

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan further deteriorated. The government continued to restrict and penalize the practices of many religious groups, particularly Muslims who seek to practice their faith independently from state control. Additionally, the government continued to enforce its 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations—as amended in 2021—placing bureaucratic restrictions on the registration process for religious communities, banning missionary activity and proselytism, prohibiting unregistered religious education, and mandating government examination and approval for all religious materials. During the year, Uzbekistan’s Parliament, the Oliy Majlis, adopted legislation that would further restrict religious education by penalizing parents or guardians for allowing their children to receive unauthorized religious education.

The Uzbek government continued to enforce longstanding, stringent registration restrictions under the religion law, one of many lingering, Soviet-era “secular” policies intended to strengthen state control over religious practices. In June, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov ordered the demolition of over 400 unregistered mosques and prayer spaces for conversion to commercial use, although there were no reports that officials carried out such demolitions. This threat, as yet unfulfilled, illustrates some of the complications that emerge from the draconian registration framework. For example, officials reportedly threatened to convert one unregistered mosque in the Yangiyul district of Tashkent into a business due to its disuse since 2007—despite the fact that its disuse was a result of government closure since that time, followed by years of reported state intimidation and denial of the congregation’s repeated attempt to register. In February, the Tashkent Inter-District Administrative Court rejected a complaint from a Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation against an official’s refusal to designate a building as its legal

address, which is necessary for registration. In April, the Tashkent Administrative Court Appeal Board rejected a further appeal by the same community. Officials also continued to refuse the registration attempts of Protestant churches and harass members. In March and April, for example, State Security Service (SSS) officials questioned unregistered church members in Karakalpakstan and Khorezm, claiming to one Protestant Christian that he was attending an “illegal extremist Wahhabi group” and pressuring him to report on the congregation’s activities.

Authorities continued to target Muslims for their peaceful religious activities—often through vaguely defined efforts to counter “extremism”—through fines, arrests, and prison sentences, while the quasi-independent Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU) continued to censor and control imams. USCIRF has [documented](#) the cases of over 50 Uzbeks who remain in prison on vague charges related to their peaceful religious activity. In April, the MBU ordered imams across the country to hand in their passports—likely representing an attempt to restrict their movement following the March attack on the Crocus concert hall in Moscow, Russia by suspected Tajik Islamic State terrorists. A month later, the MBU called on all imams to refrain from using social media and interacting with other people’s content. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) also engaged in censorship and published an updated list of banned social media channels and pages that it claimed contained signs of “extremism and terrorism.” Also, to prevent “extremism,” the CRA called on citizens to not interact with online religious posts that have not received a positive theological examination by the state, warning it could lead to serious consequences, including large fines. In June, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev warned against “various forces in the world (that) are trying to destroy the essence of religion and lead young people astray from the true path.”

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);
- Impose targeted sanctions on State Security Service officials that repeatedly arrest individuals for peaceful religious activities by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United

States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) standards among the Uzbek and other regional governments.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Uzbekistan’s religious freedom conditions through delegation visits, meetings, and hearings, including through the Congressional Uzbekistan Caucus and the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus; and
- Suspend hosting the Uzbek government’s “Uzbekistan Day” event on Capitol Hill until it releases all individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Of Uzbekistan’s approximately [36 million](#) people, between 88.0 and 96.3 percent identify as Muslim. While most Muslims in the country belong to the Hanafi Sunni community, Shi’a Muslims also exist in small numbers. Other religious groups include Russian Orthodox Christians—who comprise around two percent of the population—as well as atheists, Baha’is, Buddhists, International Society of Krishna Consciousness members, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholic Christians, and Protestant Christians.

Administrative Penalties for Religious Activities

Uzbekistan’s religion law broadly bans unauthorized religious education. Throughout the year, officials issued fines for peaceful religious activities such as unauthorized religious education, leading unauthorized prayers or religious events, or distributing unauthorized religious materials. While fines largely targeted Muslims, other religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses also faced penalties. For example, courts continued to fine Jehovah’s Witnesses for sharing their faith with others under Article 240 of the Administrative Code. In February, the Yunusabad District Criminal Court fined Elnora Maksutova 23,800,000 soms (\$1,853) and Marina Penkova 17,000,000 soms (\$1,324) for sharing their religious beliefs.

Officials enforced an expanded interpretation of a September 2023 addition to the Administrative Code of Article 184, Part 4, which bans the concealment of one’s identity in public. Claiming security concerns, local authorities have used this provision to arrest and fine individuals for growing a beard—presuming it religious in nature—or wearing religious head covering. According to reporting, authorities continued to conduct beard raids against merchants at the Malika market in Tashkent, during which security officials detained men with beards and forced them to shave under threat of administrative detention. A National Television and Radio Company representative reported that an unofficial ban on bearded singers appearing on TV prevented at least one singer, Shokhzakhon Zhuraev, from participating in a broadcasted musical contest. In August, the Samarqand District Court sentenced two men to 10 days of administrative detention for walking around the Khoja Ahrori Valiy neighborhood with beards and refusing orders to report to the police station. Also in August, the Andijon City Court, in two separate cases, fined two women each 3,400,000 soms (over \$265) for wearing religious face coverings in public.

In August, the upper chamber of the Oliy Majlis adopted legislation to penalize parents and guardians who allow their children to receive “illegal” religious education under the 2008 law On the Guarantees of the Rights of the Child. If President Mirziyoyev signs the legislation into law, those found in violation could face a fine of up to about 8,500,000 soms (\$662) or 15 days of arrest. In August alone, courts throughout the country fined over 100 individuals for providing “illegal” religious instruction under Article 241 of the Administrative Code. For example, a court in Termiz city sentenced a man to 15 days

of administrative detention for giving religious lessons on social media without authorization.

(FoRB) Prisoners

The government continued to arrest, imprison, and prevent the release of individuals targeted for their peaceful, independent religious activities. In June, SSS officials arrested an estimated 100 Muslim men in the Kashkadarya region, including former FoRB prisoner [Khayrullo Tursunov](#). A court also sentenced [Abdumutal Abdurahimov](#) to 12 years in prison for his engagement with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a Muslim organization that does not espouse violence but has perpetuated antisemitism.

Prison officials have placed at least two Muslim FoRB prisoners in punishment cells for seemingly arbitrary reasons. For example, officials placed [Faryozbek Kobilov](#) in a punishment cell for two days in early August, prompting concern that this move could jeopardize his early release. Prison officials also placed [Alimardon Sultonov](#) in a punishment cell which he reportedly fears was to ensure he would serve the rest of his sentence in a harsher prison. In a positive development, officials transferred [Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov](#) from prison to house arrest.

Key U.S. Policy

On September 27, 2024, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhancing regional security, and disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor broader human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting. In June, President Mirziyoyev and then U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Katherine Tai discussed the Jackson-Vanik amendment. In September, the United States and Uzbekistan signed a Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement to strengthen law enforcement and Customs cooperation. In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) former Uzbek officials for engaging in human rights violations.

In March, Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) and Representative Mike Rogers (R-AL) led a congressional delegation to Uzbekistan, including members of the House Armed Services Committee Representatives Adam Smith (D-WA) and Salud Carbajal (D-CA), and former member Veronica Escobar (D-TX). The delegation met President Mirziyoyev and other Uzbek officials to discuss strengthening the U.S.-Uzbek relationship, focusing on trade and regional security concerns. Following the delegation’s visit, Representative Smith acknowledged Uzbekistan’s human rights abuses but stressed the overriding importance of working with the country on other issues such as terrorism and foreign influence. In July, Senators Steve Daines and Gary Peters (D-MI) launched the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus to “improve trade relations, boost agricultural developments, address human trafficking and migration concerns and increase national security partnerships.”