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## **Criminal prosecution follows Easter worship meeting?**

**By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18**

Forum 18 (24.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2xmpqlo> - *Police raided and threatened Urgench Baptists with criminal prosecution for meeting at Easter. SSS secret police and ordinary police raided Mubarek Baptists' worship, an illegal court fining two. In Karshi police targeted hearing and speech impaired Baptists. A Samarkand Jehovah's Witness was fined when enquiring about state registration.*

Uzbek police have threatened members of a Baptist Church in Urgench [Urgench] in the north-western Khorezm Region with criminal prosecution. The threats followed raids by officers of the police Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism on successive Sundays in April on the Church's Sunday meetings for worship. The first raid was on the day the Church celebrated Easter.

On 8 April police disrupted the Baptists' shared meal to celebrate Easter. During the 15 April raid, officers confiscated Christian books and materials, detained and brought some church members to a police station, questioned them, and warned them that a criminal case would be opened against them (see below).

On 15 April the State Security Service (SSS) secret police and ordinary police raided the Sunday meeting for worship of a Baptist Church in Mubarek in the southern Kashkadarya Region. Police filmed and questioned church members, and illegally confiscated religious literature without a warrant. A court later fined two church members without any proper hearing or due process, including one Baptist who complained about the police's illegal actions (see below).

Similarly, on 6 May police in Karshi [Qarshi] in Kashkadarya Region broke into the home of a Baptist, Viktor Tashpulatov, where the Baptist Church was holding its Sunday worship meeting. Police targeted two hearing and speech impaired Church members, apparently to pressure them into incriminating themselves and others (see below).

Congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches meet for worship without seeking state permission, as is their right under international human rights law. But Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, bans any collective exercise of the freedom of religion and belief without state permission (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

The authorities have also continued to raid and fine communities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. When a Jehovah's Witness in Samarkand, in the centre of the country, went to their local mahalla (state district administrative committee) to enquire about registering a Jehovah's Witness community, the mahalla called the police. Police then confiscated his mobile phone, and he was subsequently fined twice the minimum monthly salary for having Jehovah's Witness publications on his mobile phone (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses think that the police tortured Anvar Tajiyev in Urgench because their local community had between January and March 2017 unsuccessfully asked for

state registration (see F18News 1 May 2018 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2374](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374)).

The authorities have allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to register only one congregation in the country, in Chirchik in Tashkent Region. All other congregations risk raids and fines for meeting for worship without state permission (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

### ***Urgench: Easter 8 April celebration raided***

On 8 April, Easter Sunday, Urgench Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism raided the flat of a Baptist, Stanislav Kim, where the local Baptist Church was meeting to celebrate Easter. "At around 11 am Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officers knocked on our door," Kim told Forum 18 on 15 May. "We agreed that only one officer could come in, to see that we are peacefully worshipping."

The police officer refused to identify himself and "after sitting down in a chair demanded that the worshippers come up to him one by one so he could write down their names". He left and then promised that police would come back in one hour.

As soon as the Baptists finished the worship and began to eat a meal together in celebration of Easter, "a group of police officers broke into the house, and began to force the participants out of the house onto the street to take down their names." The police refused to give their names to the Baptists and then left.

The authorities have frequently raided, prosecuted, and fined Baptists in Urgench for exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief – including staging a "show trial" for state TV (see eg. F18News 19 March 2018 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2361](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2361)).

Kim told Forum 18 that Major Khamro Masimov, Chief of Urgench Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism, did not participate in the 8 April raid but his officers did.

Asked why police raided the Easter celebration, and why the authorities keep raiding and prosecuting the Baptists, Major Masimov claimed to Forum 18 on 15 May that "we are not doing anything unlawful. Our Religion Law demands that all exercise of freedom of religion and belief must be registered, and so we must carry on controlling all exercise of this freedom."

Major Masimov has recently refused, against Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, to arrest or investigate his subordinates who tortured a Jehovah's Witness in October 2017. Hospitals refused for fear of the police to treat Anvar Tajiyev who lost his hearing in one ear and still suffers headaches. Many complaints to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, national and local Prosecutor's Offices have led to no arrests or prosecutions. Masimov of the police Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism claimed to Forum 18 that "our officers did not violate the law" (see F18News 1 May 2018 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2374](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374)).

When Forum 18 pointed out that the Baptists are exercising their fundamental human rights, which are also guaranteed by the Constitution, Major Masimov replied: "Please tell this to our Parliament. We do not decide which laws there should be. We are only responsible for making sure that the laws are observed."

### ***Urgench: 15 April raid and criminal prosecution threat***

Seven officers of Urgench Police Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism, led by Major Masimov and his deputy Captain Mukhammad Rakhimov, once again on 15 April raided Kim's home while Baptists were meeting for Sunday worship. One of the officers filmed everyone present.

"Officers conducted an unauthorised search, and confiscated a Bible and Children's Bible in Russian, a New Testament in Uzbek, a Bible commentary book, a Baptist song book, 12 copies of 'Herald of Truth' Baptist magazine, 30 Baptist post-cards, and a personal diary," Kim told Forum 18.

"Police ignored our demands to show their identity documents and the legally-required warrant for the search", Kim told Forum 18.

Asked why they did not show their identity documents and the legally-required search warrant to the Baptists, Major Masimov replied that "if we did anything unlawful they can write a complaint to the authorities." He then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

All seven adult participants in the meeting were taken to Urgench Police Station for questioning. Major Masimov himself questioned Kim. Police demanded that we write statements and sign a police report", Kim told Forum 18.

"When we told the police that their actions are unlawful, and refused to sign any papers, the officers threatened that they may open a criminal case against us", he said. After two hours of questioning, police released the Baptists.

Kim told Forum 18 on 21 May that he thinks police may be preparing a case under Criminal Code Article 244-3 ("Illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature" If there has been a previous Administrative Code conviction (as there has been in Kim's case) the punishment is a fine of between 100 and 200 times the minimum monthly wage, or up to three years' corrective labour. Kim thinks that it's possible, as has happened in other cases, that the authorities may punish him with a short-term prison sentence (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

"The case is in Urgench Prosecutor's Office, and they are deciding whether to open an administrative or criminal case", Major Masimov told Forum 18 on 15 May. "It is an administrative violation, but because it is a repeated violation the Prosecutor's Office can decide to open a criminal case." He claimed that the Prosecutor's Office would make a decision "in two or three days", but refused to give Forum 18 more details.

On 22 May Kamol Almatov, Assistant to Urgench Prosecutor Javlan Davletov, refused to answer when asked about the possible prosecution and asked Forum 18 to call back the following day. On 23 May neither Almatov nor Davletov answered their phones.

As of 24 May Kim has had no information on whether he may be prosecuted, and if so on what charges.

### ***Mubarek: Raid, arrest for complaining about police illegality***

On 15 April the Sunday meeting for worship of a Council of Churches Baptist Church in Mubarek in Kashkadarya Region was raided, The raid involved State Security Service (SSS) secret police Major Ruzimurod Narboyev, Mubarek Police Criminal Investigation Department head Senior Lieutenant Khurshid Abdiyev, local mahalla committee Chair Kholmurod Nabiyeu, and four ordinary police officers.

The Church, which refuses to seek state registration as is its right under international human rights law, has often been raided and its members fined (see eg. F18News 11 July 2013 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1857](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1857)).

"As soon as the officials arrived at the Church they began filming the worshippers without asking our permission," church member Vladimir Khanyukov told Forum 18 on 15 May. "They also without showing a search warrant confiscated our Christian literature."

Church member Vitaly Provodin called the Regional Police in Karshi to complain about the unlawful actions of the police, but very soon after the call the police arrested Provodin and took him for questioning to Mubarek Police Station. There, police tried to pressure him into registering the Church. They also told to after his release bring a copy of his passport and a testimonial from the local mahalla committee to the Police Station.

On 21 May mahalla Chair Nabiyeu and the police contradicted each other to Forum 18 as to who was responsible for the raid, Nabiyeu claiming that "I have nothing against Baptists" and that the raid was led by the SSS. He then refused to talk more. But Senior Lieutenant Abdiyev told Forum 18 that "I have a letter from the mahalla Committee informing us of the illegal activity of the Baptists and requesting us to check them."

Mahalla committees are a key element in the state's restrictions on freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

### ***Anonymous Judge, illegal hearing, fines***

Senior Lieutenant Abdiyev on 15 May summoned church members Khanyukov and Provodin to a hearing of Mubarek Administrative Court at a mahalla committee in a neighbouring District.

"The Judge did not introduce himself and directly began reading us his decision," Khanyukov told Forum 18. There was no kind of hearing or opportunity for the Baptists to defend themselves He fined Khanyukov and Provodin five times the minimum monthly wage. "We have not yet been given a copy of the decision [which is an illegal action of the authorities], but we were charged with illegal religious meeting and having religious literature."

Unfair trials and flagrant violations of due process are common in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

Asked why the authorities keep raiding and fining Baptists and others in violation of Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations, Senior Lieutenant Abdiyev replied: "It's your opinion that we violate the laws. It is the Baptists who violate our Religion Law." Asked what will happen if the Baptists continue to exercise their right under international law not to register their Church, Abdiyev replied: "We will give them new fines".

### ***Karshi: Police raid worship meeting***

On 6 May police in Karshi broke into the home of Viktor Tashpulatov where his Baptist Council of Churches Church was meeting for Sunday worship. Major Firdavs Khamroyev from Karshi Police's Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism led six officers from Kashkadarya Regional Police in the raid. The Church, which refuses to seek state registration as is its right under international human rights law, has often been raided (including by Major Khamroyev) and its members fined (see eg. F18News 7 August 2017 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2304](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304)).

"Police banged on our doors when we were holding our worship service, and immediately they entered officers began filming the worshippers without asking permission", Tashpulatov told Forum 18 on 21 May. Police wrote down the names of about 50 participants, including children, but despite pressure "none of us wrote statements or signed the police report." As police left they threatened "wait for the court to summon you", but there has not been any summons.

Asked about the raid on 22 May, Major Khamroyev claimed to Forum 18 that "it's a wrong number".

### ***Hearing and speech impaired persons targeted***

Officer Jamol Sharopov from the police Department for the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism on 20 May told Tashpulatov to bring two speech and hearing impaired Church members to police for questioning. "I told him that it is his duty to do so and not mine", Tashpulatov told Forum 18.

Tashpulatov suspects that the police want to pressure the two Church members to write statements incriminating themselves and other Church members.

Officer Sharopov claimed to Forum 18 on 23 May that "I am not involved in that case." When asked why he called Tashpulatov asking him to bring his fellow church members for questioning, he claimed "It's a wrong number" and refused to talk more.

### ***Raids, fines, punished for enquiring about state registration***

In April and May, the authorities raided Jehovah's Witness worship meetings in homes in Samarkand and Fergana [Farghona], and twice raided a home in Karshi. The authorities also Jehovah's Witnesses homes for religious literature in Urgench and in the Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. After the Yangiyul search a court fined two members of the local community five times the minimum monthly wage each under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). Such fines are common (see eg. F18News 6 April 2018 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2367](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2367)).

When a Jehovah's Witness in Samarkand, in the centre of the country, went to their local mahalla (state district administrative committee) to enquire about registering a Jehovah's Witness community, the mahalla called the police. Mahalla committees are a key element in the state's restrictions on freedom of religion and belief, including via their role in approving registration applications (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

When police arrived at the mahalla they immediately confiscated the Jehovah's Witnesses mobile phone, and he was subsequently fined twice the minimum monthly salary for having Jehovah's Witness publications on the phone.

This is not the only punishment possible for seeking state registration. Jehovah's Witnesses think that the police tortured Anvar Tajiyev in Urgench because their local community had between January and March 2017 unsuccessfully asked for state registration (see F18News 1 May 2018 [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2374](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2374)).

The authorities have allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to register only one congregation in the country, in Chirchik in Tashkent Region. All other congregations risk raids and fines

for meeting for worship without state permission (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2314](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

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## **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) - <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-opens-islamic-studies-academy> - 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 Usmankhan 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://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=14176> - 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 Buhari 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 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 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> 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>).