

# Pakistan among worst religious freedom violators

December 13, 2018

WASHINGTON—U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo added Pakistan to a list of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom, while removing Uzbekistan from the list and singling out nine Islamist groups as Entities of Particular Concern.

For the first time since 2006, Uzbekistan did not appear on the list of Countries of Particular Concern, a category for governments that have committed or tolerated “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”



Uzbekistan is a Central Asian nation bordered by five landlocked countries: Kazakhstan to the north; Kyrgyzstan to the northeast; Tajikistan to the southeast; Afghanistan to the south; and Turkmenistan to the

southwest.(Public Domain)

Instead, Uzbekistan was added to a “Special Watch List” along with Russia and Comoros.

Pompeo announced the lists Dec. 11, after officially making the designations Nov. 28—three days after military personnel and plainclothes police [reportedly raided](#) and ransacked an unregistered Baptist church in Tashkent, Uzbekistan’s capital.

In addition to Pakistan, other nations on the list of Countries of Particular Concern are Burma (also known as Myanmar), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Entities of Particular Concern are al-Nusra Front in Syria, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabab in East Africa, Boko Haram in West Africa, the Houthis in Yemen, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or Daesh), ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The [2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) created the EPC designation for non-state actors that commit systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.

“In far too many places across the globe, individuals continue to face harassment, arrests or even death for simply living their lives in accordance with their beliefs. The United States will not stand by as spectators in the face of such oppression,” [Pompeo stated](#).

“Safeguarding religious freedom is vital to ensuring peace, stability and prosperity,” he continued. “These designations are aimed at improving the lives of individuals and the broader success of their societies. I recognize that several designated countries are working to improve their respect for religious freedom; I welcome such initiatives and look forward to

continuing the dialogue.

“The United States remains committed to working with governments, civil society organizations and religious leaders to advance religious freedom around the world.”

## Pakistan criminalizes blasphemy



Sam Brownback, U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom.(File Photo / Gage Skidmore / CC BY-SA 2.0)

In a Dec. 11 [teleconference briefing](#) for reporters, Sam Brownback, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, noted Pakistan’s laws that criminalize blasphemy as one reason for designating the South Asian nation as a Country of Particular Concern. Of all people in the world who are imprisoned for blasphemy, half are in Pakistan’s prisons, he noted.

On Oct. 31, a Pakistani court overturned the blasphemy conviction of [Asia Bibi](#), a Christian mother, and released her from death row. However, at this point, she has been blocked from leaving the country.

Brownback also noted the Pakistani government “often fails to hold accountable perpetrators of killings and violence against members of

religious minorities targeted on account of their religious beliefs or affiliations.”

In recent days, Pakistan expelled 18 aid organizations, including World Vision, Catholic Relief and other Christian groups, as well as secular nongovernmental organizations. Umair Hasan with the Pakistan Humanitarian Foundation said the move will affect more than 11 million aid recipients, resulting in a loss of more than \$130 million in aid annually for healthcare, education and other humanitarian concerns, according to [CBS News](#) and other media outlets.

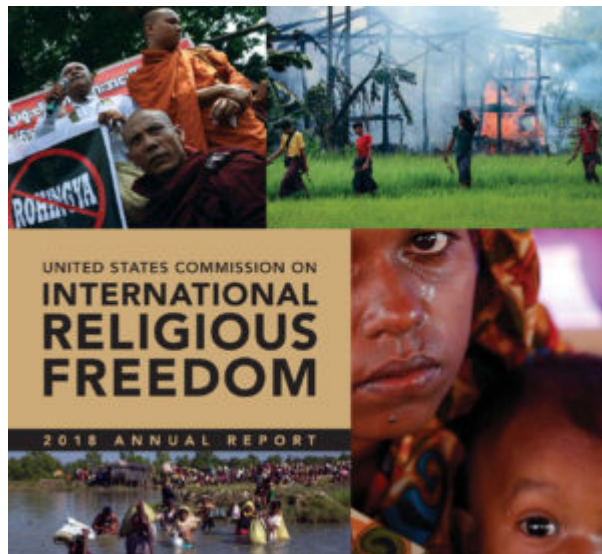
Brownback highlighted China and its detention of between 800,000 and 2 million Uighurs as one of the “worst human rights situations in the world.”

“China isn’t backing away from the religious persecution. It seems to be expanding” to include ethnic Kazakhs and other ethnic groups, he said.

## **Brownback: ‘Substantial changes’ in Uzbekistan**

Regarding Uzbekistan’s removal from the Countries of Particular Concern, Brownback said: “They’ve made substantial changes, and they’re doing it because they want to grow their nation. They want to see less terrorism, and they see this as a key route to really improving the livelihood of people throughout their nation, which we agree with, and we’re working with them.”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which issues its own recommended list of Countries of Particular Concern, ascribed Tier 1 CPC status to Uzbekistan in its [2018 report](#).



The report notes “the Uzbek government has not yet embarked on a major deviation from its overall policy of severe restriction of religious freedom.”

Tenzin Dorjee, chair of the commission, praised Pompeo for including Pakistan on the Countries of Particular Concern “after years of reporting systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.”

“While the State Department named Pakistan to the Special Watch List last year, the Pakistani government continued to harass its religious minorities, carry out state-sanctioned discrimination against groups such as the Ahmadis, and tolerate extrajudicial violence in the guise of opposing blasphemy,” [Dorjee stated](#). “Today, approximately 40 individuals in Pakistan are incarcerated on charges of blasphemy.”

However, the commission’s chair raised concern about Uzbekistan’s removal from the Countries of Particular Concern list, saying, “We question whether Uzbekistan has sufficiently improved to be moved from the CPC list to the Special Watch List.”

In addition to the nations the Secretary of State Pompeo designated as Countries of Particular Concern, the commission also had recommended the designation be applied to the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Russia,

Syria and Vietnam.

Pointing to Russia's inclusion on the Special Watch List, Brownback pointed to "widespread suppression of religious expression" and persecution of Muslims, in particular. He noted of the 145 prisoners in Russia currently jailed for their religious beliefs, 106 are Muslims.

The Trump Administration has placed sanctions on several of the Countries of Particular Concern, generally both due to violations of religious freedom and other causes such as violations of arms control agreements, Brownback said.

Sanctioned countries included Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea and Sudan. The administration waived sanctions on Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan due to "national interest," he said.