

KAZAKHSTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan continued to improve. The government remained committed to reforming its approach to religion in conversation with U.S. counterparts; President Kassym Tokayev, who assumed the presidency in 2019, has explicitly sought to improve Kazakhstan’s record on international religious freedom. In February, government officials joined the second U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group, held at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC, with the participation of civilian experts and U.S. officials, including from USCIRF. The Kazakhstani government representatives presented their road map for religious legislation and oversight reform over the next two years and responded to suggestions and concerns from the U.S. side. At a third working group held virtually in November, the Kazakhstani government provided an updated version of the road map and a tentative timeline for its realization.

Problematic legislation remained in force in Kazakhstan during 2020, but significant reforms are likely in the upcoming year. Those reforms may include simplification of the registration process and a reduction in the number of founding members needed to register, removal of official approval for religious events, elimination of expert review of religious documents, and implementation of an appeals process in cases in which registration has been denied. Such reforms, if enacted, would significantly reduce Kazakhstan’s systematic limitations on religious freedom. Other positive indicators in 2020 included the government hosting a religious freedom roundtable in the capital of Nur-Sultan early in the year, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The government also announced its intention to convene such meetings regularly across Kazakhstan in a joint effort between the Ministry of Social Development and Information

and Love Your Neighbor Community (LYNC), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that works on international religious freedom. Meanwhile, the number of administrative prosecutions for religious offenses [continued to decline](#), reaching 131 in 2020—down from 160 in 2019, 171 in 2018, and 284 in 2017.

Despite these noteworthy signs of improvement, ongoing religious freedom violations and allegations of abuse continued to plague Kazakhstan. Legislation that restricts religious freedom was the primary source of such systematic and ongoing violations. Before it enacted the 2011 religion law, Kazakhstan was one of the least repressive post-Soviet Central Asian states with regard to freedom of religion or belief. That law, however, set stringent registration requirements with high membership thresholds, and it banned or restricted unregistered religious activities, including those related to offering education, distributing literature, and training clergy. Other vague criminal and administrative statutes enable the state to punish most unauthorized religious or political activities, and religious groups have since been subject to ongoing and intrusive state surveillance. The total number of registered religious groups plummeted after 2011 as a result of that law—especially “nontraditional” groups, which declined from 48 to 16. Government experts can deny registration in a closed process, which applicant groups have no ability to appeal. For example, Scientologists have been denied status as a religion since 2012, and Ahmadiyya Muslims cannot receive official registration unless they remove “Muslim” from their community’s title. Without a clear legal framework in place to protect religious freedom for all, such abuses are likely to persist and the overall situation could deteriorate once again.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Continue engaging with the Kazakhstani government through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group to press the government of Kazakhstan to:
 - Repeal or amend its religious registration laws, in part by setting the required number of founding members at no more than 10 individuals;
 - End mandatory expert review of founding documents and religious literature or significantly reform the process to make it more transparent;
 - Cease the detention and sentencing of individuals for their peaceful religious expression and practice;
 - Hold local officials accountable for religious freedom abuses; and
- Open the Congress of the Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions in 2021 to representatives of all faiths, in cooperation with the recently founded Religious Freedom Roundtables; and
- Provide religious freedom training to law enforcement and local officials through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Kazakhstan as part of broader initiatives to combat corruption and promote good governance.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union](#)

Background

Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia and home to the region's second-largest population, with [around 19 million citizens](#). The population is around 70 percent Sunni Muslim, 26 percent Christian (including Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses), 3 percent other (including Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas), and less than 1 percent Shi'a Muslims, mostly ethnic Azeris. A total of 3,826 officially registered religious associations represent 18 religious groups in Kazakhstan and 3,597 registered places of worship. Approximately two-thirds of the population are ethnic Kazakhs—a Turkic people group—while the rest are ethnic Slavs and other Turkic peoples, including Uzbeks and Uyghurs. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country with a large ethnic Russian population, mostly in the north.

The government is avowedly secular and seeks to control religion, which it views as a potentially destabilizing force. It maintains influence over, and preference for, what it considers the “traditional” Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence; it is generally wary of other Islamic practices emanating from the wider Muslim world. It classifies as traditional and nonthreatening other religions with a long-established presence and good relations with the government—like Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism—while viewing with suspicion newer arrivals to the region, such as evangelical Christianity and Scientology. The government is particularly concerned about the spread of religious extremism, which it defines broadly and uses to target political opponents, as well as the potential for perceived social disruption from proselytism and missionary activity. Although concerns about extremist violence are legitimate, the government's vague conception of religious extremism is applicable to any nonviolent activity it sees as potentially disruptive—even private religious practice and instruction.

Ongoing Challenges

Although the number of administrative charges has dropped, in 2020 religious minorities still [reported](#) facing intimidation tactics from government authorities, including hostile interrogations, threats of punishment, surveillance, and periodic detention. The government [seized](#) the property of several Protestant churches, groups advocating for religious freedom and broader human rights faced official [smear campaigns](#) and [fines](#), and peaceful religious minorities continued to face prosecution as [extremists](#). For example, beginning in May, the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KMBPCh) and other NGOs faced a concerted government [smear campaign](#), in which they were accused of trying to destabilize the country at the behest of foreign interests. Yevgeny Zhovtis, the director of KMBPCh, is a frequent and vocal critic of official religious policy; he [argued](#) in October that all restrictions on the individual right to freedom of religion and belief clearly violate the Constitution of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Scientologists reported that members in Nur-Sultan were required to attend “preventative consultations,” where they were threatened and ordered to sign a statement denouncing and disavowing Scientology.

Corruption, particularly at the local level, remained one of the more persistent problems impeding religious freedom; for example, some religious groups reported attempts at blackmail or bribery by local officials. The solicitation of [bribes](#) by local police was reportedly a contributing factor behind deadly clashes in February when angry Kazakh mobs targeted the ethnic [Dungan](#) community, a Muslim Chinese minority. Official religious policy may have [contributed](#) to these clashes by linking Kazakh national identity with Hanafi Islam and equating “foreign” Islam with extremism; in doing so, the government has arguably helped to foster an environment hostile to religious and ethnic minorities like the Dungan.

Ethnic Kazakh Refugees from Xinjiang

The Chinese Communist Party has imprisoned large numbers of ethnic Kazakhs alongside Uyghur Muslims in China's massive concentration camps in the Xinjiang region. Partly in response to this crisis, President Tokayev signed amendments to Kazakhstan's migration law in May, changing the term used to describe ethnic [Kazakh migrants](#) from *oralman* (returnee) to *kandas* (native/blood related) as part of a broader effort to ease legal residency and citizenship for Kazakh refugees from Xinjiang. In October, four ethnic Kazakhs who had fled Xinjiang and entered Kazakhstan illegally were granted temporary [refugee status](#), marking this shift in policy. Even so, relations between Beijing and Nur-Sultan remained close; in August, the Chinese ambassador praised military cooperation between the two countries and vowed to strengthen mutual efforts to [combat extremism](#). This statement fueled concerns about China's influence in Kazakhstani security policy and the potential spread of expansive counterextremism tactics modeled on those China has used in Xinjiang.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Kazakhstan enjoyed a close partnership in 2020, including two sessions of the U.S.-Kazakhstan Working Group on Religious Freedom. In February, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo traveled to Kazakhstan and [met](#) with President Tokayev to discuss improving relations between the two countries. The then secretary also reiterated his admiration for Kazakhstan's leadership in reintegrating citizens from Syria and Iraq, and he expressed concern over the situation in neighboring Xinjiang. The U.S. government delivered \$6.2 million of [assistance](#), including essential laboratory equipment and supplies, to support Kazakhstani efforts to fight COVID-19. Meanwhile, USAID continued to support programs in Kazakhstan to promote civil society, good governance, and human rights, including efforts to foster relationships between the Kazakhstani government and [civil society](#) organizations and support partnerships for reform. In November, then [Assistant Secretary of State](#) for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce met with Kazakh and Uyghur refugees from Xinjiang during her visit to Kazakhstan, where she also discussed [bilateral engagement](#) on education and culture with government officials.