

World Watch Research

# Uzbekistan: Background Information

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## Contents

Copyright and sources .....	1
Map of country .....	2
Recent history .....	2
Political and legal landscape .....	3
Religious landscape.....	7
Economic landscape.....	9
Social and cultural landscape.....	10
Technological landscape .....	12
Security situation .....	14
Christian origins .....	15
Church spectrum today.....	16
Further useful reports.....	16
External Links .....	17

## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Uzbekistan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
35,674,000	406,000	1.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

On 20 June 1990, Uzbekistan declared its state sovereignty and on 31 August 1991 its independence. 1 September was proclaimed National Independence Day. Presidential elections were held for the first time in Uzbekistan on 29 December 1991 and Islam Karimov was elected as the first president of Uzbekistan. He stayed in power until his death on 2 September 2016. Under Karimov religious freedom was increasingly restricted.

In the presidential elections on 4 December 2016, Uzbekistan's interim president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, became the second president of Uzbekistan. While the new government opened up towards its neighbors and Russia, the restrictions on religious freedom hardly changed.

Uzbekistan had been designated as a Country of Particular Concern by the US Secretary of State from 2006-2017 and was moved in November 2018 to the Special Watch List category after the Secretary determined that the government had made substantial progress in improving respect for religious freedom. That progress was achieved is only partially true. Officially registered churches like the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the registered Baptists have indeed noted slight improvements. But for other Christians, especially for Christians with a Muslim background, the

situation has not changed significantly; they have continued to be targets for raids, arrests and oppression.

Since President Mirziyoyev became president in December 2016, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has changed in many respects. It contacted China in 2019 for [economic cooperation](#) (Jamestown Foundation, 4 September 2019). On 6 March 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan approved the decision to apply for [observer status](#) with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Jamestown Foundation, 23 March 2020). The move brought to a close months of speculation about whether Tashkent would end the previous president's policy of eschewing all Moscow-led integration processes.

On 17 March 2022, Uzbek Foreign Minister [Abdulaziz Komilov](#) said in public that his country did not recognize the pro-Russian separatist-controlled districts in Ukraine's Donbas, known as the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics," and called for a "peaceful solution" to end Russia's unprovoked attack against Ukraine (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/FL, 17 March 2022). However, on 27 April 2022, Uzbek presidential spokesman Sherzod Asadov reported that Komilov had [left the post of foreign minister](#). There is no doubt that this was caused by his lack of 'pro-Russia' wording on 17 March (RFE/RL, 28 April 2022): "On March 29, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry said Komilov had not been seen in public for more than a week because he was being treated for an unspecified 'chronic illness' in Tashkent before being taken to an unspecified foreign country for further treatment."

In January 2024 President Mirziyoyev visited China to "develop a new long-term agenda" for the two countries that will last for "decades." The Uzbek delegation aimed to court investment and agree with their counterparts on how to bring many previously signed deals to fruition, from developing green energy projects to cooperation in science and boosting tourism between China and Uzbekistan (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 January 2024](#)).

## Political and legal landscape

Uzbekistan has a constitution and parliament, but in fact all power lies in the hands of the president. All opposition movements and independent media are essentially banned.

In the decades of President Karimov's leadership (1991-2016), Uzbekistan withdrew from a number of regional bodies, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Economic Cooperation Organization. Uzbekistan was wary of too much influence from Russia, but the developments in Ukraine since 2014 have made the regime realize that it cannot act as independently as it would like to. Russia wrote off a large amount of Uzbekistan's debt in December 2014, but such actions are, of course, always tied to Russian expectations.

Parliamentary elections were held on 22 December 2019 under the slogan "[New Uzbekistan, New Elections](#)" (RFE/RL - 23 December 2019). The Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (LDPU) emerged as winner but observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) noted "serious irregularities" amid changes allowing "greater tolerance of independent voices". The elections were the first since Shavkat Mirziyoev was elected president in December 2016.

After the death of Islam Karimov and the end of his nearly three decades of authoritarian leadership, President Mirziyoev announced reforms which created a new political, social and economic climate both in the country and in the region. According to [BTI 2022 Country Report/Uzbekistan](#), from 2017 to

2020, a large number of laws and presidential decrees were adopted and implemented to a varying degree of success, indicating a breakthrough in domestic and foreign policy. One of the main strategic documents that shed light on the government's future direction was the "[Action strategy on five priority areas of development](#) of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017 to 2021", which was adopted in February 2017 (Tashkent Times, 8 February 2017). It prioritized the following five areas:

- 1) Improving the system of state and public construction;
- 2) Ensuring the rule of law and further reforms of the legal system;
- 3) Economic development and liberalization;
- 4) Social development; ensuring security, interethnic cohesion and religious tolerance;
- 5) Implementing a balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy.

### **Referendum and snap elections in 2023**

On 30 April 2023, a [referendum](#) was held about a new constitution that would allow President Shavkat Mirziyoev to run for a third term in office (RFE/RL, 10 March 2023). In May 2023, [Uzbek officials](#) confirmed that the voting public had approved a series of constitutional amendments which, among other things, paved the way for President Mirziyoev to stay in office until 2040 (RFE/RL, 1 May 2023). The referendum did not bring any [major political reforms](#) (CACI, 14 June 2023). On 8 May 2023, President Mirziyoev [announced](#) that an early presidential election would be held (RFE/RL, 8 May 2023). The snap election took place on 9 July 2023 and it was no surprise when the incumbent president was [re-elected](#) for a seven-year term with 87.1% of the vote (Al-Jazeera, 10 July 2023).

### **The 1992 Constitution and its 2023 revision**

The 1992 Constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. A religious freedom "roadmap" approved by parliament in 2018 to implement all 12 of the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur on Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed, simplified rules for registering religious organizations and their reporting requirements, but the underlying law on religion continued to make it difficult for religious groups to register.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Uzbekistan](#)):

- “An April (2023) revision to the constitution defines the country as a 'secular state'. The constitution establishes a separation between the state and religious organizations and bars the interference of the state in the activities of religious organizations. The law on liberty of conscience and religious organizations provides for the right of citizens to choose their faith or not to profess a faith, and it bars coercion and proselytization and missionary work. The law forbids coercing minors to be involved in religious organizations against their or their parents' will. It forbids the use of religion to overthrow or undermine the state, infringe on the rights of others, incite hatred, or encroach on 'the health and morals of citizens'. The law prohibits the creation of religiously based political parties as well as including religious materials in the public-school curriculum.”
- “The 2021 law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (religion law) further details the scope of, and limitations on, the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The religion law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, distribution and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and

other missionary activities. This law provides a registration process for religious organizations that allows online applications. It requires an organization to have 50 founding members to register and stipulates all founding members must live in one district or city. It prohibits private religious education.”

- “Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.”
- “According to the 2021 religion law, all religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice; without registration, a group may not carry out any activities. The law lists a series of requirements, including having a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units for central registration; presenting a membership list of at least 50 citizens who are 18 or older; and providing a charter in Uzbek with a legal, physical address to the local Ministry of Justice branch.”
- “The law limits the operations of a registered group to those geographic areas where it is registered. Even if it is registered in one area, a religious group may not expand to another area until it completes the registration process there. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy.”
- “The CRA oversees registered religious activity. The Council for Confessions under the CRA includes ex officio representatives from 16 registered religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, whom the government appoints to serve as consultants. The council discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion. The CRA also monitors internet discussion of religion and reports materials it deems extremist to law enforcement, and it publishes and regularly updates a list of websites and social media accounts the Supreme Court deems to be extremist and thus prohibited to access.”

On [22 September 2023, USCIRF](#) reported:

- “The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply troubled by reports indicating that the government of Uzbekistan is backsliding on steps it had taken in recent years to improve religious freedom conditions in the country. Within the last week, Uzbek officials have allegedly conducted raids against religious individuals, fined them, and subjected many to brief sentences of administrative arrest. Authorities have also reportedly forced Muslim men to shave their beards while school administrators have pressured schoolgirls to either remove their hijabs or wear them differently.”

Amendments to the Criminal and Administrative Codes to increase punishments related to religion were adopted by both chambers of parliament in September 2023 and await presidential signature. The amendments appear to increase punishment for the vaguely-worded "propaganda of superiority" based on religion, as well as for individuals wearing clothes in line with their religious beliefs. The text was not published in advance to allow public scrutiny and comment (Source: [Forum 18, 6 October 2023](#)).

Human Rights Watch stated in 'Uzbekistan: [Backsliding on Religious Freedom Promises – 24 May 2023](#)':

- “The Uzbek government is restricting religious freedom despite promises to eliminate restrictions.”

- “The Uzbekistan authorities still consider legitimate expression of religious sentiment or belief "extremism," and peaceful religious communities and individuals are paying the price.”
- “Uzbek authorities should ensure that rights-violating provisions related to freedom of religion in the Criminal Code and in the 2021 religion law are amended in line with international human rights law.”

Freedom of religion and belief, with interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, thus remain severely restricted in Uzbekistan. Forum 18's survey analysis of [freedom of religion and belief](#) (released on 26 November 2021) documents among other issues:

- “a harsh 2021 Religion Law, adopted in secrecy and against recommendations to bring the Law into line with the regime's legally binding international human rights obligations from the UN, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The Law also ignores multiple recommendations from the people the unelected regime rules to stop making the exercise of freedom of religion and belief illegal;”
- “proposals to adopt a new Criminal Code from 2022, which in the only draft so far released also continues to make the exercise of human rights a crime;”
- “attempts to impose complete state control of all expressions of Islam, including banning all public manifestations of Islam outside the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate), the targeting for surveillance of devout Muslims, barring Shias from opening more mosques, barring under-18-year-olds from attending mosques, especially during Ramadan, with the use of police agent provocateurs jailing and torturing Muslim men who meet informally to discuss Islam and learn to pray, and corruption and restrictions on the haj pilgrimage;”
- “banning religious teaching without state permission, and severe restrictions on the teaching which the state might permit;”
- “the imposition of state censorship of all religious texts, with wide-ranging literature bans and bans on public discussion of religious topics;”
- “a complex and arbitrary process of applying for state registration or permission for religious communities to exist, which provides multiple opportunities for officials to seek bribes and appears designed to discourage applications;”
- “jailing and torturing prisoners of conscience whose only crime is to exercise their freedom of religion and belief.”

### **Gender perspective**

Additionally, there remain significant legal gaps that serve to disadvantage women and girls. In particular, marriage is a place where violent repression of women takes place, especially of female converts. Whilst rape is outlawed in the Criminal code (Art 118), there is no provision to protect victims from marital rape. While the Law on Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence was introduced in 2019, it failed to fully criminalize domestic violence. While more shelters have reportedly been built in recent years for victims of domestic violence, a media report found that many such centers ‘did not exist’ or ‘did not function’ as intended ([Human Rights Watch 2022 Uzbekistan country chapter; CEDAW, 2022](#)). Access to justice for women and girls was highlighted as a particular concern in a recent [2022 CEDAW Periodic Report](#).

There remains a significant divergence between the law and customary practice, with women often disadvantaged in divorce, custody and inheritance proceedings. Child marriage also remains an ongoing practice, despite being illegal, with 3% of girls marrying before the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Uzbekistan](#), accessed 24 June 2024).

Military service is officially mandatory in Uzbekistan, but the army is of a sufficient size that not all young men need to be enlisted. Military service is understood to be less severe than in neighboring countries, although Christian men have faced hostile treatment and harassment within this context ([World Population Review, 2022](#)).

## Religious landscape

Uzbekistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	406,000	1.1
Muslim	33,837,000	94.9
Hindu	980	0.0
Buddhist	37,400	0.1
Ethnic religionist	54,200	0.2
Jewish	3,800	0.0
Bahai	1,100	0.0
Atheist	309,000	0.9
Agnostic	1,021,000	2.9
Other	2,180	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), 94.9% of the population of Uzbekistan is (predominantly Sunni) Muslim. However, it would be wrong to call Uzbekistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and keeps Islam under tight control, with citizens following Islamic culture rather than adhering strictly to Islamic teachings.

People in Uzbekistan still revere their glorious Islamic past when the universities and madrassas of Samarkand and Bukhara were famous for their scientific research and attracted people from all over the world. Their three Muslim kingdoms (khanates) once controlled huge tracts of Central Asia (a much greater geographical area than the present Uzbekistan).



The 3.7% agnostic and atheist part of the population is the result of 70 years of atheist propaganda by the Soviet authorities.

According to WCD, Christians form 1.1% of the Uzbek population. Evangelistic activities by Protestant Christians in Uzbekistan are not appreciated and immediately draw the attention of the authorities. Muslims oppose such activities as well. Converts from Islam face opposition from their families, friends and communities. The pressure is highest in the region of Uzbekistan that is known for its most conservative Muslim population - the Fergana Valley. The small Christian minority is weak due to much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. There are few exceptions to this and it plays into the hands of the government.

Regime officials have repeatedly used a variety of tactics to block state registration applications from both Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities. Religious communities without state registration are - against international human rights law - banned from exercising freedom of religion or belief. (Source: [Forum 18, 26 April 2024](#)).

According to [USCIRF 2024 Uzbekistan Chapter](#), USCIRF classified Uzbekistan as 'recommended for Special Watch List' and states:

- “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended negatively as the government continued to tightly control all aspects of religious practice and subject Muslims to particularly harsh punishments for their religious activities and expression. The country's [2021] Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations mandated that religious communities obtain registration to legally engage in worship and other religious activities, required that a government agency review and approve religious literature and related materials, and prohibited missionary activity and the private teaching of religion. During the year, the government passed amendments to the administrative code that penalize the 'propaganda' of superiority on religious grounds and wearing clothes that prevent a person's identification.”
- “The government increasingly detained, arrested, fined, and sentenced Muslims to prison for the illegal dissemination of religious materials or participation in illegal religious organizations. Authorities particularly targeted young men who had downloaded or shared songs with alleged 'religious extremist' content. Officials with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service engaged in transnational repression by attempting to forcibly or coercively return citizens living abroad to Uzbekistan, where they faced criminal extremism charges.”
- “Religious minorities continued to encounter significant obstacles in their ability to practice their religion or beliefs. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in many regions remained unable to register and therefore legally worship due to a burdensome and discriminatory registration process. In February, customs officials detained a Baptist foreign national who attempted to cross the border with numerous unauthorized religious books that they seized for review. In April [2023], police raided two Baptist churches meeting for Easter service, detained several church members, and beat and applied electric shocks to other worshippers.”

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Uzbekistan](#)):

- “According to the most recent government figures, there were 2,356 religious organizations officially registered in the country, 197 of which were non-Muslim. The government reported it registered 13 Muslim organizations and one Christian organization during the year.”

- “Activists and human rights groups continued to report sporadic social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam to another religion. Religious community members said ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity at times risked harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma because of conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials and that Muslims in the community forced them to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or allowed burials only with Islamic religious rites. Individuals who reported these incidents declined to share their names or even the details of their cases for fear of retaliation.”
- “The law also criminalizes the unauthorized facilitation of children's and youth religious meetings as well as literary and other religion-based study groups not related to worship.”

In Uzbekistan, Article 184 of the Administrative Code provides that Uzbek citizens who appear in public with religious attire are subject to a fine "five to ten times the minimum wage" or "administrative arrest for up to fifteen days." Only government recognized ministers of religious organizations are exempted from this prohibition. (Source: [USCIRF, 20 November 2023](#))

## Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Uzbekistan data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$):** 90.89 (2023 billion)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 6.0% (2023)
- **Inflation, consumer prices (annual %):** 11.4 (2022)
- **Unemployment (% of total labor force - modeled ILO estimate):** 4.5 (2023)
- **Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP / % of population):** 2.3 (2022)

Over the last years, the Uzbek economy has been characterized by high levels of unemployment, poverty and inflation. As it is impossible to provide jobs for all people within Uzbekistan itself, there is considerable labor migration - around seven or eight million male Uzbek citizens are working abroad, mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan. The money they send home (some US \$5.67 billion per year) make up 16.3% of Uzbekistan's annual income. Migrant workers are vulnerable but there are also positive effects, since Uzbeks working abroad are much more open to outreach by Christians.

The Uzbek economy is dependent on the growth of cotton. Virtually everything is sacrificed to increase the yield of this crop. Teachers, students, civil servants, schoolchildren, prisoners and many others are forced to help bring in the harvest each year. The use of pesticides is enormous and has affected public health negatively. Water is being drained from the two major rivers (Amy Darya and Syr Darya) to irrigate the cotton fields in such quantities that there are regular water shortages which has led to a constant sinking of Aral Sea water levels.

Uzbekistan holds a strategic position in the East-West connection between China and the West. A new version of the Silk Road is under construction, which is being pushed by both China and Turkey. This means that there are huge construction activities in progress building highways for trucks and tracks for trains.

The 2020 COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the Uzbek economy. Many migrant workers abroad lost their jobs. More than a [thousand](#) Uzbeks were stranded in Kazakhstan's southern region

of Turkistan because they were unable to travel back home due to travel restrictions (RFE/RL, 3 July 2020).

In November 2022 Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed creating a "gas union" with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to establish a mechanism to ship natural gas between the three countries and to other nations, including China ([RFE/RL, 29 November 2022](#)). Uzbekistan politely rejected the proposal days later ([RFE/RL, 8 December 2022](#)).

On 19 April 2023, [AsiaNews](#) reported that hundreds of entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan who had received generous credits from the state after the liberalization of the currency market in 2017 were now finding themselves on the brink of bankruptcy. After receiving hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars to build greenhouses, thermal plants and develop intensive crops according to government plans, the liabilities suddenly doubled and tripled. Many companies are declaring bankruptcy, and lawsuits for financial malfeasance are being filed against them. Some owners are already in jail, and many are busy defending themselves in court. According to many entrepreneurs, the state is trying to 'break the bones' of those who would like to try to fall in line, and is using the weapon of the judiciary to defend the interests of central power.

### Gender perspective

Christians in Uzbekistan have been suffering from the same economic problems as the rest of the population, for instance, high unemployment and poverty. Women are on balance more economically vulnerable in Uzbekistan due to lower education and employment rates; according to [Trading Economics](#), 39.4% of the total labor force was female in 2021. Making it additionally challenging for women and girls to be economically dependent, patrilineal inheritance practices continue despite the right to equal inheritance being guaranteed in law ([Article 36 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan](#)). As noted in a [World Bank](#) news feature on 8 March 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic added additional challenges for the economic security of women in Uzbekistan.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Uzbekistan](#) (accessed 2 May 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 est.).
- **Main languages:** Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%.
- **Urban population:** 50.5 % of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 100% (male: 100%, female: 100%) (2019)

According to UNDP [Human Development Report Uzbekistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.727 (0.691 for females; 0.748 for males), ranking 106 (2022)
- **Total population:** 34.6 million (2022).
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 71.7 years (74.3 for females; 69.0 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.0 (12.0 for girls; 12.0 for boys) The gender gap in relation to school enrolment rates has closed over the past decade, although girls remain less likely to attend secondary school or tertiary education due to socio-cultural and socio-economic barriers ([The Borgen Project, 7 September 2018](#)).

- **Gender inequality index:** 0.242 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate:** Female: 39.9; Male: 73.1 (2022)

Corruption is endemic at all levels of administration and government. The power groups within the regime have no interest in losing the opportunity of making money. The changes in government since December 2016 do not seem to have brought any action against this. In late 2023, the Uzbek government launched a major campaign against street gangs. Dozens of people are still in detention following what was referred to as the "40 days of fire" between November and December 2023; among those in custody are prominent representatives of the Uzbek criminal world such as the 70-year-old Salim Abduvaliev, known throughout the post-Soviet world as "Salimbay" or "Rich Salim" and many others, who have so far tried to deny their membership to local mafias (Source: [AsiaNews, 6 February 2024](#)).

Transparency International ([CPI 2023 Uzbekistan](#)) reported on 30 January 2024 that Uzbekistan was one of the most consistently improving nations:

- “Uzbekistan stands out in the region as a significant improver on the CPI with a score of 33 (+15 since 2014). Key steps include creating an anti-corruption agency, strengthening legislation and liberalizing the economy. Importantly, policies and procedures have been established to enforce these laws and criminal charges have been filed against numerous corrupt officials. The government also introduced stronger internal control and audit tools in various ministries and local government offices, such as anti-bribery management systems. However, its authoritarian governance resists moves towards transparency and democracy, exerting control over legislative and public institutions, and using the justice system against critics. This perpetuates corruption and underscores the need for comprehensive reform.”

Despite laying new piping, many settlements in Uzbekistan remain without drinking water, and to survive residents have started digging wells again, which are closed with locks to deny access to outsiders. Others are forced to buy water from distant locations or improvised markets, or take it from irrigation dams. (Source: [AsiaNews, 13 August 2024](#))

Another social phenomenon is that more than one quarter of the Uzbek population is younger than fourteen. This so-called youth-bulge puts massive pressure on the government to create new job opportunities every year. It also means that Uzbekistan will be facing significant changes in the not too distant future as the majority of the population will no longer have any affinities with the Soviet past.

Thanks to the former Soviet educational system, practically every citizen in Uzbekistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution must be done unofficially.

### **Gender perspective**

Uzbekistan operates according to Islamic and patriarchal norms, whereby men and women are expected to assume traditional gender roles; men are expected to assume the role of decision makers and financial providers, whilst women are expected to prioritize household duties. Despite gender equality being enshrined in [Articles 18 and 46](#) in the Constitution of Uzbekistan, discriminatory

household practices and socio-cultural barriers prevent women from realizing these rights ([CEDAW, 2022](#)). Domestic violence victims – primarily women – are viewed negatively if they choose to leave the marriage and risk being vilified. Public pressure to tackle domestic violence has increased, however, particularly following a recent media report where a groom was caught on camera hitting his bride during the wedding reception ([The Diplomat, 22 June 2022](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [Digital 2024: Uzbekistan](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 83.3% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 24.6% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 95.5% of the total population

According to [NapoleonCat](#) (June 2024), there are significantly more male than female users of Facebook (62.6% male, compared to 37.4% female users).

Key technological developments according to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: July 2024):

- “Uzbekistan’s telecom markets – both wireline and wireless – have long been playing “come from behind” in terms of their development following the country’s independence from the former Soviet Union. While the government has formally adopted the principles of operating as a market economy, many elements of the old centrally planned economic model remain. This has had the effect of reducing the level of interest from foreign companies and investors in building out the necessary underlying infrastructure, which in turn has constrained the rate of growth in the country’s telecoms sector. Nevertheless, the last five years has seen the beginning of an upswing in prospects for the sector as fibre network rollouts continue out beyond the main urban centres, while the mobile market experiences some consolidation amongst the main operations to become stronger, more efficient competitors.”
- “The fixed-line market is dominated by the incumbent state-owned provider Uztelecom, which has a much as 98% market share. With teledensity sitting at around 11%, the fixed-line segment remains relatively underdeveloped. But Uztelecom has been diligently expanding its fibre footprint across the country, and so utilisation is slowing increasing as consumers are able to take on VoIP services as part of their fibre packages. Strong growth is also present in the fixed broadband segment thanks to that same network expansion (albeit coming off a very low base), with penetration projected to reach 24% by 2027 (a 5-year CAGR of 6.2%).”
- “Despite the promising signs in the fixed markets, it is the mobile segment that continues to dominate Uzbekistan’s telecoms sector in terms of penetration, revenue, and growth. There are four major operators providing a modicum of competition; three of the four are government-owned entities although private operator Beeline Uzbekistan has been able to capture up to a third of the market. The last two Covid-affected years have proved challenging for Beeline, in particular, but its most recent operating results suggest a turnaround in the company’s fortunes is under way. Overall, the mobile market is expected to reach 100% penetration in 2023 – a 50% increase in the last five years.”

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2022 Uzbekistan](#)):

- "According to regulations, a website or blog may be blocked for calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order and territorial integrity of the country; spreading ideas of war, violence, and terrorism, as well as religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; disclosing information that is a state secret or protected by law; or disseminating information that could lead to national, ethnic, or religious enmity, involves pornography, or promotes narcotic usage. According to the Ministry of Justice, the government may permanently block websites or blogs without a court order. "
- "During the year, the Supreme Court ruled in 13 instances that 80 online profiles, channels, and pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, and Telegram were promoting extremism. The court ruled the materials and content of these sources were prohibited from entering or being manufactured, distributed, or possessed in the country."

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Uzbekistan](#):

- "Internet freedom in Uzbekistan worsened during the coverage period, largely due to measures the government took in response to summer 2022 protests in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan against proposed constitutional amendments that would infringe on the region's sovereignty. Ahead of and during the protests, the government restricted access to the internet, arrested journalists and activists for sharing information about the protests, and reportedly tortured bloggers in Karakalpakstan. In the wake of the protests, the government convicted at least 61 people for their involvement in the protests, some of which related to online activities. More positively, the government unblocked social media platforms, which were initially blocked for violating data localization requirements introduced in April 2021."
- "While reforms adopted since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016 have led to improvements on some issues, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state with few signs of democratization. No opposition parties operate legally. The legislature and judiciary effectively serve as instruments of the executive branch, which initiates reforms by decree, and the media are still tightly controlled by the authorities. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment persist, although highly publicized cases of abuse have resulted in dismissals and prosecutions for some officials, and small-scale corruption has been meaningfully reduced."

President Mirziyoyev's promise to bring in an era of free speech is in doubt. He came to power in 2016, with an election campaign that relied heavily on both bloggers and social media. At the beginning of his rule he endorsed a bolder, freer media. But as the 66-year-old now sets out on his third term in office, the recent string of arrests have stirred concerns (Source: [BBC News, 2 October 2023](#)).

All media, including the Internet, are under strict state control and are censored. As a result, Christians in Uzbekistan do not have their own media platform, and have difficulty in accessing foreign Christian media. As all digital communication is monitored, Christians have to be careful how they use social media and email.

## Gender perspective

Georgetown highlights a gender gap in regards to technology ([GIWPS Uzbekistan profile](#), accessed 24 June 2024). It is therefore harder for women to access digital Christian resources or online Christian communities.

## Security situation

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the relationship with neighboring republics Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has at times been tense and there have been ethnic clashes between Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz in the past few years. The main reason for political tension is the water supply. Uzbekistan depends greatly on water from the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya rivers for its cotton harvest. These rivers enter Uzbekistan via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and both countries are considering making use of the rivers for energy by constructing dams. Uzbekistan fears this will severely damage its main crop and has threatened with war should water be diverted away from Uzbekistan. However, since Mirziyoyev took over as president, relations with neighboring states have improved. Nevertheless, in May-June 2020, there were several [border incidents](#) between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 16 July 2020). In April and May 2022 more conflicts erupted along the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border (Source: [RFE/RL, 6 April 2022](#), [RFE/RL, 6 May 2022](#)). These incidents - none of which escalated into wider conflicts - reveal once again the transboundary lifestyle of Central Asian people and the artificial character of the borders that separate independent states from each other. In January 2023 the presidents of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to end the dispute between their two countries (Source: [AsiaNews, 31 January 2023](#)). In April 2024, the village of Barak (a former Kyrgyz exclave) became Uzbek, as part of the deal. With minimal fanfare and scant press coverage, the last remaining residents of the village of Barak found themselves leaving a foreign country to return to their homeland (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 April 2024](#)).

In early July 2022, protestors took to the streets railing against Tashkent's plan to remove provisions from the Constitution of Uzbekistan that allow Karakalpaks to declare independence unilaterally through a popular referendum. This comes following a massive crackdown on the tens of thousands of Karakalpak protestors and the imposition of martial law in Karakalpakstan. Protest began to die down after President Mirziyoyev decided to reverse course and retain the provision that the Karakalpaks insisted be kept in the Constitution. Nevertheless, observers suggest the crisis is far from over in Karakalpakstan. (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 21 July 2022](#)) The government of Uzbekistan continued its crackdown against Karakalpak activists in January 2023 by demanding lengthy prison sentences (Source: [RFE/RL, 12 January 2023](#))

Although Islam in Uzbekistan is generally of a traditional and moderate character, the country has experienced attacks in the past from radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union, both connected with the al-Qaeda network. So far, the government has been able to drive them out of the country. The Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan's south-east is known for the presence of other radical Islamic groups.

Many young Uzbeks have been inspired by the activities of radical Islamic groups like the Islamic State group (IS). It is estimated that hundreds of Uzbeks were fighting with the Islamic State group in Syria

and Iraq. In September 2014 an IS flag was displayed from a bridge in Tashkent. According to a warning by the [UK Government travel advice](#) (accessed on 27 November 2023), on 6 November 2019, 17 people were killed in an armed attack on a Tajik security check-point on the Uzbek/Tajik border, with IS claiming responsibility. Thousands of suspected members of Islamist groups have been imprisoned and the Uzbek government has sought Russian assistance to combat the threat of any increasing militancy.

### **Gender perspective**

Over the past years Uzbekistan has dropped down the rankings of Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security index, primarily reflecting a worsening security situation and lack of community safety for women ([GIWPS Uzbekistan profile](#), accessed 24 June 2024). However, the lack of official data makes it challenging to identify the scale of violence against women, but it is understood to be [significant](#) (RFE/RL, 7 March 2021). Media reports highlighted a rise in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown ([HRW 2021 Uzbekistan country chapter](#)). Bride kidnapping, despite being illegal, is also reportedly an ongoing issue in Uzbekistan.

### **Christian origins**

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Uzbekistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. The Nestorian church experienced a period of decline starting in the 14th century, when the Mongol rulers of the region finally decided to convert to Islam. Thereafter, [Nestorian Christianity](#) was largely confined to Upper Mesopotamia and the Malabar Coast of India (Encyclopaedia Britannica, last accessed December 2022).

The current presence of Christians in Uzbekistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia through a number of military campaigns, bringing in ethnic Russians who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans from Russia to Central Asia, fearing they would otherwise present a security risk. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Uzbekistan. After Uzbekistan became an independent country in 1991, non-traditional Christian communities became evangelistically active among the Uzbek population.



## Church spectrum today

Uzbekistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	242,000	59.6
Catholic	3,700	0.9
Protestant	42,000	10.3
Independent	101,000	24.9
Unaffiliated	17,700	4.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>406,400</b>	<b>100.1</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	14,100	3.5
Pentecostal-Charismatic	85,700	21.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) the largest Christian denominations in Uzbekistan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Independent groups
- Unaffiliated Christians
- Armenian Apostolic Church

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Uzbekistan>
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