

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan continued to deteriorate. Throughout the year, Uzbek officials imprisoned, detained, and fined independent Muslims who deviate from the state’s preferred interpretation of Islam for their peaceful religious activities, particularly religious expression. Authorities continued to employ restrictive legislation to penalize freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), particularly the 1998 law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (religion law), requiring religious groups to register following burdensome requirements, and the 2018 law On Combating Extremism (extremism law). Further suppressing FoRB, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed into law expanded penalties for unauthorized religious education in February 2025. USCIRF follows the cases of dozens of FoRB victims imprisoned due to their peaceful religious activities under this increasingly restrictive legislative framework, although the number is likely [higher](#).

As in years past, officials detained Muslim men en masse for discussing religion without approval. At times, officials employed violence and harassment to target such individuals. In May 2025, Samarkand police arrested 10 Shi’a Muslim men for discussing religion in a group chat, detaining some for up to 20 hours and confiscating their passports. During this time, police beat four detainees: Bakhtiyor and Sherzod Rakhimov, Ibrokhim Ibrahimov, and Anvar Aliyev. Reportedly, police torture occurs during detention when officers use physical abuse to coerce confessions. Days later, Samarkand City Criminal Court judges sentenced the four men to between seven and 10 days of administrative imprisonment under Administrative Code Articles 183 and 194, which penalize petty hooliganism and failure to comply with officials’ lawful demands. Uzbek officials continued to use administrative penalties throughout 2025, including administrative detentions.

In July, Samarkand police arrested Aliyev again on charges of producing, storing, distributing, or displaying materials that threaten public order under Criminal Code Article 244.1. In October, a Samarkand City Court judge issued Aliyev a suspended

four-year prison sentence, which he is serving under house arrest. In September, Samarkand officials raided the homes of six Shi’a men in the morning, detaining and releasing them the same day. Three of the men included those previously placed under administrative detention.

On April 30, 2025, a Kashkadarya Regional Court judge rejected the appeal of eight Muslim men that Uzbek authorities sentenced to prison for terms between six and 10.5 years for discussing Islam in late 2024. According to a June report, prison officials reportedly restricted one of those men, [Khasan Abdirakhimov](#), from praying the *namaz* properly by forcing him to sit and confiscating his Qur’an. Officials also harassed Abdirakhimov’s family. The local Karshi *mahalla* (governing body) pressured Abdirakhimov’s wife to not complain about her husband’s imprisonment. Additionally, *mahalla* and local school officials insisted that Abdirakhimov’s daughter not wear a hijab and his son maintain short hair.

Courts arbitrarily extended the sentences of imprisoned FoRB victims on falsified, minor infractions. In March, the Navoi City Court sentenced FoRB victim [Fariduddin Abduvokhidov](#) to an additional 10 years in prison for claiming that prison officials are “infidels.” Authorities charged him under Criminal Code Article 244.1 and Article 244.2, which penalizes the creation, leadership, or participation in religious “extremist” organizations. In April, the same court extended his sentence by a year on unknown charges. In 2023, a Tashkent Region court sentenced Abduvokhidov to an additional 10 years for being late to a prison roll call. Authorities sentenced Abduvokhidov to 11 years in prison in November 2020 for discussing Islam with others. Abduvokhidov is scheduled for a 2035 release.

In May 2025, a Bukhara Region court sentenced [Tulkun Astanov](#) to an additional three years and two months in prison for allegedly disobeying morning exercise orders. Astanov, sentenced to five years in prison in 2020 for defending Muslims’ right to FoRB, was scheduled to complete his sentence in November 2025; however, he is now scheduled for release in April 2028.

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);
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Uzbekistan, including in any memorandums of understanding related to the critical mineral sector and raising concerns through the [Minerals Security Partnership Forum](#); and
- Impose targeted sanctions—including freezing FoRB violators’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities—on State Security Service officials and judges who repeatedly arrest individuals or issue administrative or criminal penalties for peaceful religious activities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Suspend hosting the Uzbek government’s “Uzbekistan Day” event on Capitol Hill until it releases all individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities; and
- Raise Uzbekistan’s religious freedom conditions and FoRB victims by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia](#)
- **Spotlight Podcast:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Uzbekistan’s Administrative Penalties for Peaceful Religious Activities](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Around 36 million people [live](#) in Uzbekistan, of which between 88 and 96 percent identify as Muslim. While most Muslims belong to the Hanafi Sunni community, 122,000 individuals identify as Shi'a. 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. While Article 35 of the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, the government widely restricts religious freedom through various legislation, including the religion and extremism laws.

Uzbek "Secularism" to Minimize Longstanding FoRB Restrictions

In February 2025, President Mirziyoyev approved the law About Ensuring Freedom of Conscience of Citizens in the Republic of Uzbekistan and Approving the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere (the Concept). The Concept aims to facilitate the right of Uzbeks "to freedom of conscience" and reaffirm the government's secular nature. However, the Concept emphasizes that individuals must practice religion in accordance with Uzbek law. Yet, the laws regulating religion violate international FoRB standards, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is a [signatory](#). Notably, the 1998 religion law criminalizes unregistered religious activities, instituting a bureaucratic and arbitrary registration process for religious communities. The religion law additionally bans missionary activity and proselytism, prohibits unregistered religious education, and mandates government examination and approval for religious materials. Relatedly, the 2018 extremism law contains a broad and vague definition of extremism that extends beyond violent acts or incitement to violence, criminalizing peaceful religious activities.

Prohibition on Private Religious Education

In February, President Mirziyoyev approved amendments to Article 23 of the law On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child that prohibit parents and guardians from "illegally involving their child in religious education." These amendments allow authorities to penalize those who send their children to unregistered religious educational institutions. Administrative Code Article 47 punishes violators with a fine and repeat offenders with up to 15 days of administrative detention. Administrative Code Article 241 already similarly penalizes those who teach religion without authorization with a fine or administrative detention.

In August 2025, the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) issued a warning to parents, urging them to monitor their children's internet activity in response to online advertisements promoting religious institutions abroad. The CRA cautioned that these institutions may "instill religious fanaticism" and emphasized that Uzbek citizens are only permitted to receive religious education through state-approved institutions under the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU).

Ramadan Restrictions

The Uzbek government increased FoRB restrictions on Muslim communities during Ramadan in 2025. For instance, police prevented children from attending *Tarawih*, night prayers at mosques associated with the month of Ramadan, including in Fergana and Tashkent. A Committee on Religious Affairs official defended police actions by stating that those under 18 were not legally allowed to participate in religious activity. Officials additionally required that national guard members sign a declaration that they would "not perform religious rituals, including fasting, during Ramadan." Officials claimed that the declaration was intended to "ensure combat readiness."

Official Suppression of Religious Expression

The Uzbek government controls religious expression, including religious literature. In January, the Supreme Court published a list of 1,400 religious materials, primarily social media pages, banned from being imported, produced, stored, or distributed because they contained signs of "extremism." Criminal Code Article 244.1 penalizes violators with up to eight years in prison.

Authorities continue to target religious expression through raids, harassment, and forced shavings. Since the beginning of the year, police in Tashkent raided mosques to identify bearded men. Tashkent mosque imams lectured bearded men to shave under threat that authorities would identify them as "extremist." Police reportedly stopped men in public to photograph and check their beard lengths. In some instances, police gathered large groups of bearded men at mosques for local imams to lecture them about their beards and being grateful to live in Uzbekistan. In August, officials at the Sergeli car market in Tashkent detained bearded vendors, photographed them, and forced them to shave. In August, Namagan officials threatened religious leaders' wives to remove their hijabs or their husbands would be fired. An official leading the meeting allegedly stated that "the Qur'an does not command the hijab" to justify the threat.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, the United States and Uzbekistan strengthened their bilateral relationship through shared security and trade interests. In April, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [met](#) with Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov to discuss U.S. support for Uzbekistan's sovereignty and efforts to collaborate on nuclear energy, trade, and critical mineral cooperation. However, reports from the meeting did not include discussions on religious freedom or human rights.

In July, the Congressional Uzbekistan Caucus co-organized "Uzbekistan Day" on Capitol Hill, which highlighted U.S.-Uzbek relations and reforms under President Mirziyoyev. In September, U.S. Special Envoy for Global Partnerships Paolo Zampolli emphasized strengthening ties between the two countries during a [visit](#) to the Center for Islamic Civilization in Tashkent. In September, President Donald J. Trump [met](#) with President Mirziyoyev to thank him for his \$8 billion purchase of Boeing airplanes. In November, both presidents [met](#) again under the guise of the C5+1 to discuss the advancement of trade and investments in U.S. companies.