

uzbekistan

PERSECUTION 101

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Tight government control of religion and heavy restrictions on civil society and the free flow of information has increasingly repressed religious freedom in this Central Asian country

Central to Christianity, along with many other religious traditions, is the practice of sharing one's faith. For many, proselytization is key to faithful practice and—especially for religious minorities—essential to ensure the continued survival of one's faith in hostile environments. Unfortunately, Uzbekistan has chosen to crack down on proselytization and perpetuate a system that refuses people of faith access to this basic right. All religious communication is tightly controlled—from religious education the printing and distribution of materials touching on religion, little can be said on religion without government approval.

QUICK FACTS



Type of Government
Presidential
Republic

Head of Government
President Shavkat
Mirziyoyev

Total Population
Approx. 36.52 million

Religious Demography
97.56% Muslim - 35.12 mil
2.28% Eastern Orthodox
0.16% Other - 584,000

Ethnic Demography
83.8% Uzbek
4.8% Tajik
2.5% Kazakh
2.3% Russian
4.6% Other

TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Regulation of Religious Affairs

The government of Uzbekistan heavily regulates the internal affairs of religious groups in the country.

Legal Restrictions

The law creates narrow restrictions for religious life, with groups required to register and unregistered religious activity a criminal offense.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has long been considered among the least democratic countries in the world. Ruled by an authoritarian president who maintains near-complete control over the legislature and judiciary, the Uzbek legal system is one largely created by decree and with little consideration to human rights or democratic freedoms.

There is very little resistance to President Mirziyoyev's rule—with independent media essentially snuffed out and no second political party to challenge his rule, Mirziyoyev has proven himself uninterested in pursuing the many reforms he promised when running for election in 2016. In 2023, he successfully engineered an extension to his rule by introducing a constitutional referendum to reset the clock on his first two terms, which will allow him to rule until at least 2040.

In this context, it is unsurprising that religion is viewed with suspicion by the Uzbek legal system. All religious groups must apply for government approval to engage in any activities—unregistered religious activity is a crime. While the government does register both Muslim and non-Muslim groups, many groups face issues registering.



Registered groups face an array of restrictions, and are limited to a certain geographic area of operation—any work outside that area is illegal and requires a separate registration.
The U.S. Department of State reported in a report published in 2024 that "organizing or participating in an [unregistered] religious group is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison," while simply inviting someone to join such a group is punishable by up to three years in prison.

The law also criminalizes vaguely defined religious extremism, with participation in such prohibited groups carrying punishments of up to twenty years imprisonment.
The police are known to torture people of faith while enforcing the county's heavy restrictions on religion. In 2023, the police raided two separate Baptist churches celebrating Easter, detaining several members and applying electrical shocks to others, according to a report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Other reports of torture under detention exist, with Freedom House describing the use of torture as a "persistent problem" across the country.

The printing, storage, and distribution of religious literature is heavily restricted in Uzbekistan, with the government retaining the right to censor religious material. This significantly impacts church and missionary activity, which often includes printed literature to share about their faith.

Proselytization itself—even aside from printed literature—is barred outright under the 2021 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Anyone caught sharing their faith or otherwise engaged in missionary activity face up to three years in prison for their crime. This law is regularly enforced, casting a pall over an activity that is basic to many religions.
As Uzbekistan continues to tighten the net around religious practice, it behooves the international community to raise the issue of religious freedom with the Uzbek government. Whether prisoners of conscience subject to torture or lay persons unable to speak about their faith with their neighbors, religious Uzbeks face a bevy of legal restrictions on religion that fly in the face of international human rights law and should be reformed.

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Uzbekistan Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Uzbekistan Chapter



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