

Uzbekistan



Persecution / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **94.6%**
- Agnostics : **3%**
- Christians : **1.2%**
- Others : **1.2%**

30,300,000

448,969 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Although freedom of belief is a constitutionally guaranteed right,^[1] various regulations limit its effective exercise.

The main restrictions were introduced with a 1998 law on freedom of conscience. This includes the obligation of religious groups to register, a ban on proselytism and religious education limited to religious schools officially recognised by the state.^[2] All religious literature must be approved by the Religious Affairs Commission; moreover, even in the case of texts that have passed the difficult process of state censorship, the official government line is that religious material can be kept only in places strictly set aside for worship and registered as such by the state, not in private homes^[3] Such a ban creates special problems for those communities that, in the absence of registration, do not have places to keep the sacred books.^[4]

Any violation of the regulations is severely punished under various articles of both the administrative and criminal code. In April 2016, the government increased the penalties for violations of the law on religion, introducing criminal proceedings even in the absence of any prior administrative sanction and increasing prison sentences for those involved in illegal religious organisations, especially if children younger than 16 are involved.^[5] Under the same provision, it is possible to impose a prison sentence of five to eight years to punish the dissemination of extremist religious ideas via the Internet and other means of mass communication.^[6]

The sudden death of President Islam Karimov in September 2016 after 27 in power brought an end to a premiership where there was no respect for human rights. His replacement, former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated his wish to build “a democratic state and a just society” with human rights to the fore.^[7] The United Nations now has access to the country for the very first time.^[8]

That said, regulation of religious life, even in the name of the fight against extremism, and the absence of other basic rights, such as the rights of association and expression, seriously restrict religious freedom.^[9]

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has listed Uzbekistan as a country of particular concern since 2006.^[10]

Incidents

Christians who do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church are treated with particular severity. Labelled “extremists”, or otherwise viewed as an alien and destabilising force in society, they have been the victims of controls, police raids, fines, brief detentions and beatings.^[11] Converts from Islam to Christianity suffer further pressure from their social and cultural milieus.^[12]

For the first time, in July 2017, Christians were granted access to the Bible in the Uzbek language, printed with state approval and distributed in 3,000 copies.^[13]

The authorities, however, have carried out countless raids in private homes, ending in most cases with the seizure of religious material, and with fines equal to 20 times (but sometimes 200 times) the minimum monthly wage^[14] for the illegal possession of religious material or taking part in unauthorised religious meetings. In some cases, even short-term prison sentences were imposed.

In Urgench, the local unregistered Baptist community has frequently been at the centre of police attention. Its pastor, Rev Stanislav Kim, was sentenced in August 2016 to two years of corrective labour, with 20 percent of his wages seized by the state. His crime was possession of unauthorised religious books.^[15] He was subsequently fined, together with fellow Baptist Oybek Rahimov, for amounts equal to 100 and 90 times the monthly minimum wage respectively.^[16] Two weeks after his flat was raided while a religious meeting was under way, Rev Ahmadjon Nazarov was followed on his way to Kungrad to visit fellow Baptists. Here, the police broke into the house where they were gathered, seized electronic devices and Christian texts and subjected all those present to forced questioning. One person was detained for 15 days for resisting a public officer and four others were fined.^[17]

The situation of religious believers in the north-western region of Karakalpakstan is particularly hard. With the exception of the mosques that belong to the state-controlled Musahedral and a Russian Orthodox parish, no other community has been allowed to exist.^[18] Here, in April 2017, four Protestants – Atamurat Tajimuratov, Salamat Biskeyev, Joldasbai Zhanabergenov and Marat Mambetaliyev – were sentenced to 15 days in prison for holding a religious meeting in a private home. Five more people present at the meeting were each given a fine worth 40 times the minimum monthly salary.^[19]

Jehovah's Witnesses have also been subjected at least 185 police raids between September 2016 and July 2017. These raids have resulted in 155 convictions, 148 fines and seven short-term detentions. During the interrogations, the police severely tortured 15 believers and some women were sexually assaulted.^[20]

A positive development was the release on parole on 8th November 2017 of the only non-Muslim prisoner of conscience, Baptist Tohar Haydarov, 33, who had been sentenced to ten years in prison in March 2010 for alleged drug offences.^[21]

Muslims, too, faced countless obstacles to their right freely to practise their faith. Up to and including 2016, state authorities continued to suppress public displays of religiosity, including women wearing the hijab and men with long bears.^[22] During Ramadan in 2016, the authorities in the capital Tashkent banned sharing the iftar meal in public places such as restaurants and mosques.^[23] They also used various methods to monitor closely the presence of minors during religious services, going so far as to put teachers and policemen in front of mosques to control comings and goings.^[24]

Some positive steps were taken after Mirziyoyev took power. They include, among others, the release of some political

prisoners and the removal of the names of more than 16,000 people from a security blacklist of 17,000 potential Muslim religious extremists.^[25] The approach to religious education also changed. No longer viewed with suspicion, it is now deemed an indispensable tool to prevent the spread of religious fanaticism^[26] among young people and a way to rehabilitate those who fall under the influence of extremist ideology.^[27] Some initiatives were undertaken to allow Muslims to fulfil their religious duties more easily, such as lifting restrictions on civil servants who want to participate in Friday prayers,^[28] introducing the Halal standard for food^[29] and re-establishing for the first time since 2005 the azan (call to prayer).^[30]

Despite these positive developments, thousands of Muslims, who have practised their religion outside strict state controls, remain in prison, sentenced to long prison terms on vague charges of extremism or anti-constitutional activity.^[31]

Muslims found in possession of religious material on mobile phones or other electronic devices received prison sentences, heavy ones in some cases.^[32] This is what happened, for example, to two cousins, Jonibek Turdiboyev and Mansurkhon Akhmedov, sentenced in June 2016 to five years in prison for possession of an audio disk with Muslim sermons on it,^[33] as well as Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev, a Russian citizen, sentenced in August 2016 to six years in prison for having verses of the Qur'an on his phone.^[34]

Conducting religious activities outside the places specifically designated for worship has caused serious problems for some Muslims. In June 2016, following a police raid during a religious meeting in a house in the Bukhara region, four Sufi Muslims were sentenced to four years in prison; 11 more were given fines worth 4,000,000 Uzbekistani Soms (UZS) for participating in the activities of an illegal religious group.^[35] In May 2017, a Tashkent court imposed prison sentences of five to six years on 11 Muslims, accused of meeting in private homes to discuss religious matters and listening to forbidden sermons.^[36]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Uzbekistan's new government has taken tentative yet encouraging steps towards greater democratic openness. It will take time, however, before we can see whether these changes are just window dressing to gain domestic legitimacy and attract foreign investors – indispensable to revive the country's economic fortunes – or a real attempt to change direction towards a more open democracy, respectful of human rights in general and freedom of religion in particular.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Cf Articles 31 and 6, Uzbekistan's Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2011, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Uzbekistan_2011.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Uzbekistan_2011.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 10th April 2018).

[2] "Uzbekistan Chapter", 2017 Annual Report, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Uzbekistan.2017.pdf>, (accessed 2nd May 2018).

[3] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: No books allowed, Bible ordered destroyed", Forum 18, 13th December 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2341, (accessed 15th April 2018).

[4] Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan, "UZBEKISTAN: Religious freedom survey, September 2017", Forum 18, 11th September 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314, (accessed 15th April 2018).

[5] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Harshened Criminal and Administrative Code punishments", Forum 18, 15th June 2016, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2189, (accessed 15th April 2018).

- [6] "Religious extremism propaganda in media and Internet to be punished by sentence of up to eight years in Uzbekistan", Interfax Religion, 27th April 2016, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=12914>, (accessed 15th April 2018).
- [7] Tom Michael, "Panel cautiously optimistic on improving human rights in Uzbekistan", The Astana Times, 29th September 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/09/panel-cautiously-optimistic-on-improving-human-rights-in-uzbekistan/>, (accessed 14th April 2018).
- [8] "UN Human Rights Chief on First Visit To Uzbekistan", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11th May 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/un-human-rights-chief-uzbekistan/28480074.html>, (accessed 13th April 2018); and "UN Expert Tells Uzbekistan Religions 'Not A Threat'", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12th October 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbelistan-freedom-religion-shaheed-un/28790512.html>, (accessed 13th April 2018).
- [9] "UN Expert Tells Uzbekistan Religions 'Not A Threat'", op. cit.
- [10] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, op. cit.
- [11] Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan, op. cit.
- [12] "Uzbekistan", World Watch List 2018, Open Doors, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/uzbekistan/>, (accessed 3rd May 2018).
- [13] Barnaba's Fund, Daily Prayer, 1th December 2017, <https://www.barnabasfund.org/au/daily-prayer/Monday-11-December-2017>, (accessed 12th April 2018).
- [14] Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan, op. cit. The monthly wage is 130,240 soms (about €40, US\$ 45). See Musfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Hardened Criminal and Administrative Code punishments", op. cit.
- [15] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Punished for religious books at home", Forum 18, 29th September 2016, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2219, (accessed 15th April 2018).
- [16] Ibid., "UZBEKISTAN: Officials bully child, "show trial", Forum 18, 19th March 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2361, (accessed 15th April 2018).
- [17] Ibid., "UZBEKISTAN: Surveillance, raids, Bible destruction, jailing, torture", Forum 18, 19th October 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326, (accessed 15th April 2018).
- [18] Mushfig Bayram e John Kinahan, op. cit.
- [19] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Short prison terms, fines after", Forum 18, 7th August 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304, (accessed 15th April 2018).
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[24] Ibid.

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[28] Mashrab Fozil, op. cit.

[29] Ibid.

[30] "Uzbekistan Allows Call to Prayer on Loudspeakers", Eurasianet, 7th November 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-allows-call-to-prayer-on-loudspeakers>, (accessed 23rd April 2018).

[31] Mushfig Bayram e John Kinahan, op. cit.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Torture, prison for "illegal" religious materials", Forum 18, 19 December 201, http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2241, (accessed 4th April 2018).

[35] Mushfig Bayram and Kinahan John, op. cit.

[36] Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: Muslims' long prison terms, Protestants' short terms", Forum 18, 20th June 2017, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2288, (accessed 12th April 2018).