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## ***Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan*** **US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 5 June 2025**

*Forum 18, established in 2003, provides truthful, original, detailed, and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Russia, Russian-occupied Ukraine, government-held Ukraine and Belarus.*

Azerbaijan is a personalised, authoritarian state. The regime seeks to control all activity, whether related to politics, the media, trade unions or religion. All organisations need state approval before they are allowed to exist and function. Participants in any organisations that function without state permission risk punishment.

Under the Religion Law, backed by Administrative Code Article 515 ("Violation of the procedure for creating or running religious organisations"), all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by a group of people is illegal unless it has obtained state registration, and so permission to exist. The state controls the largest religious community – the Islamic community – from inside, with intrusive oversight over all its decisions. It controls all other religious communities from outside.

To apply for permission to exist, a group must have at least 50 local adult citizen founding members. This bans all small religious communities. Many people are afraid to sign registration applications, for fear of harassment and reprisals by the regime. Registration applications need prior approval from local authorities before they even reach the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, which is supposed to register religious organisations. However the State Committee often rejects applications for unspecified "violations".

Four state bodies are particularly concerned with forcing belief communities to seek state permission to exist: the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, the State Security Service secret police, the ordinary police, and local Religious Affairs Commissions. All four bodies have made joint raids on people exercising freedom of religion and belief without state permission.

The Islamic faith is under the tightest state control. All mosques must belong to the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board, which supposedly represents both Shia and Sunni Muslims. The regime has closed most specifically Sunni mosques over the past ten years. State control is highly intrusive, and many mosques have multiple security cameras inside and out. The state enforces on all Muslims a Shia Muslim calendar, which dictates when they are allowed to pray and celebrate Muslim festivals. Muslims, particularly Sunnis, have objected to the calendar.

In 2018, the State Committee took over control of higher Islamic education from the Muslim Board. The Azerbaijan Theological Institute, established by Presidential Decree in February 2018, is the only

higher educational establishment the regime allows to operate. The regime closed Baku Islamic University, operated by the Muslim Board, later in 2018.

Azerbaijani citizens who have studied abroad (as well as foreign citizens) need State Committee permission to conduct Islamic rituals in mosques. Those who do so without State Committee approval risk up to a year's imprisonment (more if they do this repeatedly). In March 2022, President Ilham Aliyev signed further Religion Law amendments transferring responsibility for naming and removing prayer leaders in all mosques from the Muslim Board to the State Committee. All prayer leaders must undergo state re-approval every five years.

The State Committee needs to approve the opening or renovation of any place of worship of any faith.

Some religious communities meet without registration, either because they do not want it or have been refused. They are often raided, with individuals taken to the police station for questioning and sometimes fined up to several months' average wages. Sharing faith with others also risks such large fines.

Many Muslims have been jailed, some of them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Others have been jailed apparently for their perceived closeness to Iranian views. While in prison, many are punished and tortured for seeking to exercise freedom of religion or belief. State Security Service prison guards beat political prisoner Bahruz Samadov when he requested a Bible in August 2024. He was given a Bible the following day. He tried to have those who tortured him punished, but the courts rejected his suit.

Ethnic Armenians captured when Azerbaijan overran Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2023 face torture and denigration of their perceived Christian affiliation. Some have been denied access to requested Christian literature. Tattoos of crosses on prisoners' hands appear to have been burnt off the skin. Released prisoners of war recount beatings and ethnic slurs based on perceived religious affiliation. Guards have seized neck and wrist crosses from prisoners, broken them and scattered them on the floor.

A harsh censorship regime backed by the Criminal Code, the Religion Law, and Administrative Code Article 516 ("Violation of legislation on freedom of religion") is in force. The State Committee must approve all religious literature printed in and imported into the country and specifies the number of copies of each named work that may be printed or imported. It also checks the contents of shops selling religious literature, and has a list of banned religious literature which the "Expert Analysis" Department – which is responsible for the list – has not made public, despite numerous requests. Each copy of an approved religious book needs a sticker (bought from the State Committee) certifying that it has been approved before being distributed.

Despite Azerbaijan's promises to the Council of Europe before its accession in 2001 and numerous judgments against it in the European Court of Human Rights, the regime has never introduced an alternative civilian service for those who cannot do compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Conscientious objectors have been prosecuted and even jailed under Criminal Code Article 321.1. About a dozen young men who have refused call-up have been banned from leaving the country – often for more than a year – as investigators prepare possible criminal prosecutions.

*More background is in Forum 18's Azerbaijan survey [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2429](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2429)  
Individual cases of documented FoRB violations are at <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=23>*