to fail to meet the requirements for a registered central office. The MOJ continued to renew the accreditation for one rabbi for the community.

The government continued to deny permission to train Shia imams inside the country and did not recognize training received outside the country. The government reportedly registered several Shia mosques as Sunni ones instead.

According to human rights sources, the government remained suspicious of Muslims who worshipped outside state-approved institutions, were educated at madrassahs abroad, gathered socially to discuss religious issues, or were tied to "Wahhabi" imams, a term the government and the press continued to use to

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describe Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derived from teachings of certain prominent Uzbek imams of the early 1990s who had fallen afoul of the muftiate.

The media reported security services continued surveillance of religious communities by filming participants in Friday prayer services at local mosques.

According to human rights activists and religious adherents, the government maintained its control over the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials by controlling the muftiate, which was responsible for such matters. The government ensured its control over the muftiate through the CRA and by picking the muftiate staff.

The government and local imams continued to discourage public displays of religion considered to be foreign-influenced. Media reported authorities questioned women in Tashkent, but also in 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, whether foreigners or citizens, of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord. Government-affiliated press criticized missionaries for proselytizing, labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists "totalitarian sects," and stated it was the "duty" of all citizens to prevent the "deleterious" effects of such groups.

Sources continued to report the government issued instructions to *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.

The government provided 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," or less than 20 percent of the country's allotted number of pilgrims. Local *mahalla* committees, district administrations, the National Security Service (NSS), and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. According

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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 informal financial remuneration.

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 and 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 which was imported legally or produced in country, as well as articles of religious use such as prayer beads or incense. According to an August report from a human rights activist in the Fergana Valley, authorities sometimes confiscated audio recordings of sermons by former Mufti Sheikh Mohammed Sodiq Mohammed Yusuf, who ran his own publishing house with the support of the CRA, as they could not always distinguish between what material was forbidden and what was allowed.

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 Islamic-related news sites.

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Groups allowed by the government to publish, import, and distribute religious literature included 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.

Media and believers reported authorities continued to discourage children 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 Friday prayers, and teachers and police officers continued to turn students away from Friday prayer services. 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, however, children were able to attend church sponsored activities and services with the permission of their parents. Witnesses reported 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 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.

Several airports in the country displayed Uzbek language banners characterizing missionary activity negatively.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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NGOs reported there continued to be social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to change religions. Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners said they felt less societal pressure than before against choosing and changing their religion. 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 “alien religious beliefs.” Sources said religious groups perceived as proselytizing religions, including evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal Christian Churches, faced greater social scrutiny and community members called the police to report their activities.

A number of nongovernmental media organizations continued to publish articles critical of proselytism and critical of members of minority religious groups deemed by media outlets to be “non-traditional.”

A March 1 article published on the 12News.uz website, which regularly published pro-government news stories, called Jehovah’s Witnesses “an undoubted leader for illegal religious activity,” particularly criticizing how the group’s “illegal” missionary activity affected children. The article also stated there was no reason for concern about religious freedom in the country and characterized registration requirements for religious groups as “not particularly burdensome.”

Immediately prior to November 16, UNESCO Tolerance Day, the website Zamondosh, registered in the Netherlands, which regularly published pro-government news stories, published three articles about Jehovah’s Witnesses and Korean Protestant missionaries in which it accused members of these groups of “spy-like” activities and “leading astray the unwary.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and visiting senior officials from the Department of State met with government officials to recommend tangible steps the government might take to improve its record on religious freedom, including easing restrictions on religious practice, increasing interfaith dialogue, and initiating a training program to foster religious tolerance for government officials.

The embassy continued to intervene with government officials, including the National Human Rights Center and the CRA, where possible, when it learned of

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detentions of individuals for their religious beliefs or difficulties faced by religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations with regard to their registration and the destruction of their religious literature. Embassy officers continued to urge the government to include religious prisoners of conscience in its annual amnesty of prisoners, and met with government officials to discuss the non-registration of religious communities, limitations on religious expression, restrictions on religious literature, and other constraints on worshippers.

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

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.

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 February 29, 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.