

# UZBEKISTAN

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended negatively as the government continued to tightly control all aspects of religious practice and subject Muslims to particularly harsh punishments for their religious activities and expression. The country's Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations mandated that religious communities obtain registration to legally engage in worship and other religious activities, required that a government agency review and approve religious literature and related materials, and prohibited missionary activity and the private teaching of religion. During the year, the government [passed](#) amendments to the administrative code that penalize the "propaganda" of superiority on religious grounds and wearing clothes that prevent a person's identification.

Various government agencies continued to police and censure Muslims for their religious activities. In October 2023, law enforcement authorities in Tashkent raided and [closed](#) several halal restaurants, reportedly questioning employees about their religious beliefs and telling the proprietors that they could reopen if they agreed to sell alcohol. Throughout the country, mosques also [lowered](#) the volume of the call to prayer, a practice that the government had previously loosened restrictions on to signal its increased respect for religious freedom. The official Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) sought to control media reporting on Islam and in one instance [instructed](#) media outlet Kun.uz to cut or change sections of a story it had produced on religious matters. In August, the founder of Azon.uz, a popular website that focused on Islam, suddenly and inexplicably [announced](#) the closure of the site and its television and radio broadcasting, which many [attributed](#) to government pressure. The government continued to rigorously oversee the performance of the Hajj and Umra and [warned](#) its citizens against undertaking either pilgrimage "illegally" by traveling with an unauthorized organization. In November, the government additionally [restricted](#) the

ability of minors to perform pilgrimages and allegedly continued to involve *mahallas* (local neighborhood committees) to determine who would be allowed to go on pilgrimage.

The government increasingly detained, arrested, fined, and sentenced Muslims to prison for the illegal dissemination of religious materials or participation in illegal religious organizations. Authorities particularly [targeted](#) young men who had downloaded or shared songs with alleged "religious extremist" content. In January, a court [sentenced](#) Sardor Rakhmonkulov—whose mother claimed he experienced torture while in custody—to five years' imprisonment on extremism-related charges for "distributing religious songs." In May, another court [gave](#) Jahongir Ulugmurodov three years in prison for posting a song to social media. Both individuals were released from prison later in the year pursuant to court decisions. In May, a woman [received](#) a three-year prison sentence for "liking" a religious lecture on social media five years prior, which a court decided constituted "distributing" the material to her friends online. A court later changed her sentence to a form of house arrest. Officials with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service engaged in transnational repression by attempting to forcibly or coercively [return](#) citizens living abroad to Uzbekistan, where they faced criminal extremism charges.

Religious minorities continued to encounter significant obstacles in their ability to practice their religion or beliefs. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in many regions remained unable to register and therefore legally worship due to a burdensome and discriminatory registration process. In February, customs officials [detained](#) a Baptist foreign national who attempted to cross the border with numerous unauthorized religious books that they seized for review. In April, police raided two Baptist churches meeting for Easter service, detained several church members, and beat and applied electric shocks to other worshippers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the 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 2021 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards, including by removing registration requirements on religious communities, permitting the

possession and distribution of religious literature, and permitting the sharing of religious beliefs;

- Press the government of Uzbekistan, at the highest levels, to immediately release individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Allocate funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S.

Embassy in Tashkent to provide litigation support to individuals and religious communities prosecuted in connection with their peaceful religious activities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Advocate on behalf of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations through letters, floor speeches, hearings, delegations, and other engagements with or about Uzbekistan.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Deeply Troubled by Uzbekistan's Backsliding on Religious Freedom](#)
- **Event:** [Evaluating Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Uzbekistan](#)

## Background

The population of Uzbekistan is [estimated](#) at approximately 35.8 million people. Different estimates place the percentage of the population that identify as Muslim at between 88 and 96.3 percent. While most Muslims in the country are Hanafi Sunni, there are also small numbers of Shi'a Muslims. Slightly more than two percent of the population are Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 1.5 percent are atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. In September, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov reportedly [asserted](#) that civil servants in the country must choose between their beliefs and their careers.

During the year, several international observers expressed concern about the situation for religious freedom in Uzbekistan. In March 2023, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief released a report that [found](#) the government had only partially implemented many of the recommendations made in 2018 and failed entirely to implement others. In May, Human Rights Watch characterized the country as "backsliding on [its] religious freedom promises" and [documented](#) widespread violations, including the continued prosecution of Muslims under overly broad extremism provisions. In October, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that called on Uzbekistan to protect the right to freedom of religion, amend its religion law, protect Christian converts, and [release religious prisoners](#).

## Retaliation for Religious Expression

The government increasingly cracked down on bloggers and others who expressed their opinion on religious matters publicly or through social media posts. In February, a court fined a man who had criticized a shop display on social media on the grounds that he had [shared](#) unauthorized religious content. Local officials [stated](#) that "people cannot judge or otherwise interfere with others based on their personal religious and moral views. The action of any person against this order will be strictly prosecuted in accordance with the law." In a similar incident in April, a court [sentenced](#) blogger Hojiakbar Nosirov to 15 days' administrative arrest on charges of "inciting religious hatred" after he said in a video that Muslims should not consume certain brands of yogurt due to their ingredients. In May, former imam Shavkat Hasan had to [pay](#) a fine of nearly \$575 (6.6 million so'm) for discussing religious matters on social media without the CRA's permission. During the year, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan—a nominally independent entity responsible for overseeing Islamic practice in the country—reported [firing](#) multiple imams related to their unapproved commentary.

Relatedly, there were also reports that authorities continued to forcibly shave the beards of men and [demand](#) that women wear their

headscarves a certain way. In September, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [reported](#) that law enforcement conducted a number of raids throughout Tashkent to detain bearded men, force them to shave, and subject at least some of them to brief periods of administrative arrest.

## Transnational Repression of Muslims

Although the current administration has sought to distance itself from the legacy of the previous government under Islam Karimov—which brutally repressed freedom of religion or belief—it nonetheless continued to [pursue](#) individuals who had fled that regime due to religious persecution. Police and security services have reportedly pressured and coerced Uzbek Muslims living abroad to return to Uzbekistan, in some cases even promising them that they will not face prosecution upon their return. In March 2023, a court reduced Alijon Mirganiyev's prison sentence he received on religious extremism-related charges from seven years to six years and six months. He was arrested upon his return to the country and sentenced in October 2022 despite having [received](#) assurances he would not be detained. In September, France [deported](#) Muhsinjon Ahmedov, who was in the process of seeking asylum given the criminal charges that he faced in Uzbekistan related to his religious practice. In November, authorities in Uzbekistan arrested Ahmedov on the allegation that he was involved in "extremism." In December, a French court ruled that his deportation was conducted illegally and that French authorities should immediately seek his return to France.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan [engaged](#) closely on efforts related to regional security, economic development, people-to-people ties, and human rights. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$41 million for programs in Uzbekistan. In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) to Uzbekistan, where he [met](#) with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and [urged](#) the government to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. During that visit, Secretary Blinken [asserted](#) that "real progress has been made on protecting religious freedom" in Uzbekistan and [added](#) that the United States "supports the full implementation of President Mirziyoyev's reform agenda. That includes delivering on commitments to defend religious freedom." In September, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Mirziyoyev for the C5+1 Presidential Summit, which public reporting indicated did not include substantial discussion of human rights. In November, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu also [visited](#) Uzbekistan to participate in the U.S.-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue. While in the country, he met with civil society groups working to promote human rights.