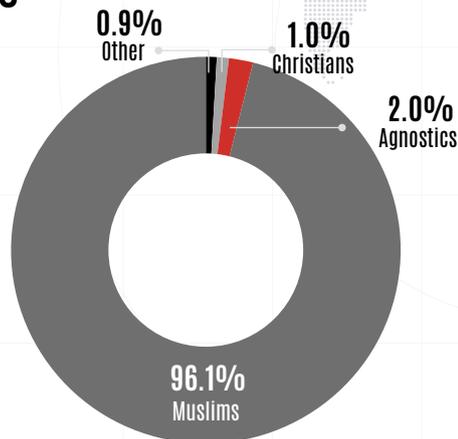




# UZBEKISTAN

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Although the Constitution of Uzbekistan<sup>1</sup> protects freedom of religion (Article 31) and provides for the non-interference of the state in the affairs of religious communities (Article 61), various regulations limit it being exercised effectively.

The main restrictions were introduced in 1998 with the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations.<sup>2</sup> The latter criminalises all unregistered religious activities, bans missionary activities and proselytising, and gives the authorities the power to approve the content, production, distribution and storage of religious publications. The law allows religious instruction only in government-sanctioned schools; any religious schooling in private homes is banned.<sup>3</sup> Religious groups are not allowed to operate outside the areas where they are registered and must seek government approval for all religious activities not included in formal worship.<sup>4</sup>

On 15th September 2020, a draft bill came before the Uzbek parliament (Supreme Assembly).<sup>5</sup> It was meant to align the country with international standards, but it has disappointed various religious groups since it keeps many

of the repressive features of the existing law. In fact, it includes censorship of religious materials and still requires religious groups to register (but the minimum number of believers required to set up a religious entity dropped from 100 to 50).<sup>6</sup>

The bill still bans missionary activities. It requires religious groups to notify the authorities of any event they plan to hold outside their normal premises, providing reasons, address, date, funding, expected participants, including foreigners, plus material that will be used. The bill bans private religious instruction, but does allow parents to teach their children the basics of ethics and religion.<sup>7</sup>

On the positive side, the bill removes the ban on wearing religious clothes in public and gives the decision to close a religious organisation to the courts rather than the administration.<sup>8</sup>

On 30th July 2018, the law “On countering extremism” was approved.<sup>9</sup> Many international organisations have criticised it because it is too broad and vague, and does not differentiate between nonviolent religious beliefs and ideologies that support violence. The new legislation could be used to unduly limit freedom of religion, expression and association.<sup>10</sup>

On a positive note, Interior Ministry spokesman Nulifar Turakhonova said that once coronavirus-related restrictions are lifted, minors will also be allowed to pray in mosques “in the company of fathers, brothers and other close relatives.”<sup>11</sup> This ends a ban introduced during the Karimov era.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Many steps have been taken in the past two years towards greater protection of religious freedom. Thousands of people have been removed from the “black lists” of religious extremists and some religious prisoners have been released or their sentences reduced. Raids against religious communities have gradually decreased, almost to zero.<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic Church was finally able to organise a summer camp for young Catholics in the Fergana Valley.<sup>13</sup> Currently the small Uzbek Catholic community is made up of about 3,000 members and is trying to register a sixth parish in Angren. During the countrywide lockdown caused by the coronavirus, the Catholic Church managed to carry out its apostolate using social media to keep in touch with its members by online broadcasting of Masses, prayers and Bible meetings.<sup>14</sup>

Another extremely positive development in terms of religious freedom is the registration of eight Christian churches in 2018 and 2019, eight years after the last time this happened.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite improvements, some groups continue to complain that the path towards registration remains an uphill battle. Among them are Jehovah’s Witnesses, who only have one recognised congregation in Chirchik. In September 2018, they tried to register seven more communities,<sup>16</sup> but their applications were rejected by local authorities (mahalla committees), whose approval is required. Different grounds were cited, such as a general disapproval of the religious group, to possible conflict and division within the community.<sup>17</sup>

Compared to previous years, police raids against religious groups decreased. The number dropped considerably in 2018, to practically zero in 2019.<sup>18</sup> This is likely a consequence of a directive issued in December 2018 by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev banning secret services and law enforcement agencies from conducting raids on religious communities.<sup>19</sup>

In September 2018, police raided a group of 40 Protestants who were meeting in the Tashkent region. Some of

the participants were charged hefty fines, in one case up to 20 times the minimum monthly wage, whilst four South Koreans were deported. A woman and a five-year-old girl had to seek hospital treatment because of the psychological pressure put on the faithful during interrogation, which lasted more than 12 hours.<sup>20</sup>

For the first time, soldiers took part in a raid in November 2018 against a Baptist community during Sunday worship in Yashnobod, a district of the capital Tashkent. 14 believers were forcibly taken to the local police station, registered and questioned for over nine hours.<sup>21</sup>

In November 2018, eight Protestants were subjected to extremely long interrogations after being detained in a police raid at a flat where they had gathered to read the Bible. Although duly approved and purchased from the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the religious literature was confiscated, along with a laptop and a personal computer.<sup>22</sup>

That same month, after a raid on a house in Urgench, the Protestants gathered there came under intense pressures. One of the people present, Lolakhon Umarova, was asked to publicly accuse the host and the pastor of holding “unauthorized religious meetings”.<sup>23</sup> When she refused, she was threatened with prosecution. Police also put pressure on Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov, who developed heart problems and had to be consequently hospitalised. This was not the first time that he was a target of police attention.<sup>24</sup>

In August 2018, the Chust City Court, in the Namangan region, sentenced Pastor Alisher and his assistant Abror to 10 days of administrative detention, after he and other confreres were caught at his home drinking tea. Six women present at the event were also found guilty of “illegal religious activity” and fined US\$120 each, a sum that represents more than five months’ salary at the minimum wage.<sup>25</sup>

Uzbekistan censors all printed and electronic religious literature, and the mere possession or use of religious material outside registered religious buildings is considered a violation of the Administrative Code.<sup>26</sup> On 25th December 2019, the Religious Affairs Committee updated its list of banned Islamic texts, over 200 books, including texts by Ahmadi Muslims and the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi.<sup>27</sup>

Baptists complained that some of their religious material was seized in July and November 2019. In July, airport authorities found German Baptist Viktor Klassen in possession of 44 copies of a book titled “Learn the Bible” in

Uzbek. After being questioned for several hours, he was fined US\$400 because the books were deemed intended for missionary work.<sup>28</sup>

Although the government has adopted a more relaxed approach to religious freedom, social pressures against conversion from Islam remain strong. In one case, on 9th February 2019, a man killed his wife because she had become a Christian. When he found her at the Tashkent airport trying to flee the country, he slit her throat.<sup>29</sup>

The authorities, like elsewhere in Central Asia, have struggled to find the right balance in their relationship with Islam, caught between the need to control the potential risk of radicalism and their own long-standing secularism.

The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (Muftiate) ensures that the country's various Islamic communities express the "proper" religiosity.<sup>30</sup>

Sunni Hanafi Islam is a key component to nation-building. President Mirziyoyev has sought to promote the revival and knowledge of Islam,<sup>31</sup> encouraging Qur'anic recitation competitions, allowing the azan, the call to prayer, to be heard again after ten years of silence, and expanding the offer of Qur'anic courses.<sup>32</sup>

Still, anti-religious rhetoric intensified in 2019, directed in particular at Islamic practices that promote a more conservative interpretation of Islam, deemed not in line with national traditions.<sup>33</sup> In August 2018, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov signed an order to impose a secular dress code, explicitly banning religious clothing or symbols in schools, including hijabs, yarmulkas and crosses.<sup>34</sup>

In September 2018, an unknown number of female students were expelled from the Tashkent International Islamic Academy for refusing to remove their hijabs. Some of the students tried unsuccessfully to get the decision overturned in court.<sup>35</sup> In April 2019, the government granted female students the right to wear a headscarf in the traditional Uzbek style, known as ikat.<sup>36</sup> In the wake of this controversy, various bloggers who criticised the government for its religious policies were arrested in August and September 2018; many were subsequently fined and sentenced to 15 days in jail.<sup>37</sup>

In September 2018, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan fired the imam of the Omina mosque in Tashkent, Fazliddin Parpiev, who in a video asked President Mirziyoyev to

push further his reforms and lift the ban on women wearing hijabs and men sporting beards;<sup>38</sup> in late 2018, Parpiev and his family left Uzbekistan for fear of retaliation.<sup>39</sup>

In August 2019, police arrested about 100 men in a Tashkent market, forcing them to shave their beards so that they would look like the picture in their biometric passports, this out of alleged "security concerns". A similar incident occurred in Namangan the following month.<sup>40</sup>

In September 2019, high-level government officials summoned imams from across the country to Tashkent for a meeting where they were instructed to discuss only general moral issues in Friday prayers, avoiding overtly religious issues.<sup>41</sup> Discussing Islamic issues, especially if outside authorised venues, has caused problems for some believers, accused of proselytising or even extremism.

In mid-August 2020, a Tashkent court sentenced eight Muslims who discussed their faith on social media to prison terms of up to 11 and a half years, on charges of downloading extremist sermons and other terrorist offences. In a previous case, on 13th March 2020, the same court sentenced four young men, who were trying to learn more about Islam, to up to six years in prison.<sup>42</sup>

Uzbekistan closely monitors Muslims who want to go to Makkah. To travel to the holy city, pilgrims must meet a number of personal, financial and religious requirements. The complexity of the process and the uncertainty over the outcome induce many would-be pilgrims to resort to bribes to facilitate their applications.<sup>43</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took over from Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan has developed a comprehensive plan of reforms to modernise state institutions and government policies, prioritising economic liberalisation and an end to regional isolationism.

In December 2018, the US State Department announced its decision to move Uzbekistan out of the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), to which it was added in 2006, to its Special Watch List.<sup>44</sup> The Economist chose Uzbekistan as the "Country of the Year"<sup>45</sup> for 2019 since "no other country travelled as far" in terms of reforms.<sup>46</sup>

Last year also saw genuine actions to expand religious freedom particularly steps such as the 2018 decision by

President Mirziyoyev banning the secret service and law enforcement from conducting raids on religious communities.<sup>47</sup> Although the Uzbek government is still very authoritarian and has yet to take significant steps to enable the development of a free civil society, there are some important signs of hope that it will increasingly recognise the

value of a more tolerant approach to religion, if for no other reason than to persuade international public opinion (and foreign investors) that Uzbekistan is profoundly changing.

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