

# UZBEKISTAN

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended slightly positively in a few areas, although most concerns related to the fundamental protection of this right remained. The government continued to severely restrict freedom of religion or belief through its 1998 law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, as amended in 2021, which requires religious groups to obtain registration to engage in religious activity and prohibits unregistered religious activity, the private teaching of religion, missionary activity, and proselytism, in addition to other undue restrictions. Although the government allowed the opening of some new mosques and registered a handful of religious minority communities—including three Protestant Christian churches and one [Shi'a Muslim mosque](#)—the registration process remained a burdensome and insurmountable challenge to other religious minority communities. Local governments and *mahallas* (local neighborhood committees) still arbitrarily blocked some registration applications submitted by Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians.

While the government continued to [issue](#) sporadic pardons that resulted in the release of some individuals convicted in connection with their peaceful religious activities, more than 2,000 Muslims remained imprisoned on various charges of “extremism” and other related offenses. Throughout the year, authorities continued to detain, arrest, imprison, and ill-treat Muslims for distributing unauthorized or illegal religious materials, criticizing state-approved imams, holding prayers in unsanctioned areas, and leading informal classes on Islam without government permission. Law enforcement authorities conducted raids against and detained alleged members of the Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir for [meeting](#) to discuss religious texts or [sharing](#) such texts online. In July, a local court in Bukhara [sentenced](#) Muslim Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov, who studied the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, to more than five years

in prison for allegedly recruiting youth to the so-called “Nurchilar” group. In another case, Muslim blogger Fazilhoja Arifhojaev [received](#) a seven-and-a-half-year prison sentence in January after he reshared a Facebook post that stated that Muslims should not congratulate non-Muslims on their religious holidays. According to Human Rights Watch, Arifhojaev's lawyer [said](#) that his client experienced ill-treatment and torture while in police custody. USCIRF received reports throughout the year that Uzbekistan pursued individuals who had fled abroad on religiously motivated charges and requested their extradition. In an apparent effort to suppress information, Uzbekistan's State Security Service (*Davlat Xavfsizlik Xizmati*) also intimidated human rights activists documenting the country's ongoing religious freedom violations—including during USCIRF's commissioner delegation visit—and reportedly [warned](#) journalists against reporting on such issues.

Authorities sought to limit some elements of Islam and Islamic practice unofficially considered inappropriate. For instance, in May police in two districts of Tashkent [rounded up](#) at least 10 men and threatened them with arrest if they refused to have their beards shaved, [drawing criticism](#) from the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan. Similarly, officials have [harassed](#) women and girls who wear the hijab and [maintained](#) that only a “light-colored national headscarf” may be worn in schools. Despite a public announcement made in recent years that children can attend mosques, in April security officials in the exclave of So'x (or Sokh) reportedly raided and [drove out](#) children from the Hazrati Ali mosque during the holy month of Ramadan. Authorities allegedly [dissuaded](#) or hindered attempts by Muslims to reopen previously closed places of worship, such as the Abu Zar mosque and the Nazira Bibi Xonim mosque in Tashkent, and [required](#) Muslims interested in performing the Hajj or Umra pilgrimages to apply to their *mahalla*.

### 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 1998 religion law, as amended in 2021, 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 at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan 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

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** Tashkent and Bukhara in April 2022
- **Country Update:** [Uzbekistan: Space for Reform](#)
- **Podcast:** [Uzbekistan: Gaps in Principles and Practice](#)

## Background

The government of Uzbekistan [estimates](#) the country's population at nearly 35 million people. Varying estimates assess that between 88 and 96 percent of people identify as Sunni Muslim; one percent identify as Shi'a Muslim; 2.2 percent identify as Russian Orthodox; and 1.6 percent identify as atheist, Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, or a member of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Uzbekistan's reform agenda related to religious freedom slowed in 2022 relative to previous years, although the government introduced additional legislative and other policy changes that alternately represented positive and negative developments for freedom of religion or belief. At the beginning of the year, Uzbekistan [signaled](#) its intent to abolish administrative fines for wearing religious attire in public after formally dropping the ban previously included in the country's religion law. Meanwhile, in June the government [adopted](#) a new law on advertising that prohibits "disrespect for traditional symbols of the country," including religious symbols. In the foreign policy sphere, in October Uzbekistan [voted against](#) the United Nations Human Rights Council holding a debate on China's human rights abuses perpetrated against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

## Fines, Detention, and Arrest of Muslims

Uzbekistan continued to repress Muslims whose independent religious practice violated the country's religious regulations and whose actions the government equated with "extremism" or "religious fundamentalism." For example, in several instances courts handed down fines to Muslims who held or permitted prayers in unauthorized locations such as businesses. In January, law enforcement [raided](#) the business of Farhod Rahmonov because he allowed his employees to pray at their place of work. The next month, a local Tashkent court fined him the equivalent of \$1,982 (21,600,000 So'm). In March, a court [jailed](#) Nosir Numanov for 15 days after he performed Friday prayers in a teahouse with a group of friends. The court also fined the teahouse owner approximately \$2,473 (27,000,000 So'm).

Likewise, authorities routinely cracked down on Muslims for illegal possession or distribution of religious texts. According to non-governmental organization Forum 18, in January and February police [arrested](#) as many as 24 men for keeping "extremist" religious content on their phones. In April, a judge [sentenced](#) Hasan Abdirahimov to four years in prison for "liking" and sharing religious materials online; he was already serving a previous sentence for listening to banned sermons. In May, Oybek Hamidov [received](#) five years in prison after he shared an audio file of a sermon. That same month, a court [sentenced](#) Alimardon Sultonov to seven years in a labor camp on numerous charges, including storage of materials with "religious extremism," despite claims he had experienced torture. His family has asserted he was arrested due to his criticism of state-appointed imams, among other public figures.

Women are also targeted, often in connection with their collective religious activity. Following a raid in the beginning of the

year, police [accused](#) four women of teaching Islam without official permission and fined each around \$124 (1,350,000 So'm). In January, officials [detained](#) another 12 women—who had gathered in a private home for religious readings—on charges of Hizb ut-Tahrir membership.

## Persistent Obstacles for Religious Minorities

Despite the passage of a revised religion law with a supposedly streamlined registration process in July 2021, few non-Muslim religious communities have managed to obtain the legally required registration. Only two Pentecostal churches and one Evangelical church received registration in June and September 2022, respectively, since the adoption of those amendments. Numerous religious communities that have sought registration in recent years remained unregistered by year's end.

Various communities reported to USCIRF that they were often required to inform the government of their activities, that they limited some practices in light of the continued bans on proselytism and missionary activity, and that some still could not import religious literature. In a few instances, police subjected Jehovah's Witnesses to interrogation, seized their possessions, threatened them with fines for sharing their beliefs, and in one case searched an individual's private home. Forum 18 [reported](#) that in early 2022, the Ministry of Internal Affairs ordered non-Muslim religious communities to install surveillance cameras in their places of worship, causing some members to cease attending services amid fears of possible retaliation.

## Key U.S. Policy

As in recent years, the United States and Uzbekistan took steps to build closer relations in 2022, an effort exemplified by the number of high-level visits paid by both countries to the other throughout the year. For example, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu traveled to Tashkent twice, in [May](#) and [November](#), to "advance our support for . . . freedom of religion or belief," among other priorities. In August, a congressional delegation that included Representative Trent Kelly (R-MS), cochair of the Uzbekistan Caucus, and Representative Darin LaHood (R-IL) also [visited](#) to discuss bilateral relations.

The U.S. government continued to prioritize religious freedom concerns in the country at all levels of engagement. In December, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov on the occasion of the two countries' annual Strategic Partnership Dialogue, where Secretary Blinken [highlighted](#) his appreciation for "the work being done on reforms, including on religious freedom." Similarly, visiting delegations from Uzbekistan regularly interacted with the U.S. Department of State's [Ambassador at Large](#) for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain and [Under Secretary](#) for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to discuss freedom of religion or belief. Then U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel N. Rosenblum frequently raised religious freedom issues in his [meetings](#) and other [public fora](#).