

Uzbekistan: Free Human Rights Defender Gaybullo Jalilov and All Prisoners of Conscience

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Earlier this month, on December 10, rights activists around the world celebrated International Human Rights Day, which commemorates the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Although the UDHR was passed by the UN General Assembly 65 years ago, its promise remains unfulfilled in states like Uzbekistan, where the government continues to persecute its own citizens for peacefully exercising their fundamental human rights.

Among the most basic liberties protected by the UDHR is right to freedom of belief. In 1998, 50 years after the adoption of the UDHR, the United States Congress adopted the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 \(IRFA\)](#), which made religious freedom a priority for U.S. foreign policy. At the time of its passage, former Senator Sam Brownback, a leading advocate for religious freedom and supporter of the IRFA, expressed concern about the appalling state of religious freedom worldwide and urged the U.S. government to take a more active role in promoting respect for this fundamental human right abroad. Senator Brownback was especially concerned about the widespread violations of religious freedom in Uzbekistan, where “Muslims who [did] not conform to the government-prescribed ideas [were] imprisoned and often tortured.”

Indeed, Uzbekistan continues to be among the worst violators of religious freedom in the world. The Uzbek government attempts to regulate all aspects of religious life from bans on women wearing hijab and men having beards to raiding religious gatherings and imprisoning individuals for practicing Islam outside state-sanctioned mosques. The government often charges those who practice their faith independently with religious extremism, even though at trial the prosecutors fail to present any evidence that the individuals promoted or participated in terrorist activities.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reports that there are as many as 10,000 individuals imprisoned in Uzbekistan on charges of religious extremism. Many of these individuals are also accused of “anti-constitutional activity” and are sentenced to extremely long prison terms. Once in prison, many face unsanitary conditions, a lack of basic medical care, and are often singled out for especially cruel treatment. Prison authorities commonly accuse religious prisoners of violating prison regulations, subjecting them to various punishments and longer prison sentences without any due process. Moreover, these prisoners are rendered ineligible for amnesty releases. The entire system appears designed to remove independent religious practice from society.

The case of Gaybullo Jalilov, a 49-year-old human rights defender and observant Muslim, exemplifies the fate of thousands of religious prisoners. He has been wrongly detained since September 5, 2009 on vaguely defined charges of “religious extremism” and “anti-constitutional activity.” Uzbek authorities detained Mr. Jalilov because of his work monitoring over 200 different cases of religious persecution in Uzbekistan and sentenced him to 11 years in prison.

While in detention, Mr. Jalilov has suffered greatly. On one occasion, prison guards violently bludgeoned him with truncheons after he refused to sing the Uzbek national anthem, leaving him nearly deaf in both ears.

Since 2006, USCIRF has recommended that the United States designate Uzbekistan as “a country of particular concern” (CPC), a status given to countries with “systematic, ongoing and egregious” violations of religious rights. In 2011, the State Department designated Uzbekistan a CPC, which normally requires that the United States impose sanctions. However, the State Department issued a waiver for Uzbekistan, allowing the government to dodge the restrictive measures because of its key role in the Northern Distribution Network, a supply route for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Allowing Uzbekistan to escape responsibility sends the wrong message about the United States’ commitment to religious freedom. Uzbekistan and other states that systematically violate their citizens’ right to religious freedom should not get a pass. As we celebrate the adoption of the UDHR this month, the United States must recommit itself to the cause of religious freedom and hold accountable those regimes that continue ignore international law.

Patrick Griffith is a Program Attorney at Freedom Now, a Washington D.C.- based nongovernmental organization that works to free prisoners of conscience worldwide. Freedom Now considers Gaybullo Jalilov to be a prisoner of conscience and advocates for his release.