

Raids on Baptists, refusal to register religious organisations, persecutions and surveillance over representatives of certain faiths – all these facts have been reported in Uzbekistan by human rights activists despite the reforms declared by the authorities. There's an opinion that persecutions of Protestants become more intensive under the pretext of countering missionary activities.

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On December 12, the United States [removed](#) Uzbekistan from the list of religious freedom violators. This important fact seems to suggest that the country has stopped persecuting people for their religious views and any certain religion.

In fact, in the last two years Uzbekistan has tried to demonstrate its tolerance to various religious groups, while major persecutions of the clergy of different religions during the leadership of the first president Islam Karimov seem to have stopped.

However, despite the official statements, not all religions in the country can exist quietly, and the country cannot always guarantee religious freedom. According to the Norwegian human rights organisations, [Forum 18](#), the evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB) are regularly raided, while the state requires that the organisation should officially register as religion. The volunteers of the Human Rights in Central Asia Association also confirm this information.

### Who are Evangelical Christian Baptists?

Christian Baptists in Uzbekistan, just like all over the world, are divided into two different groups: one group is an officially registered faith, another group deliberately opposes registration. Although they seem to practice the same religion, the two groups have some differences in their faiths. The first group (general) believes that Jesus made satisfaction for all people's sins, and the second group believes that Jesus atoned for the sins of some people only. The difference also concerns the salvation. However, it doesn't preclude each of religions from attracting new adepts.

But how does it happen that one religion exists openly and another one is persecuted? Let's see some history.

The Baptists of Central Asia and former USSR vary deeply from their American fellows. And they have been in confrontation almost at all times. This group consisted from reactionary

followers of the Anglican Church. Baptists have come to Asia from Germany via Ukraine, where they were called Shtundists, and then to Russia. They came to Uzbekistan from Siberia and Mordovia in early last century.



Photo: mirvam.org

During the formation of the USSR, almost all religion was beyond the law and strongly persecuted by the authorities, but Baptists managed to exist in such conditions until 1944, when they joined evangelists and turned into ECB – Evangelical Christian Brothers. They had had this status until 1965, when Khrushchev allowed the existence of this religion in exchange for registration of church. As a result, the group split: one part agreed and received the official status, another part refused and received the status of “persecuted”. The main difference between the two faiths is the availability of state registration of church-offices. However, neither licence, nor official status can deprive the believers of problems.

### **Does safety matter more than freedom?**

According to the US government report on the religious freedom for 2017, many representatives of both official and unregistered religious groups are still persecuted despite the amnesties and attempts of the Uzbek president to change the religious situation. They are suspected of extremism, illegal distribution of religious literature, many of them are denied registration by imposing impracticable conditions and then they are persecuted for the failure to meet them. The report said that:

“A number of government entities, including the Ministry of Interior, NSS, Customs Service, and local police, continued to confiscate, and in some cases destroy, religious literature and the equipment used to produce it.”

A lawyer commenting the religious situation in the country (who asked not to be named for reasons of safety) noted that the religious situation in the country is ambiguous. On the one hand, article 31 of the Constitution guarantees religious freedom to the citizens:

Freedom of conscience is guaranteed to all. Everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. Any compulsory imposition of religion shall be impermissible. In fact, the Constitution has not been violated since they profess their religion and no one prevents them from being alone with God. On the other hand, the country has effective law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On the freedom of religion and religious organisations” adopted on May 1, 1998, concerning holding religious ceremonies and worshipping, i.e. relations between religions and the state. Even this law violates neither the constitution, nor article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

However, according to the lawyer, in international law national interest is the first and foremost for every state. And to understand the reason behind the adoption of this law, we should go back to the time when it was adopted, i.e. 1998, amid extremism, terrorism and religious expansion. He noted that this law is absolutely outdated today and needs to be revised. The committee for religious affairs made such attempts, yet the bill got nowhere.

**“Thousands of people remain behind bars on vague charges of religious ‘extremism’.” Steve Swerdlow.**

It should be noted that this law covers representatives not only of the Baptist movement, but also of Orthodox, Catholic and other movements, including the Muslims. In 1998, when the bill was passed, it set limits for worship, providing for control in this activity, which was important for Uzbekistan at that time. The law prohibited uncontrolled missionary activities.



Steve Swerdlow. Photo: RFE/RL

Lawyer and researcher of Human Rights Watch in Central Asia **Steve Swerdlow** thinks that security cannot justify religious persecutions. According to him, although Uzbekistan faces legitimate security threats, it doesn't give it a reason for detaining persons just to make sure they have peaceful religious views.

“From the mid-90s, the national authorities have imprisoned thousands of people on overbroad charges of religious extremism. Although the government claims it has released hundreds of peaceful Muslims since late 2016, it cannot be confirmed because the authorities have not provided information about specific charges of the released people. We think that thousands of people remain behind bars on vague or overbroad charges, including for religious “extremism”, which is a violation by Uzbekistan of international human rights obligations,” Swerdlow said.

**Nadezhda Ataeva**, head of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (France) has the same opinion:

In Uzbekistan, persecutions of Protestants get even worse on the pretext of countering missionary activities and Proselytism. Also it has running prohibition of registration of Protestant churches. All reprisals are committed by security agencies and administrative authorities.



Photo: [worldwatchmonitor.org](http://worldwatchmonitor.org)

## **How to get a license and what for?**

Sometimes the state creates deliberate obstacles to licensing of religious ceremonies and worshipping. This is true for the Jewish community, which has been denied registration because it did not have synagogues in “at least eight of country’s 14 administrative units, as required by law”.

However, the Ministry of Justice refuses to accredit the community’s rabbis (the last time the rabbis were accredited was 4 years ago, in 2014) and the insufficient number of the rabbis limits the worship options, interest in religion and growth of community.

The same obstacles have been created to other religious groups, for example, in Kara Kalpak, where non-Muslim and non-Orthodox Christian religious groups cannot obtain the legal status. The same is true about Jehovah’s Witnesses, who cannot obtain the right to register new groups despite their right to exercise their religion and the alleged immunity from persecution.

Steve Swerdlow also confirmed this fact in the comment for CABAR.asia:

The Uzbek authorities have totally prohibited Proselytism. Many Christian groups have been denied registration of their communities or their right to exercise their common religion.

The authorities often raid meetings of “unregistered religious groups” by violently dispersing the meetings of peaceful Christians, by detaining, fining, and threatening participants, and by confiscating the Bible and other religious materials.

However, Baptists who are regularly persecuted due to their failure to register don’t want to register at all. The community doesn’t like the outsiders and doesn’t trust media representatives. According to one of its representatives (who asked not to be named), their religion is spirituality, which cannot be registered, and the authorities are not the law, and the law of God is the true law. So they think they don’t need any registration to enlighten the masses.



*Photo: worldwatchmonitor.org*

Meanwhile, the Uzbek authorities keep on repressing the believers by new raids with the involvement of military agencies of the country, National Guard and State Security Service (SGB) in addition to civilian authorities.



*Nadezhda Ataeva. Photo: catoday.org*

According to Nadezhda Ataeva, the Baptists are under close surveillance both by police and SGB, and by volunteers among neighbours, mahalla committee workers and public utilities.

According to her, their posts in social media are being monitored, and one “like” is enough to be summoned for preliminary questioning. During raids, their mobile phones are being confiscated without a warrant and checked for content.

“Every member of the Baptist group is under surveillance, which is a reason for blackmailing. As, as we can see, the representatives of this community can resist passively by indicating the violations of laws and contesting judicial decisions and fines,” Ataeva said. According to her, interior agencies ignore the decree of Shavkat Mirziyoyev dated November 30, 2017, which prohibits the use of torture to receive evidence, whereas the members of unregistered Protestant groups keep being interrogated for hours, where they are forced to perjure and squeal.

**“Every member of the Baptist group is under surveillance.” Nadezhda Ataeva**

Following the September raid, a woman and a five-year-old girl were hospitalised.

According to Ataeva, “this repressive practice deserves more attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion”.

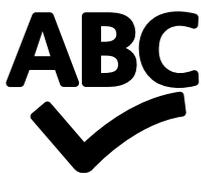
Despite the fact that the United States have upgraded Uzbekistan to the “special watch list”, the situation in the country is still volatile. Any violation in this area can lead to the return of the country to the list of countries of particular concern, especially if raids, persecutions and interrogations continue.

When we wrote this article, we were advised of possible surveillance attempt and of wiretapping of the author, of serious threats related to the people who can be somehow tied to unregistered religious groups, and of possible squeals and accusations against those people who are somehow tied to the persecuted religious groups. According to Steve Swerdlow, this practice “raises deep concern in regard to the declared commitment of Uzbekistan to hold reforms in this area”.

It means that the country will long be in the focus of attention of human rights organisations, and the situation with persecuted religious groups in the country will remain unstable.

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