

Uzbekistan, a country of particular concern, according to the US

HRWF (09.02.2018) - In accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the Secretary of State annually designates governments that have engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom as "Countries of Particular Concern". Uzbekistan was re-designated as one of them, along with Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as Countries of Particular Concern. The Secretary of State also placed Pakistan on a Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan protested.

At the onset of this year, Uzbekistan is known to keep many Muslims in jail, as the 2018 Database of FORB Prisoners of Human Rights Without Frontiers clearly shows (<http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Uzbekistan-FBL-2018.pdf>).

Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian countries, is vulnerable to the influence of an Islam imported by missionaries from the Arabic Peninsula and is beginning to try to preserve its historical Muslim identity by developing education in Islamic Studies, domestic training of Uzbek theologians and religious education of young people.

Uzbekistan opens Islamic Studies Academy

Eurasianet (19.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Ha2jeO> - The first specialized academy of higher learning in Uzbekistan devoted exclusively to Islamic studies has been registered by the Justice Ministry in seemingly more evidence of a growing embrace of religious values.

The government's religious affairs committee reported on its website on January 17 that the Justice Ministry officials formally handed credentials to the chairman of the state-sanctioned Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan, grand mufti Usman Khan Alimov, and the rector of what is to be dubbed the Islamic Academy, Nematulla Ibragimov.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in mid-December signed off on the legislation required for the creation of the academy, which is being founded under the auspices of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan.

Ibragimov's background is Arabic studies. He has formerly worked at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies.

The Islamic Academy will offer two-year undergraduate degrees and three-year doctoral courses. Uzbek citizens and foreigners alike can apply. The main disciplines will be Koranic studies, Islamic law, study of the hadiths - the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammed - and the interpretation of Islamic texts.

The academy has already enrolled 16 undergraduates for its 2018-2019 academic year. Ravshan Nazarov, a historian, said he believes that Uzbekistan is sorely lacking in well-trained theologians and that the Islamic Academy would provide a timely remedy.

The fulsome praise coming the religious affairs committee, which has described the academy as a "great gift for believers in our country," suggests that instruction will be hewing very closely to the state-mandated orthodoxy, however.

Yakub Bukharbayev, an imam and a teacher at the Islamic Institute in Tashkent, one of two institutions in Uzbekistan authorized to train clerics, said that the country's archives contain tens of thousands of Islamic manuscripts that need to be studied. Graduates of the Islamic Academy can be enlisted into pursuing that goal, he said.

"Before in Uzbekistan we didn't even offer scientific degrees in Islamic studies. We have a native of Bukhara, [9th century Islamic scholar] Imam al-Bukhari, who is the author of hadiths. And we have the works of another great fellow countryman, a scholar of the hadiths and Islamic jurist, Imam at-Termezi, who has also not been sufficiently studied," Bukharbayev said.

Islamic education is, after many years of neglect under the late President Islam Karimov, who regarded devout Muslims with intense suspicion, beginning to earn more attention from the Uzbek authorities.

In May, the country's oldest madrassa, the 16th century Mir-i Arab in Bukhara, was upgraded to a higher education institution - from a college for upper secondary education - becoming the second establishment of its type in Uzbekistan, along with the Islamic Institute in Tashkent.

Mir-i Arab was the only madrassa allowed to operate in Soviet times and turned out many students who would go on to become major figures in their own regions. They included the chairman of the Council of muftis of Russia, Ravil Gainutdin, the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus, Allahshukur Pashazadeh, and even the former head of the Chechen Republic, Ahmad Kadyrov, father of the current incumbent, Ramzan Kadyrov.

In addition to the two institutions of Islamic higher learning, Uzbekistan has nine Islamic high schools, which caters to students in their late teens.

There is also the Tashkent Islamic University, which was founded in 1999 as the first specifically Islamic university in Central Asia. That university is not exclusively focused on religious studies, however, and provides courses on secular subjects, including natural sciences and economics.

Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan disagrees with U.S. State Dept analysis of religious freedom in republic

Interfax (15.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2H8TF0a> - United States Department of State's inclusion of Uzbekistan in the list of countries where violations of freedom of religion occur is based on biased information and old stereotypes, the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan said.

The State Department announced on January 4 that Uzbekistan is among the countries where "egregious violations of religious freedom" occur.

"The U.S. Department of State report on Uzbekistan is definitely based on biased information, and it contradicts the real situation," the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan said in a statement released on Monday.

Serious changes occurred in Uzbekistan's religious affairs in 2017, the statement said. "A lot of work was done to resolve the accumulated problems. The president did a lot of work to maintain Islamic values, promote religious education, and spread our religion," the directorate said.

The Center for Islamic Civilizations and international research centers named after Imam Bukhari and Imam Tirmidhi were created in the country, the directorate said. The number

of Islamic educational establishments reached 11. A higher religious school was created in Bukhara. A three-year special extramural department was opened at the Tashkent Islamic Institute, Koran study groups formed, and the quotas for Muslim educational establishments were increased by 150%.

According to the Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan, 55 mosques were renovated, and 15 new mosques were built. The hadj pilgrim quota was increased from 5,200 to 7,200, and the quota for umrah (small pilgrimage) was increased from 6,000 to 10,000.

On the president's initiative, over 16,000 people were removed from lists of members of various marginal religious groups in 2017, the directorate said.

"Much was done to study the problems and goals of these citizens, to prevent discrimination against them, to provide them with comprehensive support and help them return to life in society," it said.

According to official information, 94% of Uzbekistan's population is Muslim, 3.5% of its citizens are Orthodox Christians, and the rest belong to other religions.

Over 2,220 religious organizations of 16 religions are registered in the country, including more than 2,000 Muslim and 157 Christian organizations, eight Jewish communities, six Baha'i communities, a Society for Krishna Consciousness, a Buddhist temple, and an interreligious Bible Society.

FoRB Prisoners Database of Human Rights Without Frontiers

In its 2018 Database of FORB Prisoners, Human Rights Without Frontiers is documenting 38 cases of Sunni Muslims, 4 Sufi leaders and 2 Said Nursi followers currently in prison, according to various sources such as Forum18, ECOI, Refworld and Worldwide Religious News.

Sunni Muslims currently in prison have been accused of alleged separatism, extremism, planning to overthrow the government and/or belonging to a banned Islamist movement. They are not known to have committed acts of violence.

Followers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi, who lived and died in the 19th - 20th century, were also imprisoned on the alleged ground that Nursi's works are banned for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers, which is not the case.

The four Sufi leaders arrested in 2016 were sentenced to prison terms because their religious group has not been registered by the state and is therefore deemed illegal.

No Christian (Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic) and no Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison at the beginning of this year (<http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Uzbekistan-FBL-2018.pdf>).