

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positively. Over the course of the year, the government registered at least eight non-Muslim religious organizations, [ended](#) a de facto ban on children attending mosques, [interceded](#) to prevent the eviction and demolition of a synagogue located in Tashkent, and released some religious prisoners. Government officials continued to engage closely with the United States and other international partners on religious freedom concerns, particularly the ongoing efforts to reform the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 religion law). On multiple occasions, the *Oliy Majlis*, Uzbekistan’s parliament, invited international observers—including USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief—to participate in open parliamentary discussions of the draft law. In August, the government formally requested an opinion on the draft from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. In October, the two organizations [issued](#) a joint opinion that criticized the draft because it “maintains major restrictions and suffers from deficiencies that are incompatible with international human rights standards.” Although the government stated at the end of the year that it was still considering some recommendations provided by the ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and others, it was unwilling to accept the more substantive revisions required to bring the draft law into full compliance with international standards. On the contrary, the government stated that it will preserve in the law many problematic provisions, including those prohibiting unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and missionary activity. According to the draft, the law also will continue to set difficult and potentially discretionary registration requirements, place limitations on the location of religious

rites and ceremonies, and subject all religious literature and related materials to official review and approval.

Reports throughout the year indicated that authorities in Uzbekistan continued to harass, detain, and imprison Muslims who practiced Islam independently of strict state controls or possessed unauthorized or allegedly “extremist” sermons and other religious texts in print or electronic form. In March, human rights activist Musajon Bobojonov was [arrested](#) and sentenced to five days in prison for conducting a *nikah*, an Islamic marriage ceremony, without state permission. In April, authorities visited Dr. Alimardon Sultonov following an inquiry he made about the prevalence of COVID-19 cases in the area, [seized](#) his computer for containing illegal religious texts, and [sentenced](#) him to 14 months restricted freedom. In December, authorities pulled Shi’a Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov from a taxi, brought him in for questioning, and forcibly gained access to his phone where they discovered religious materials. It was unclear by the end of the year whether he would face charges. Although President Shavkat Mirziyoyev issued multiple pardons releasing and reducing the sentences of many religious prisoners throughout the year—including releasing prisoners [Aramais Avakian](#) and [Ruhiddin Fahriddinov](#), who were included in [USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#)—a few thousand religious prisoners are estimated to remain in prison. Moreover, in 2020 the government [arrested](#) an undetermined number of individuals under broad and ill-defined charges of “extremism” that many observers viewed with skepticism given Uzbekistan’s “history of alleging extremism accusations to target political opposition” and religious individuals. In March, the United Nations Human Rights Committee [expressed](#) concern about the persistence of torture in prisons and other detention facilities and the use of arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture against independent Muslims.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards and encourage the government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Press at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Allocate funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Embassy in Tashkent to provide litigation support to individuals and religious communities prosecuted in connection with their peaceful religious activities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Podcast:** [How Far Has Tashkent Gone in Greater Respect for Religious Rights?](#) (in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Legal Reform Efforts in Uzbekistan, Urges Conformity with International Standards](#)
- **Country Update:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)

## Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) that roughly 88 percent of Uzbekistan's population identifies as Muslim, while Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that between 93 and 94 percent of the population is Muslim. The majority of Muslims in Uzbekistan are Sunni, while approximately 1 percent are Shi'a. Around 3.5 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 3 percent comprises atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Protestants.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has sought to enact a number of legal and policy reforms to improve conditions for religious freedom and actively address some concerns raised primarily at the international level. Despite these efforts, however, and although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, the government largely preserved its interest in maintaining extensive state control over the practice of religion. Various officials remained actively involved in the effort to revise the 1998 religion law, but they did not pass an amended version of that law during 2020 and appeared likely to reject many of the recommendations that the ODIHR and the Venice Commission put forward. In addition, the Administrative Code and Criminal Code also continued to limit and allow for the punishment of religious activity that the government had not expressly sanctioned.

## Legal Restrictions and Reforms

The government of Uzbekistan first pledged to revise the country's 1998 religion law in May 2018 with the parliament's adoption of a "roadmap" to improve religious freedom conditions. Initial versions of a revised draft law made some important improvements by lowering the number of persons required to register a local religious organization from 100 to 50, reducing the time to process registration applications, and [eliminating](#) a formal prohibition against wearing religious clothing in public, among others. However, despite the government's continued engagement with international partners and other interlocutors who advised additional revisions to make that law compliant with international standards, officials remained adamant that under the amended law they would not allow any unregistered religious activity, missionary activity, or private teaching of religion. Other aspects of the draft law also raised concerns, such as new and potentially discretionary requirements that religious communities seeking registration obtain a "letter of consent" from the government's Committee on Religious Affairs and a "letter of guarantee" from local authorities—as the text of the draft law specified no criteria for either the provision or denial of such letters.

## Government Control of Islam and Imprisonment of Muslims

Officials in Uzbekistan remained most preoccupied with maintaining control over the practice of Islam in the country. Although the government made some progress regarding the ability of non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their beliefs—including by registering

[some](#) Christian communities and upholding a ban on police raids—it devoted comparatively less effort to easing restrictions on Muslim religious practice. On the contrary, one imam at a mosque in Tashkent [said](#) that "all mosques in Uzbekistan are under constant video surveillance" to monitor the ways attendees pray and worship, and that a person who "ignores the government's policy in the religious sphere can find themselves behind bars." The nongovernmental organization Forum 18 [reported](#) that in multiple instances authorities searched Muslims' homes for unauthorized or banned religious texts, often seizing even those texts that are officially permitted. In the beginning of the year, Uzbekistan significantly [expanded](#) its list of banned religious literature and websites to include, among other things, a number of poems and materials critical of the government's stance on Islam. Muslims frequently faced charges of "extremism" or terrorism, and they were prosecuted under various provisions of the Criminal Code—such as Articles 244.1 and 244.2—for possessing such literature in either print or electronic form or for [meeting](#) to discuss Islam. By the end of 2020, an undisclosed number of religious prisoners remained imprisoned, including [Khayrullo Tursunov](#), who is included in [USCIRF's ForB Victims List](#). However, one source indicated that the government has released as many as 1,600 religious prisoners since 2016.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan pursued an expanded bilateral relationship in 2020. In February, the State Department [released](#) a new Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025 that underscored continued U.S. commitment to the region, including through the promotion of rule of law reform and respect for human rights. In September, then USAID Acting Administrator John Barsa [announced](#) the opening of a new bilateral USAID Mission in Uzbekistan. At the conclusion of the State Department's Annual Bilateral Consultations with Uzbekistan in November, the two sides [announced](#) that they would upgrade those discussions in 2021 to the status of a Strategic Partnership Dialogue.

The United States also continued to prioritize religious freedom through sustained high-level engagement with the government of Uzbekistan. In February, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [traveled](#) to Uzbekistan where he [met](#) with religious leaders to discuss reforms, and that same month he [urged](#) Uzbekistan to continue its "good work in granting greater degrees of religious freedom to [its] own people." Over the course of the year, the United States [worked closely](#) with the government of Uzbekistan to reform its 1998 religion law and to [advocate](#) for the release of religious prisoners. On December 2, the State Department [removed](#) Uzbekistan from its Special Watch List "based on significant, concrete progress," two years after delisting it from the department's list of Countries of Particular Concern. Despite the State Department's decision to take Uzbekistan off the Special Watch List, USCIRF concludes that the violations during 2020 remained sufficiently severe to meet IRFA's standard for inclusion on that list.

### Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Why is Uzbekistan still in this report? Very few countries have ever engaged as proactively as Uzbekistan has with the international community. Its progress is significant and worthy of commendation. Uzbekistan is an example to other countries.

As I read it, among the reasons for Uzbekistan remaining on USCIRF's list: (1) the country has not met the international community's expectations when it comes to the passage of the law mentioned in this report; (2) there remains among some authority figures in Uzbekistan a visceral bias against its citizens changing religions; and (3) there is an ongoing need to review any relevant cases of those individuals actually imprisoned on the basis of religion alone.

I understand the procedural complexities with the first and third concerns, but I find the second issue very easy to solve. Uzbekistan's authorities, including its religious leaders, need to make it clear they actually believe in the celebrated Islamic teaching that "there is no compulsion in religion" and acknowledge—as all Abrahamic faiths do—that the freedom of choice is a divine gift (see Section 2 of the "Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration"). It may be that Uzbekistan's authorities are somehow confusing coercive proselytization with the freedom of religion and belief. Surely this at least can be overcome, and it should be overcome.