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## **Obstacles, pressure, bribe demands obstruct legal status applications**

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (11.12.2019) - <http://bit.ly/2PWdOLM> - Officials registered a handful of religious communities in late 2019, but many others complain of official obstacles. Some cannot get Land Registry or Mahalla approval, others face demands for bribes. Seven Jehovah's Witness communities were rejected. Catholics await registration for a sixth parish. Police pressured Shia Muslims in Bukhara to halt a petition to reopen a closed Shia mosque.

Members of religious communities, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that many communities would like to obtain state registration, but are "being blocked from registering with various excuses. Others have not applied, thinking that the authorities will not register them." One Protestant, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 3 December that "I know of several Churches across Uzbekistan which the authorities refused to register in 2019."

Uzbekistan has repeatedly obstructed registration applications, as well as in May 2018 adding new obstacles to the process. Against international human rights law, Uzbekistan demands that religious communities must have state permission to exist and exercise their freedom of religion and belief.

All Muslim communities have to be part of the state-controlled Muslim Board to be allowed to register and thus exist legally. Police pressure forced Shia Muslims in Bukhara in late 2019 to halt a petition to have one of 15 closed Shia mosques reopened (see below).

Although the authorities registered a handful of non-Muslim communities in late 2019, several sources claimed to Forum 18 that bribes are required. The sources declined to give examples of communities which paid bribes to gain registration.

Officials rejected the registration application of a Baptist Union congregation in Gulistan.

The Land Registry failed to give the church the certificate it needs and the Mahalla Committee Chair demanded full personal details of all the Church's founder members, and then refused to give his approval. "The authorities are trying to create obstacles for us not to register," the Baptists complained (see below).

A Tashkent Protestant Church is being denied registration because officials say it does not have a valid legal address (see below).

Officials have rejected the applications from all seven Jehovah's Witness communities in various cities which were lodged in September 2018, as well as a branch in Uzbekistan of their US-based organisation, despite numerous court hearings. "For over 25 years, we have sought registration of our communities in various cities, but all applications have been denied," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. The authorities allow Jehovah's Witnesses only one legal local community in the entire country (see below).

Catholics have launched a petition to be allowed to register a parish in Angren. Parishioners from the city have to make a long journey each Sunday to attend Mass in the capital Tashkent (see below).

At at least two closed meetings in late 2019, state security, religious affairs and local administration officials have summoned leaders of some local religious communities and demanded that they provide the authorities with full information not only about their communities but about "religious sects". Some speakers demanded that Jehovah's Witnesses be banned. Religious communities were pressured to sign a petition against unspecified dangerous religious communities "which destabilise the situation". The Religious Affairs Committee published the petition on its website on 25 September (see below).

The 13 May 2019 government draft of the long-promised revised Religion Law (seen by Forum 18) would continue to ban religious activity without state permission, as well as sharing of faith. However, it would – if adopted in the May 2019 version - reduce the number of adult resident citizens required to found a local religious organisation from 100 to 50, as well as registration fees.

No public announcements have been made since May about any progress in adopting the revised Religion Law and the text does not appear to have been made available to the public.

### **Fewer raids, but registration too difficult**

"At the moment the authorities are not interfering with our meetings for worship in our private homes. They know where we are and know all about us, but for some reason they have left us alone," a member of an unregistered Protestant Church in northern Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 28 November. The church member did not want their name or the name of their Church to be given for fear of state reprisals.

"We do not want to register since we think we will not be able to gain registration," the Protestant added. "We cannot afford to have a building for a legal address, and it is a waste of time to go through all the bureaucracy." They knew of other unregistered religious communities in a similar situation.

One human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, suggested that the authorities "have left unregistered activity undisturbed right now because they want to present a favourable international image to gain financial loans from European countries and America. I fear that once the loans have been received, unregistered communities will be targeted again."

## **Authorities refuse registration to Gulistan Baptists**

The authorities in Syrdarya Region south-west of Tashkent refuse to register a Baptist Union congregation in the city of Gulistan, local Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 26 November.

"We submitted the request for registration as well as a list of documents that we prepared to the Justice Department on 30 September," local Baptists said. "We were reminded that we need to bring two more documents – a certificate from the Land Registry Service and a letter of endorsement from the Chair of the mahalla committee."

Mahalla committees (the lowest element of district administration) are a key element in the regime's attempts to stop people exercising freedom of religion and belief without state permission. Among their unwritten functions they can be used to orchestrate hostility against religious communities the authorities dislike.

Officials claimed in a meeting in Samarkand with registered religious communities on 20 September (see below) that a visiting American delegation "misunderstood" the role of mahalla committees. Dilshod Mamadkulov, the Deputy Hokim (Head) of Samarkand Regional Administration, claimed that "if the mahalla committee does not endorse a religious organisation, it is the opinion of the local population."

On 30 September, Yury Davydov, the leader of Gulistan's Baptist Church, made an official request to the Land Registry Service, but this has not been answered.

Ilhom Turdaliyev, Chair of the mahalla committee, refused to approve the Baptists' registration application. On 7 October Davydov met Turdaliyev after he evaded attempts to meet, and said that the Baptists must provide a full list of all Church members with their residential addresses and copies of their passports. Davydov told Turdaliyev the following day that all the necessary information about the Church had been submitted to the Justice Department.

Mahalla Chair Turdaliyev then claimed that he will approve the application after the Baptists obtain the Land Registry Service certificate. But as of 9 December this has not happened.

"The authorities are trying to create obstacles for us not to register," the Baptists stated.

Asked why he refuses to give a letter of endorsement to the Baptists, Turdaliyev told Forum 18 on 4 December that "They have not provided a letter to us from the Land Registry Service that they can use the land for religious purpose." He added that the Land Registry Service will "not provide the papers until they adjust their building according to the rules of the fire and sanitary standards."

Asked why the Baptists must obtain permission from various state agencies in order to exist and carry out their meetings for worship, Turdaliyev replied: "The Law demands that." Asked why Uzbekistan imposes such conditions in defiance of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) guidelines and its international obligations, he responded: "I don't know. This is not my competence." He declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

Aziz Urunov, Assistant of Alimjan Makharov, Head of Syrdarya Land Registry Service, claimed to Forum 18 on 5 December that the Baptists have not asked for permission. "I do not remember them asking us about the certificate." He claimed that "if the Baptists ask we will give them the certificate."

## **No registration for Tashkent Church unable to afford legal address**

A member of a Protestant Church in Tashkent, who did not want their name or the name of their Church to be given for fear of state reprisals, explained the difficulty their Church has faced getting state registration.

"We were refused registration, and told by the Religious Affairs Committee that we do not have a legal address as demanded by the Law," the Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18 on 2 December. "But we cannot have a legal address since we cannot ask other Churches for us to be registered at their address, since according to the Law only one organisation can be registered at the same address."

The Tashkent Protestant added: "We also cannot register it at a private address of our members according to the Law. The only solution for us is to purchase a piece of land where we can build our own building, which we cannot afford."

Asked why religious organisations functioning in Tashkent have to ask for permission from various state agencies in order to exist, the official (who did not give his name), who on 5 December answered the phone of Almaridon Karshiyev, Chief of Tashkent City Administration's section responsible for work with religious organisations, claimed to Forum 18: "We do not have any problems with registration of religious organisations in Tashkent City."

Told of the problem of the Protestant Church and asked why owning a building is stipulated as a condition to exist, the city official responded: "This is prescribed by the Law. If they do not want registration and they are not holding massive gatherings, they can just meet in their homes, but need only to inform the local authorities of their meetings."

Asked what constitutes massive gatherings, whether 10 people, 50 people, 100 people or what the number of participants is, the official could not answer. Asked why the Religion Law, contrary to Uzbekistan's international obligations, demands compulsory registration for all religious activity, the city official replied: "That question is not within my competence, you need to ask the Religious Affairs Committee."

The official declined to talk to Forum 18 on why Jehovah's Witnesses cannot gain registration outside Chirchik in Tashkent and answer Forum 18's other questions.

## **Seven Jehovah's Witness communities refused registration**

The only legally registered local community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan is in Chirchik in Tashkent Region. Only in 2017 did local officials allow it to put up a notice outside its meeting place identifying it as a Kingdom Hall. Officials stripped registration from the only other registered Jehovah's Witness community, in Fergana, in 2006.

"For over 25 years, we have sought registration of our communities in various cities, but all applications have been denied," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 3 December. "Without registration, the Witnesses are not only denied freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association but also denied freedom to exist as communities."

In September 2018, Jehovah's Witnesses submitted applications to the respective mahalla committees for approval of the registered address of seven local communities in the cities of Bukhara, Fergana, Karshi, Samarkand, Tashkent, Urgench and Nukus (in Karakalpakstan). "The mahalla committees in all seven regions denied the Witnesses' applications for registration," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Odiljon Umirov, Assistant to Dilshod Mamadkulov, Deputy Hokim of Samarkand Regional Administration, who is responsible for work with religious organisations, confirmed to Forum 18 that Mamadkulov participated in the 20 September meeting between the state organs and the religious communities. Asked why Jehovah's Witnesses are being refused registration in Samarkand Region, and in the 20 September meeting the officials particularly attacked Jehovah's Witnesses, Umirov replied: "I cannot comment on that."

On the morning of 6 December, Umirov told Forum 18 Deputy Hokim Mamadkulov is "still busy, call back after lunch." Numerous calls in the afternoon to Mamadkulov's numbers went unanswered. He claimed that Mamadkulov is "busy," and asked Forum 18 to call back the next day. Phones went unanswered on 7 December.

An official (who did not give his name) of the section of Karakalpakstan's Justice Ministry responsible for registration of religious organisations, put the phone down on 5 December when he heard Forum 18's name. Subsequent calls to his and other officials' numbers went unanswered.

An official at the reception of Fergana Regional Administration (who did not give his name), when asked why Jehovah's Witnesses local community was refused registration, on 5 December referred Forum 18 to Jamshid (he did not give his last name). The reception official clarified to Forum 18 that Jamshid "worked for the State Security Service (SSS) secret police in the past, and he oversees religious affairs in the region at the moment." Jamshid's phones went unanswered the same day.

### **Courts fail to back registration for Jehovah's Witnesses**

Jehovah's Witnesses filed complaints in local and regional courts against these denials, but lost their case in every instance. The Supreme Court has so far dismissed six of the seven supervisory appeals Jehovah's Witnesses filed concerning these rulings.

However, on 13 September, in the seventh case, the Court cancelled the lower court decision denying the registration of their community in Urgench and sent it back to the first instance court for reconsideration. But on 13 November, Khorezm District Administrative Court dismissed the complaint.

Aziz Abidov, Press Secretary of the Supreme Court, asked Forum 18 on 6 December to call back the next day. "I need to gather information on the details of the case on Jehovah's Witnesses," he told Forum 18. On the morning of 7 December Abidov asked Forum 18 to "call after lunch." Calls in the afternoon to him and other numbers at the Supreme Court went unanswered.

Jehovah's Witnesses also tried to register a local branch of its US-based organisation. However, the Justice Ministry denied the application on 4 March 2019 and again on 18 March after Jehovah's Witnesses resubmitted it.

Subsequently, they filed a complaint to Tashkent City Administrative Court. On 4 July, the court dismissed the complaint, stating that the case is not within its jurisdiction. On 23 September the cassation court sent the case back to the first instance court, Yunusabad District Court. That court referred the case to Shaykhontohur District Administrative Court.

Judge Sardor Rakhmuddinov "heard the case on 11 December and made his decision," his Assistant (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 11 December. He refused to put Forum 18 through to the Judge, claiming that "he is busy." He also refused to answer other questions on this case.

Uboydullo Aliyev, Chief of Shaykhontohur District Court, on 11 December also refused to discuss the case or tell Forum 18 the result of the hearing. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 Judge Rakhmuddinov rejected their complaint.

### **No help from National Human Rights Centre, Ombudsperson**

On 11 March 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses filed an appeal about the registration denials to the National Human Rights Centre in Tashkent. On 22 July, the Centre responded that the "issue is not within its purview and recommended that we appeal to the Constitutional Court of Uzbekistan", Jehovah's Witnesses noted. However, on 24 October, the Constitutional Court rejected the Jehovah's Witnesses' appeal.

On 6 November, Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application to the Ombudsperson, Ulugbek Muhammadiyev, who is attached to Parliament. Reached on 11 December, Saidbek Azimov, Assistant to Muhammadiyev, asked Forum 18 to call back later when he would be available. Called back as requested, Azimov took down Forum 18's questions about Jehovah's Witnesses' registration and Uzbekistan's international obligations, and then consulted with Muhammadiyev by phone. Azimov then told Forum 18 to call back the following day.

Neither the National Human Rights Centre nor the Ombudsperson is accredited with the Global Alliance for National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), which rules on whether such institutions meet the requirements of competence, independence from governments and adequate powers of investigation set out in the Paris Principles. GANHRI's Sub-Committee on Accreditation is due to consider Uzbekistan at its March 2020 session.

"To date, Jehovah's Witnesses have found it impossible to register their local communities outside of Chirchik," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "As long as legal recognition is denied, the Witnesses remain open targets for harassment and mistreatment."

### **Catholics petition for parish registration**

The Catholic community launched a petition asking the government to register the parish in Angren, 105 kms (65 miles) by road from Tashkent. The authorities have only allowed five Catholic parishes in the entire country to register.

The 25 or so Angren Catholics have to travel all the way to the registered Catholic Church in the capital each Sunday to attend Mass, the Apostolic Administrator of Uzbekistan Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz told the Vatican-based news agency Fides for a 3 December article.

"We try to support them by paying for their journey, but now we would like to have a place, a room or a chapel where we can celebrate Mass in their city too," Bishop Maculewicz added. "We hope to succeed soon. Should the government accept the request, we priests would go there every Saturday, in turn, to Angren to celebrate the Eucharist and the other sacraments." He believes the parish would grow if it had a church in the city.

### **Police pressure Shia Muslims to halt petition to reopen mosque**

Shia Muslims in Bukhara began a petition in late 2019 for the reopening of one of the 15 long-closed local Shia mosques, sources told Forum 18. However, police soon visited active members of the community to pressure them to halt the petition. They reluctantly complied.



## **Officials demand that religious communities provide information**

The State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the Religious Affairs Committee and other authorities at least in two officially-arranged meetings known to Forum 18, demanded that registered religious communities provide the authorities with information on their activities as well as inform the authorities on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious communities, which they openly described in these meetings as dangerous sects, sources at the meetings who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

At the officials' insistence, the participating religious communities signed a petition to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev asking the authorities to "struggle against and not give official registration to unspecified unregistered religious sects, which destabilise the situation in the country", sources told Forum 18 (see below).

Such meetings are known to have taken place on 20 September in Samarkand Region and on 15 October in Chirchik in Tashkent Region.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that their representatives were not invited to the meeting in Chirchik, despite the fact that they are registered there.

Some Imams of registered Mosques, as well as representatives of the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the Russian Orthodox Church, the registered Protestant Churches, Baha'i and Jewish communities from Samarkand, Jizakh, Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya Regions were summoned to the 20 September Samarkand meeting.

The State authorities were represented in the meeting by: Officer Sergei (last name not given) of the SSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent; Begzod Kodyrov, Deputy Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee; Dilshod Mamadkulov, Deputy Head of Samarkand Regional Administration; a high level official (name not given) of Samarkand Regional Police; and a Deputy Chief (name not given) of Samarkand Regional Justice Department.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses "the reason you have difficulty gaining registration"**

Begzod Kodyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed in the 20 September meeting between state officials and registered communities in Samarkand that "there is no persecution for religious beliefs in Uzbekistan, but there are cases of violation of the Religion Law." He said that communities "need to explain to their members that they must not violate the Religion Law. The Law was adopted in 1998, by this time you should have learned it by heart, but this did not happen."

Without specifying the time period, Kodyrov that four Christian and eight Muslim organisations had recently been registered in Uzbekistan.

Officer Sergei of the SSS secret police told the participating religious leaders that they "must necessarily explain to their communities the authorities' request to cooperate, must inform the authorities about all missionaries and their activity in writing, and assist the authorities to prevent violations of religious freedoms."

One official representative of a community, who was asked by the state officials to speak, told the meeting that it is "necessary to inform the authorities in writing of the necessity of preventing the activity of the Jehovah's Witness sect".

The official claimed, in his speech addressing the Protestants in the meeting, that the "reason you have difficulty gaining registration for your communities is the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is because the local authorities cannot distinguish between Christians and

Jehovah's

Witnesses."

A representative of another religious community, who was similarly asked by the state officials to speak, told the meeting that it is "important that all the registered religious organisations as well as Imams of mosques need to explain to their members the harm caused by dangerous sects." He said that it is "important that we all struggle against these sects in order to root them out. The authorities need to take radical measures against them."

Protestants Forum 18 spoke with, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, expressed their concerns about this to Forum 18.

"There are no legal grounds for the regime to demand that some religious communities collaborate with them against other communities," one Protestant pointed out. "This is a direct and flagrant violation of the Religion Law, according to which religious communities cannot take on the responsibilities of state agencies."

"We do not understand why officials demand Christian organisations launch a witch-hunt against Jehovah's Witnesses, and who gives the right to an Orthodox priest to brand other religious communities as sects, and to ask the authorities to take radical measures against them?" They added that "we know that according to the Russian Orthodox, all the other Churches except for the Orthodox and Catholics are sects."

Protestants, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the meeting participants "understood from Sergei's message that they must inform the authorities about Jehovah's Witness activities".

### **Told not to complain to human rights defenders or media**

In a similar meeting between state officials and registered religious communities, Begzod Kodyrov and other officials told the religious communities present not to share their problems with local or international rights defenders or media. "It will not help you," he told them. "If you have problems you need to tell us and not the media."

### **Coerced petition demanding some communities shouldn't have permission to exist**

Some religious communities at the 20 September Samarkand meeting signed an alleged petition claiming that "there are people and organisations which are involved in propagation of non-traditional cults and totalitarian sects". The Religious Affairs Committee published it on its website on 25 September, as did the pro-regime [podrobno.uz](http://podrobno.uz) on 3 October.

Uzbekistan has legally-binding international human rights law obligation to respect and facilitate the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, with its interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. This includes the freedom to share beliefs.

The "petition" claims that "without focusing on concrete organisations, we declare our common position against terrorism and extremism, which is produced by religious hatred and missionary activity of those organisations, the main purpose of which is degradation of the family, a scornful attitude to the older generation, refusal to further develop art and science, violation of laws, inter-religious enmity, propagation of homosexuality and paedophilia, infringement of health rights, and other centuries-old traditions of Uzbekistan."

The petition maintains that "impunity for violating the Religion Law can negatively affect



the security of the state and darken a bright future for the children".

"Feeling responsible for the future of our country, we ask you [President Mirziyoyev] to ensure that competent state agencies will not give state recognition to these illegal destructive organisations", the petition concludes.

Religious Affairs Committee officials stated that following this "petition", they would discuss ways to prevent missionary activity and proselytism at the next Public Council meeting.

Repeatedly from 4 December onwards, Religious Affairs Committee officials refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they issue such demands to religious communities.

Begzod Kodyrov, Deputy Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee, Nasratulla Nadirov, and Muzaffar Jalilov of the International Section all refused to explain why Uzbekistan breaks its international human rights obligations, as outlined in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities, by requiring belief communities to have state permission to exist and banning the sharing of beliefs. (END)

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## **Haj pilgrims face state control, bribery, blacklists**

***Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on haj pilgrims, including using blacklists to bar devout Muslims, arbitrarily restricting who can go on the pilgrimage. Controls are complex and multilayered, involving the SSS secret police, the Muftiate, and the government's Religious Affairs Committee. The system's complexity facilitates corruption.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (08.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/33XEXUM> - Uzbekistan continues to restrict severely the ability of Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca their faith requires, Forum 18 notes. Every able-bodied healthy adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime.

Yet Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims, severely restricts who can get onto the long pilgrimage waiting lists including using blacklists to bar devout Muslims, arbitrarily alters who can go on the pilgrimage and when they can go, and imposes a large financial cost for going on the pilgrimage (see below).

The haj is controlled and organised by three separate and interlocking state structures: the Haj Committee, the Haj Board, and the Haj Council, all of which involve the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the Muftiate, and the Religious Affairs Committee (see below).

Many Muslims have also observed that the complexity of the process and the many officials involved provides opportunities for bribery. "Believers are afraid because of the obstacles at so many levels that they will not be put on the waiting lists, or be removed from the lists arbitrarily," one told Forum 18. "So they are willing to pay up to the officials." They said that people do not wish to discuss such cases "fearing for their

safety", and added that "this is found in all spheres of life, that officials create obstacles and big queues so people have to pay bribes to get things done" (see below).

The Haj Committee removed from the list young women from Fergana Region who were due to go on the 2019 haj because they were below the state's unwritten age limit, a human rights defender told Forum 18 (see below).

One pilgrim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated that "the authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates does not follow Islam."

In 2019, the haj took place between 9 and 14 August. All the state-approved haj pilgrims flew from Uzbekistan to Saudi Arabia on the state-run Uzbekistan Airways.

### ***Restricted pilgrim numbers, long waiting lists***

Uzbekistan routinely imposes severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in the annual haj pilgrimage, with just over 5,000 a year having been allowed in the past. This led to long waiting times to be allowed by the regime to go on the haj, with some would-be pilgrims being told that they "will be able to go in 20 or 30 years" or even longer.

Saudi Arabia sets the quotas allowed per country, based on a quota of 1,000 pilgrims per million Muslim residents. Uzbekistan's population is over 32 million people, at least 90 per cent of whom are seen as being from a Muslim background, giving a possible haj quota of about 28,000 pilgrims a year. Since 2017 Uzbekistan has only allowed 7,200 haj pilgrims a year, roughly one quarter of the number of pilgrims the regime could allow.

According to Muslims Forum 18 has spoken to, waiting times are thought to vary significantly between the region around the capital Tashkent and elsewhere in the country. After the 2017 increase in the numbers the regime allows, current estimates of the time pilgrims can expect to wait – which are not officially published – vary between five to eight years for people from around Tashkent to between five and 20 years elsewhere.

"There always is a big gap between Tashkent and the regions," one Muslim familiar with haj waiting times told Forum 18 on 4 November.

"If you bribe the authorities you will have no waiting problem," another Muslim commented to Forum 18 in November. "If you don't, you may wait for years and years, because they will keep putting your name at the bottom of the list all the time."

Muslims think that various factors have led to the apparent decrease in waiting times after 2017. Adkham Olimov, a Muslim activist from Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 5 November that he thought these factors included: "the quota going up from 5,000 to 7,200, some on waiting lists dying of old age, some not being able to afford to go on the haj when their turn comes up, and some people secretly using private companies in third countries".

### ***Interlocking, multilayered state control, bribery***

The haj is controlled and organised by three separate and interlocking state structures: the Haj Committee, the Haj Board, and the Haj Council, all of which involve the SSS secret police, the Muftiate, and the Religious Affairs Committee.

Haj pilgrims who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals have noted that the complexity of the process and the many officials involved provides opportunities for bribery.

"Believers are afraid because of the obstacles at so many levels that they will not be put on the waiting lists, or be removed from the lists arbitrarily," one told Forum 18. "So they are willing to pay up to the officials." They said that people do not wish to discuss such cases "fearing for their safety", and added that "this is found in all spheres of life, that officials create obstacles and big queues so people have to pay bribes to get things done."

Individuals submit in writing an application to go on the haj, with a copy of their passport. According to a 2017 decree, the authorities then have one year to decide whether or not to allow an applicant onto the waiting list. Local administrations, along with the SSS secret police, the Muftiate and the state Religious Affairs Committee check and interview each applicant, after which the views of mahalla officials and residents on the applicant are sought. Alleged "consultation" by mahallas with their officials and residents has been manipulated to deny freedom of religion and belief. After this process is complete about whether or not to endorse or reject the application, and each mahalla committee submits to the local administration its list of potential pilgrims.

The central mahalla of a district then compiles a waiting list of applicants, and the Haj Committee then puts the names of the potential pilgrims onto a central register. The Haj Committee notifies pilgrims when their turn to go on the haj has arrived.

Pilgrims are then invited to the local district administration and instructed to collect more documents, including photographs, certificates of their place of residence, their health, and a reference letter from their local mahalla committee. The letter gives information about their personal qualities and "charitable works".

Haj pilgrims who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals have identified the "charitable works" requirement as a focus for extortion and bribery, at both the district authority and local mahalla committee level. Officials ask pilgrims to make donations for the repair or upgrading of roads, laying electricity lines, to help poor families, or for the unspecified welfare of the mahalla. Such donations are commonly made in cash, for example to mahalla committee chairs, and there is no transparency or accountability for how such money is spent or by who.

Similarly, it is thought that at least some – possibly 20 per cent or more - of medical certificates are obtained through bribery. These bribes can add between roughly 10 per cent and 30 per cent to the cost of the haj, depending on whether the potential pilgrim is genuinely healthy or not. The more unhealthy a would-be pilgrim is, the higher the potential for bribery.

"Officials do not openly ask for bribes, but in reality bribery is what happens," one Muslim commented to Forum 18.

The mahalla reference letter and the documents are submitted to the Haj Committee, which sends them for inspection to the Haj Board. The official Haj Board then inspects the documents of pilgrims, and approves the names of potential pilgrims in a given year, sending its list to the Haj Council.

The Haj Council collects travel expenses, arranges travel visas, organises additional medical examinations and vaccination of the pilgrims. It also organises the pilgrims into groups, appointing one group leader for every 50 pilgrims. Group leaders are thought by

many pilgrims to be SSS secret police informers or officers. The Haj Council also distributes the pilgrims onto flights run by the state-controlled Uzbekistan Airways.

Before the pilgrimage the Haj Council arranges pre-departure training for pilgrims, given by officials of the Muftiate, Religious Affairs Committee, and SSS secret police. Officials give special instructions to successful haj applicants on how to behave on pilgrimage, including not to talk to foreigners. Pilgrims are "strongly recommend not to have contacts with foreigners, and if invited for a meal or other meetings are told to inform group leaders and get their permission," a 2019 haj pilgrim, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, stated.

Officials typically give these instructions at meetings for all approved pilgrims. As well as group leaders, other SSS secret police informers or officers are thought to accompany the haj pilgrims.

Akmalkhan Shakirov, Head of the Muftiate's International Relations Department, who also oversees Haj organisational issues, refused to comment on why so many obstacles are put in the way of Muslims making the haj their faith requires them to make if they can. "I cannot talk to you over the phone about this," he told Forum 18 on 10 October.

Asked why the SSS secret police blocks Muslims from going on the haj, the duty officer in its headquarters in the capital Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 6 November that "these are just rumours." Asked why the SSS is involved at every level of haj organisation, he claimed that "I am not supposed to talk to you over the phone."

### ***Authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates "does not follow Islam"***

One pilgrim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated that "the authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates does not follow Islam." They pointed out that Islam does not require an age limit to go on the haj, "but officials require this." Similarly, there is no requirement in Islam for "pilgrims to be subjected to questioning by government officials about 'What is your reason for going on the Haj', 'Do you know such and such subjects in Islam', etc." The pilgrim asked, "Why do they have to ask about religious knowledge or beliefs, or ask about the reason for going on the Haj?"

The pilgrim also observed that Islam makes "no demands for pilgrims to give financial and other support to poor families living in the same mahalla. It should be voluntary not a law." They explained that "pilgrimage candidates are afraid that they can be removed from the list, because there have been examples of this, and so they pay certain sums to the mahalla committees to avoid this."

### ***Arbitrary age limit***

An "unwritten instruction" bans would-be pilgrims under the age of 45.

Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 on 1 November that the Haj Committee removed from the list young women from Fergana Region who were due to go on the 2019 haj. Officials told them that they are under the required age limit, even though there is no formal legal age limit. "This is only a matter of manipulation by officials to extort money from people, or put their own favoured people onto the lists," Tashanov suggested.

Human rights defender Bahodiyr Eliboyev and other Muslims who did not wish to be named also knew of such 2019 cases, when applicants who had previously been refused because of the unwritten age limit were allowed to go on the haj when they were older than the age limit.

Dilshodkhon Bobojonov, Head of the International Relations Department of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself to talk about the age limit.

### **High costs**

Only haj and umra (non-compulsory pilgrimage to Mecca at any time of the year) pilgrimages organised by the regime and allowed by the state-controlled Muftiate are permitted.

"Private individuals in Bukhara in 2018 tried to establish a company for private umra tours," human rights defender Shukhrat Ganiyev from Bukhara told Forum 18 on 5 November. "But the state-controlled Muftiate from Tashkent immediately blocked it through the regional authorities."

Another Muslim, who wished to be anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that it "it is possible to go on the umra privately but it must be done without making it public. I personally know some people who have done this from third countries, but this can lead to problems with the authorities."

Neither Zakirjon Khidoyatov, who is responsible in Bukhara Regional Administration for restricting freedom of religion and belief, nor spokesperson Umid Kushayev wanted to speak to Forum 18 on 6 November.

Ulugbek Jurayev, Assistant to Religious Affairs Committee Chair SSS secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov, claimed to Forum 18 on 14 October that "private companies can arrange haj visits, and people use their services."

However, on 28 August the SSS secret police detained 35 Muslims returning from the haj at Tashkent Airport, Radio Free Europe reported. The pilgrims, who were on a pilgrimage organised by a company in the United Arab Emirates, were held for seven hours of questioning. Officers asked them "who organised the pilgrimage, who led the group, how much they paid for the trip, and who they met during their stay abroad". The SSS secret police told the detainees that their passports can be collected from their local police station, where they will face further questioning.

Jurayev of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed to Forum 18 that "those pilgrims were not questioned about the Haj, but because their travel documents were not in order." He would not explain what was wrong with their documents.

Haj pilgrimages can be very expensive at the prices the regime charges, costing around one and a half times the average annual salary of around 24 million Soms. Although some foreign private firms charge more than the state price, others charge less than the state price – in some cases around half the price the state charges.

Referring to the state price, Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 that the price "is already very high, and it is very hard for an average Uzbek Muslim to accomplish the Haj." He added that "the cost of the Haj is one the main reasons why I have not been able to accomplish it yet."

Human rights defender Bahodiyr Eliboyev, from Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 4 November that "an average Uzbek cannot afford such [state] prices, and usually those who go on the Haj are either well-to-do or save money for years." He explained that "I for instance cannot cut food, health and other costs from my family budget, which is why I and many others cannot go on the Haj."

However, Muslims Forum 18 spoke to thought that past problems with obtaining foreign currency for the haj have been resolved, in both Tashkent and the regions. This is because citizens are now allowed to every quarter withdraw from banks amounts up to the equivalent of 2,000 USD Dollars.

### **Blacklists**

Even successful completion of the haj application process does not guarantee a haj pilgrimage, as the SSS secret police maintains an exit blacklist of people – for example human rights defenders – who are not allowed to travel abroad.

"Muslims on blacklists .. are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings," one human rights defender told Forum 18 in April 2019. One source used to identify Muslims for surveillance and warnings has been state-run competitions to find Koran Hafizes, who have memorised the Koran. The SSS secret police then questioned winners. Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined, but declined to give details for fear of state reprisals.

"On the recommendation of the SSS secret police, people can still be eliminated from the waiting lists," human rights defender Ganiyev told Forum 18. "Usually it is people the authorities do not trust or like." This causes some to decide not go on the haj.

"I have been told by officials that I am on a blacklist because I am devout," one Muslim who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 1 November. "So I have not applied to go on the haj because I think if I ask for this I will be blocked by the authorities."

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## **Raids, eviction threat for Urgench Baptists**

***Police raided a Baptist church's Sunday meetings for worship in Urgench in September and administration and police officials threatened Pastor Stanislav Kim with eviction from his home. Although the local administration then orchestrated a hostile mob, the congregation has in October met without official interference.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (22.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2JBk0Xx> - On Sunday 15 September, police from the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" raided the home of Pastor Stanislav Kim in Urgench in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region. The raid targeted the regular Baptist weekly meeting for worship, as has happened many times before to the Urgench congregation.

On 17 September, two days after the Sunday raid, officials summoned Pastor Kim to a meeting at the local mahalla committee (the lowest level of district administration). At the meeting were city and police officials as well as the local state-controlled imam. The mahalla Chair Khayrullo Yunusov was unable to explain to Forum 18 why an official of one belief was invited to a meeting attacking followers of another belief's exercise of freedom of religion and belief (see below).

Officials at the meeting claimed that there was in the mahalla "general discontent of the mahalla with the Baptists", claiming to have had complaints from 89 residents out of



about 3,000 people. One of the alleged 89 complainants is known to be a mahalla employee, but the others have not been identified (see below).

The meeting decided Pastor Kim "must leave our mahalla or he should arrange his meetings elsewhere", as well as that he and his family should be evicted from their home if the meetings do not stop. Mahalla Chair Yunusov denied that officials had threatened eviction, but refused to discuss this threat more when Forum 18 quoted from a letter he had sent to Pastor Kim threatening eviction (see below).

"some of their members come to their meetings with children under 17, and the Baptists teach them their religious dogmas," Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed. However, Pastor Kim observed that "we do not allow children in our meetings without their parents' consent" (see below).

The day after the meeting, on 18 September, Mahalla Chair Yunusov "gathered some neighbours and summoned brother Kim once again to their building", Baptists told Forum 18. Yunusov's mob "spoke to Kim in a hostile manner, and demanded that he and his family leave his home and move to another area," the Baptists complained. On 22 and 29 September police launched two further raids on Sunday meetings for worship (see below).

On 15 October Mahalla Chair Yunusov told Pastor Kim "that the best solution could be for us to rent a place outside the mahalla". Pastor Kim told Yunusov that "we are not going to rent a place, and we have our own property where we worship." (see below)

Pastor Kim also told Yunusov that the Baptists do not want to apply for state permission to exist, and that "we will continue our meetings for worship". He noted that their last meeting for worship was on Sunday 20 October and that officials have not interfered since the 29 September raid (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent what is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising the freedom of religion and belief that police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments" are involved. The Committee did not respond (see below).

From 2 October the Religious Affairs Committee has been run by State Security Service (SSS) secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov, who previously ran the SSS secret police in the southern Surkhandarya Region (see below).

### ***Police raid Baptists meeting for worship***

On Sunday 15 September, police from the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" raided the home of Pastor Stanislav Kim in Urgench in Uzbekistan's north-western Khorezm Region. The raid targeted the regular Baptist weekly meeting for worship, as has happened many times before to the Urgench congregation.

"We had many guests alongside with our regular worshippers since we were celebrating the autumn harvest God gave us. Our guests were from across Uzbekistan," Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 16 October. "They sent two of their officers to our meeting and then left."

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.

"Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" police throughout Uzbekistan are used by the regime to target the exercise of human rights without state permission.

### ***"Stop the meetings of the illegal Baptist Christian religion"***

On 17 September, two days after the Sunday raid, officials summoned Pastor Kim to a meeting held by the local mahalla committee (the lowest level of district administration). Mahalla committees are a key element in the regime's attempts to stop people exercising freedom of religion and belief without state permission.

At the meeting held in the mahalla's building were the Deputy Head of Urgench City Administration Munavarkhan Amanbayeva, Expert of the City Administration Department of youth, social and educational issues Oybek Vaisov, the head of Urgench's police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Khushnut Yakubov, his Deputy Khayrullo Salayev, local police officer Inspector Akbar Muradov, and the Chair of the local AI-Khorezm mahalla administration Khayrullo Yunusov.

Urgench City Administration officials who refused to give their names refused to put Forum 18 through to the Head of the Administration Shukhrat Abdullayev on 16 October. They referred Forum 18 to Deputy Amanbayeva. The person who answered her mobile phone claimed to Forum 18 that "she is busy and cannot talk with you". They would not say when a conversation could happen.

The mahalla meeting also included Imam Matyakubov of the mahalla's state-controlled Kuzli ota Mosque. The regime strictly controls and restricts all mosques and all public expressions of Islam.

Baptists told Forum 18 on 15 October that Pastor Kim was "questioned in a hostile manner in front of some mahalla residents about meetings for worship".

Mahalla Chair Yunusov was unable to explain why an imam was invited to a meeting attacking the freedom of religion and belief of followers of another belief. "We invite imams to mahalla meetings because they are part of the mahalla," Yunusov mumbled to Forum 18 on 15 October. When Forum 18 again asked why an imam was invited, Yunusov claimed that "the imam did not speak against them [Baptists] but only expressed the general discontent of the mahalla with the Baptists".

According to the minutes of the 17 September meeting, sent with a letter to Pastor Kim which Forum 18 has seen, Yunusov claimed that "residents of our mahalla wrote a complaint to us that Stanislav Kim gathers citizens in his home to propagate the teachings of the Illegal Baptist Christian religion". Yunusov further claimed that 89 residents "told us that either Kim must leave our mahalla or he should arrange his meetings elsewhere".

Asked by Forum 18 why the Baptists cannot meet for worship in their private property, Yunusov claimed that "this disturbs the neighbours".

The alleged residents also allegedly complained that "young children, including neighbours' children with adults, participate in these meetings, which concerns us". Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed that "some of their members come to their meetings with children under 17, and the Baptists teach them their religious dogmas. And they sing songs loudly in their home".

Pastor Kim told Forum 18 that "we do not sing loudly, and we do not allow children in our meetings without their parents' consent".

When Forum 18 pointed out to Mahalla chair Yunusov that parents have the internationally recognised human right to teach their children their beliefs and bring them to meetings, he claimed that "they are small children and do not understand what they are being taught".

Mahalla Chair Yunusov claimed to Forum 18 that "It's the mahalla residents' common view that the Baptists should not meet for their religious meetings in a residential area". However, very few names of the alleged 89 residents – out of about 3,000 residents – have been given, and at least one of the names is a mahalla employee. Yunusov also could not identify the alleged 89 residents to Forum 18.

In stark contrast to the anonymity of the claimed residents, all applications for state permission for a religious community to exist must include among other things full personal details of 100 adult Uzbeks citizens, as well as permission to exist from the mahalla.

Mahalla Chair Yunusov went on to tell the 17 September meeting that Pastor Kim "despite numerous talks with police from the Urgench Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, and several punishments including criminal punishments given to him is intent on continuing these illegal meetings".

Among the numerous punishments for exercising freedom of religion and belief given to Pastor Kim and his congregation is an August 2016 criminal punishment of two years corrective labour imposed on the Pastor for having Christian books in his own home.

### ***"He must be informed in writing of his eviction"***

Deputy City Administration Head Amanbayeva, city official Vaisov, and Imam Matyakubov all attacked Kim in the meeting, claiming that "you must register your Church or arrange your meetings elsewhere".

The state officials at the meeting then decided that "if Kim continues his criminal violations he must be informed in writing of his eviction from the mahalla". Also, police Inspector Muradov "should be informed of the further actions of the mahalla Administration regarding this issue".

Inspector Muradov was reluctant to discuss his participation in raids and the meeting. "I was in that meeting, but please talk to the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department as this issue is their responsibility," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. He then refused to talk more.

The head of Urgench's police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Yakubov did not answer his phone on 16 October.

When Forum 18 asked mahalla Chair Yunusov what the Baptists did that was criminal, he claimed that "the Baptists have misinformed you". When Forum 18 repeated the question, Yunusov could give no answer.

Forum 18 asked mahalla chair Yunusov why the authorities raided the Baptist Church and why they want to evict Kim's family from his home. "We are not against the Baptists," he claimed. "They have misinformed you. We are only suggesting them that they should rent a hall in the city for their meetings and not meet in a home in a residential area."

When Forum 18 pointed out that the warning letter threatens eviction, and asked what further actions the authorities will take, Yunusov replied: "I don't know. You need to ask the city authorities."

### ***Officially-orchestrated mob***

On 18 September, the day after the meeting, Mahalla Chair Yunusov "gathered some neighbours and summoned brother Kim once again to their building", Baptists told Forum 18. Yunusov's mob "spoke to Kim in a hostile manner, and demanded that he and his family leave his home and move to another area," the Baptists complained.

### ***Raid, written eviction threat***

On 22 September, one week after the initial raid, three Urgench police Criminal Investigation Department officers led by local police officer Inspector Muradov again raided the Baptists' Sunday meeting for worship.

"They entered our meeting hall, and Inspector Muradov video filmed all the participants," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Police then gave Pastor Kim a warning letter, including the minutes of the 17 September meeting, signed by mahalla Chair Yunusov. This claimed that Kim and his family will be "evicted" from their home "if he continues his criminal violations".

### ***"Our children hear your songs and want to attend your meetings"***

One week later, on Sunday 29 September, "Inspector Muradov and Chair Yunusov came to our meeting for worship", Pastor Kim stated. "They asked us why we gather and celebrate the Christian religion, in the midst of Muslim Uzbeks." They then told Kim that "you must not do this. Our children hear your songs and want to attend your meetings. You should stop this."

### ***"Seemingly, it has not affected our members or their attendance"***

However, Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 15 October that "we keep on meeting for our worship without any hindrance. Since early October no one from the authorities has visited us. Seemingly, it has not affected our members or their attendance."

On 15 October, Mahalla Chair Yunusov invited Pastor Kim to his office to tell him that he has received many messages about the case. "He again told me that the best solution could be for us to rent a place outside the mahalla," Pastor Kim told Forum 18 on 22 October. He told Yunusov that "we are not going to rent a place, and we have our own property where we worship."

Pastor Kim also told Yunusov that the Baptists do not want to apply for state permission to exist, and that "we will continue our meetings for worship". He noted that their last meeting for worship was on Sunday 20 October and that officials have not interfered since the 29 September raid.

### ***SSS secret police officer appointed to run Religious Affairs Committee***

On 2 October the regime appointed State Security Service (SSS) secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov as Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. He replaced Jasur Akramov, who ran the Committee from April 2018 to August 2019. His predecessor Artykbek Yusupov ran the Committee from 2006.

The Religious Affairs Committee has a key role in suppressing the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, as does the SSS secret police.

Colonel Akhmedov before his appointment ran the SSS secret police in the southern Surkhandarya Region, whose regional capital is Termez.

***What is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising this freedom?***

Forum 18 asked Ulugbek Jurayev, Assistant to SSS secret police Colonel Akhmedov at the Religious Affairs Committee, why Uzbekistan raids people exercising their freedom of religion and belief, and what is either "extremist" or "terrorist" about exercising this freedom that police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments" are involved. He claimed on 14 October that: "I am not aware of the case but I am sure if they write to the Committee, it will investigate why this happened."

The duty officer at the SSS secret police's Tashkent headquarters on 4 October refused to answer questions. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any officials.

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## **Muslim activist's sentence imminent?**

***The Prosecutor asked Tashkent City Court to give 48-year-old Tulkun Astanov a five-year suspended sentence, with a verdict expected on or after 18 October. The Muslim activist is being punished for visiting the state-controlled Muftiate to discuss hijab bans and other restrictions on freedom of religion and belief.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (14.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/36nI2Pu> - As the criminal trial of Muslim activist Tulkun Astanov and one other at Tashkent City Court neared its end after seven weeks, on 9 October the State Prosecutor asked the Court to give 48-year-old Astanov a five-year suspended sentence. He gave his final address to the court on 14 October. The verdict might be handed down as early as 18 October.

Astanov is being tried to punish him for visiting the state-controlled Muslim Board to discuss his concerns over restrictions on Muslims' freedom of religion and belief in Uzbekistan (see below).

"Today the Court gave the final word to the defendant," Rukhiddin Komilov, a Tashkent human rights defender, told Forum 18 on 14 October. He is defending Astanov and the other man together with Toir Zhumashev, the defence lawyer. "The Court took no other actions, and possibly on 18 October or on a later date the sentence will be handed down."

Astanov is facing the more serious charges of storing or distributing "extremist" materials using telecommunications networks. The maximum punishment is eight years' imprisonment. He denies distributing any "extremist" materials (see below).

Officials at the Court refused to put Forum 18 through to the Judge hearing the case, Orif Klychev. Neither they, nor officials at Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office, would explain why Astanov is on trial (see below).

Ulugbek Jurayev, Assistant to Abdugafur Akhmedov, the newly-appointed Chair of the State Religious Affairs Committee, claimed to Forum 18 on 14 October that Akhmedov and his Deputies were busy.

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Asked why the authorities are prosecuting Astanov simply for expressing his views on freedom of religion and belief in Uzbekistan and criticising the authorities, Jurayev replied: "I think extremist materials were seized from him, and that is why."

Told that Forum 18 has seen no evidence of extremism in the indictment, and was told by the defence that the security agencies also could not produce such evidence, asked why he is so sure about it, he said "I don't know the details."

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Diego Garcia-Sayán, visited Uzbekistan in September. He noted that "challenges continue to undermine the independence of the judiciary as an institution and the capacity of individual judges to decide the case before them solely on the basis of their conscience and in accordance with the law and the facts of the case" (see below).

Meanwhile, officials refused to explain why Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov has not been amnestied in view of the recent amnesties or pardonings of a number of Muslim prisoners of conscience or why Tursunov's relatives have not been allowed to visit him in prison in recent months (see below).

### ***Defending hijab wearers***

Muslim activist Tulkun Tashmuradovich Astanov (born 25 April 1971) was present in Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Court to observe when two Muslim women, Luiza Muminjanova and Nazimakhon Abdukakharova, tried unsuccessfully to challenge the ban on wearing the hijab (Muslim head covering for women).

"The Court upheld the ban, which Astanov did not like," human rights defender Komilov told Forum 18. Astanov then decided to go with one other to the state-controlled Muftiate to ask why Muslim girls are banned from wearing hijab, among other questions.

At the 8 April meeting at the Muftiate, Astanov asked Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur among other things why the hijab is banned, why imams have to be appointed by the state and preach sermons prepared for them by the state, and why the Muftiate does not help Muslims when their freedom of religion and belief is violated.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused Astanov of being a "hooligan", and being disrespectful to the Muftiate's alleged "spiritual leadership". Police were called and later in the day officers arrested Astanov.

### ***Police "illegally opened criminal case"***

A Tashkent court jailed Astanov and one other on 8 April for 15 days for criticising Uzbekistan's lack of freedom of religion and belief. They were arrested and jailed the same day they met the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, a day after his 15-day jail term expired.

However, before the 15-day jail term had ended, SSS secret police launched a criminal case against Astanov.

"We think that officers of Olmazor District police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department arrested Astanov near the building of the Muftiate and brought him to Olmazor District Police Station on 8 April," human rights defender Komilov told Forum 18. "There police at first opened an administrative case against him, and then on the completion of the 15 days, on 22 April, they opened a criminal case against Astanov before releasing him."



Komilov explained that "This is the usual procedure - the state puts defendants in custody to keep them under pressure to cooperate and it is easier to fabricate criminal cases this way."

The criminal case was led from 23 April by State Security Service (SSS) secret police investigator Major Bakhoddinov, Komilov told Forum 18.

"Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department police violated the law and illegally opened the criminal case," Komilov stated. He explained that on 8 April, Muftiate officials had called the ordinary police to complain of alleged hooligan acts of Astanov. Police that brought him to a police station under hooliganism charges.

"However, it was Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department police officers who apprehended Astanov, and later questioned him in the police station." Komilov insisted that this is illegal. "Legally, police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments can only be involved in criminal cases."

### ***"Charges have been fabricated"***

Prosecutors brought charges against Astanov under Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 3 Point (d) ("Production or storage with the purpose of distribution of materials that contain ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent expulsion of citizens, or aimed at creating a panic among the population, as well as production, storage with the purpose of distribution or demonstration of attributes or symbols of religious-extremist terrorist organisations", committed "with use of the media or telecommunication networks as well as the internet"). This carries a maximum punishment of five to eight years' imprisonment.

Komilov complained to Forum 18 that the "charges have been fabricated" and that Astanov is being prosecuted for "actively raising freedom of religion and belief issues of Muslims in Uzbekistan with the authorities on social media, as well as for having dared to go directly to the Muftiate to discuss the ban on the hijab and other issues with officials there."

The criminal investigation is led by SSS secret police investigator Major B. Bakhoddinov.

The 25 July indictment - signed by Tashkent City Prosecutor Bakhridin Valiyev and SSS secret police investigator Major A. Zufarov and seen by Forum 18 - claims that "extremist materials belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organisation were found on the mobile phone seized from Astanov during questioning".

Nowhere does the indictment say exactly what the alleged ISIS or Daesh materials are, nor is any proof given of any link between the materials found on Astanov's phone and ISIS or Daesh. The "extremist" materials found on Astanov's Facebook page are a video clip on the hadith (sayings) by the Muslim Prophet Muhammad on the fate of Syria, which displayed the flag of the Hizb ut-Tahrir Muslim movement banned in Uzbekistan.

Also on Astanov's Facebook page were several Muslim texts with the titles "Counsel by Religious Masters," "Sheikh Sodik Samarkandi on wearing hijab", "Identity of Muslim girls", "Novruz holiday (fireworship festival) is haram (forbidden) for Muslims", "[Western] New Year celebration forbidden for Muslims".

"The only allegedly extremist thing the investigators could find in my materials, was the miniscule flag of Hizb ut-Tahrir in that video," Astanov told Forum 18 on 4 October. "I downloaded it from the internet since I was looking for the hadith of the Prophet on the fate of Syria, and unfortunately I was not careful enough to notice that flag."

Astanov added that he immediately removed the video from his Facebook account after the investigators told him about it. "In fact, long before I downloaded the video I had warned my readers about ISIS and Hizb ut-Tahrir and all the other extremist organisations." Forum 18 on 4 October verified the truthfulness of this on Astanov's Facebook account.

### ***Trial begins***

Prosecutors handed the criminal case against Astanov to Tashkent City Court, where it was assigned to Judge Orif Klychev. The trial began on 23 August.

On the petition of defence lawyer Zhumashev, Judge Klychev questioned Mahmud Tolipov, Chief of Olmazor District police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments, and his subordinate Senior Lieutenant Botyr Kholikiy during the 30 September hearing.

"Senior Lieutenant Kholikiy admitted that he participated in the detention of Astanov near the Muftiate building," Komilov told Forum 18. Kholikiy told the Court that Astanov did not resist arrest. However, he could a defence question about what legal basis the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department was involved in the arrest.

Komilov added that "Police Chief Tolipov claimed to the Court that he is not related to this case at all, and Judge Klychev asked him no further questions."

Komilov told Forum 18 that among the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" police officers who interrogated Astanov was A. Khusainov (first name not shown in the case files).

Khusainov in the 23 September hearing claimed that he "only prepared a report of the confiscation of the phone but did not participate in the arrest or questioning of the defendant," Komilov said. "We asked him on what grounds officers of the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Departments participated in the Administrative Code case, and he could not answer."

On 9 October the State Prosecutor Azizbek Islamov, representing Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office, asked the Court to give Astanov a five-year suspended sentence. He gave his final address to the court on 14 October. The verdict might be handed down as early as 18 October.

### ***No answers***

Judge Klychev's Assistant, Begzod (who refused to give his last name), who answered the Judge's number several times between 4 and 10 October, refused to tell Forum 18 why a criminal case was opened against Astanov. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials. "I already told you that no one from the Court will give any comments to you. You need to ask the Supreme Court's permission to talk to us," he told Forum 18 on 10 October.

Tashkent Court's Chancellery officials (no names were given) between 4 and 10 October refused to answer Forum 18's questions regarding the case or put it through to Judge Klychev or to Bakhtiyar Islamov, the Court's Chair.

Phones in Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office went unanswered between 9 and 10 October.

Asked why a criminal case was opened against Astanov, Olmazor District Police officials (who did not give their names) on 4 October referred Forum 18 to Olmazor police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Chief Talipov and Officer Kholikiy.

Reached by Forum 18 on the same day and asked about the case both officers claimed that it was a wrong number. When Forum 18 confirmed with Olmazor Police that the numbers are correct and called back, Chief Talipov said "What now, are you threatening me?" He then put the phone down.

The duty officer, who answered the phone of the SSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent on 4 October, wrote down Forum 18's question why Astanov was accused by the secret police of extremism simply for criticising the Muftiate and the regime for their violation of the freedom of religion and belief of Muslims and for sharing the teachings of some Imams and Hadith on their social media accounts. But no answer was given.

The SSS secret police officer also refused to put Forum 18 through to Investigator Bakhoddinov or other responsible officials. "I cannot do so, but only write down your complaint," he answered. "I do not have such information," was his response, when Forum 18 asked how it can get in touch with any SSS officers involved in the case.

### ***United Nations concerns over judicial independence***

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Diego Garcia-Sayán, visited Uzbekistan in late September as Astanov's trial continued.

In his 25 September statement at the end of his visit, Garcia-Sayán noted that "a number of challenges continue to undermine the independence of the judiciary as an institution and the capacity of individual judges to decide the case before them solely on the basis of their conscience and in accordance with the law and the facts of the case".

"Substantial threats against judicial independence and the rule of law remain," Garcia-Sayán warned. He pointed to the heavy and constant presence of the security services throughout society and Uzbekistan's institutions. He was also concerned about broad powers that prosecutors retain in criminal proceedings, which limit the independence of judges to decide cases autonomously and in accordance with his or her conscience.

"The system as a whole should have a clearer human rights focus," Garcia-Sayán added.

### ***Tursunov's relatives denied prison visits***

Abdulla (he refused to give his last name), Press Secretary of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Implementation of Punishments, which oversees prisons, refused to tell Forum 18 why Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov has not been amnestied in view of the recent amnesties or pardonings of a number of Muslim prisoners of conscience or why Tursunov's relatives were not allowed to visit him in prison in recent months.

Abdulla also refused to put Forum 18 through to Bakhrombek Adylov, Deputy Interior Minister, Head of the Chief Directorate, or any other officials. "Please send your questions in writing," he told Forum 18. When it asked for the email or mailing address, he consulted with some officials but then put the phone down without saying anything. Subsequent calls on the same day went unanswered.

Kazakhstan illegally extradited Khayrullo Turdiyevich Tursunov (born 4 April 1975) to Uzbekistan in March 2013. He was sentenced in June 2013 to 16 years in jail for meeting privately with other Muslims without state permission to study the Koran and pray.

Shortly after his sentence, Tursunov was apparently deliberately exposed by the regime to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis.

Officials from the southern Kashkadarya Region – possibly from the SSS secret police – arrived at the Labour Camp in Karshi in Bukhara Region where Tursunov is being held. They tortured him over a period of six hours on 17 April and threatened to extend his jail term. They were trying to extract false testimony against a distant relative who has lived outside Uzbekistan since 2006. Tursunov refused to sign the pre-prepared statement.

Prison authorities have refused Tursunov's relatives permission to visit him in Karshi prison in recent months, Bayramali Yusupov, his distant relative who lives abroad, told Forum 18 on 2 October 2019. "Khayrullo is still in prison, and a couple of days ago I was told that for the last couple of months the prison authorities have not allowed relatives to visit him."

Yusupov told Forum 18 that "when Khayrullo was arrested up to 30 Uzbek citizens were arrested at the same time in a fabricated case. Allegedly they cooperated and organised an extremist organisation. Almost all of them have been released from prison except for Khayrullo."

A Muslim man - released after a lengthy jail term from the prison where Tursunov is held - told Yusupov by phone that Tursunov's prison is a "strict regime prison, and the authorities do not as a rule release prisoners from there directly". He said that Tursunov "should be moved to a less strict regime prison at first and only then he could be amnestied". The former prisoner has not seen Tursunov personally and does not know his conditions, Yusupov told Forum 18.

Tursunov's Labour Camp address is:

Uzbekistan  
Bukhara Region  
Korovulbazar sh.  
Uchr. UYa-64/25  
Tursunov Khayrullo Turdiyevich

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## **Torture, no pardon, for prisoner of conscience**

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (21.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2wGAred> - Officials from the southern Kashkadarya Region – possibly from the SSS secret police – arrived at the Labour Camp in Bukhara Region where Muslim prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov is being held. They tortured him over a period of six hours on 17 April and threatened to extend his 16-year jail term. They were trying to extract false testimony against a distant relative who has lived outside Uzbekistan since 2006. Tursunov refused to sign the pre-prepared statement.

The 44-year-old Tursunov is serving a 16 year sentence imposed in 2013 for meeting without state permission with other Muslims to study the Koran and pray. His family have since March 2018 been seeking a pardon for him (see below).

Since April 2018, Tursunov's family have been trying to convince him to write to the President for a pardon, a relative told Forum 18. But Korovulbazar Labour Camp officers

told him that "even if you write a letter it will not help you. No one will release you." The officials also laughed at him for thinking that he could be pardoned. Due to the officials' behaviour, including torturing him on 17 April 2019, relatives say that Tursunov thinks there is no point in applying for a pardon (see below).

Officials – possibly from the SSS secret police – tried to get him to sign false statements against a distant relative, Bayramali Yusupov. Yusupov has been in exile since 2006 after criminal charges were brought against him for having attended a Turkish-run school and being active in mosques. He has been seeking a guarantee that he can return without being prosecuted, but the regime will not grant this. "In March and April 2019 up to 20 Muslim men were questioned about me, some of whom are serving prison terms," Yusupov told Forum 18 (see below).

Exiled human rights defender Mutabar Tajibayeva of Fiery Hearts told Forum 18 that she thought that "the authorities are afraid that if Yusupov comes back to Uzbekistan he will speak about many of their crimes against innocent Muslims" (see below).

Tursunov was "beaten and put under psychological pressure" over about six hours on 17 April 2019, a relative told Forum 18. Tursunov was "pressured to sign statements against Yusupov that the officials had prepared in advance, and threatened that his Labour Camp sentence would be extended unless he signs". However, despite the torture, Tursunov did not sign the pre-prepared statements (see below).

Despite numerous complaints from the family, and contrary to the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no officials have been arrested or prosecuted for torturing Tursunov. Forum 18 is aware of other cases where officials who have acted illegally also apparently enjoy impunity. No official has been prepared to talk to Forum 18 about the impunity torturers enjoy (see below).

Elsewhere, Jahongir Kulijanov, a Shia Muslim from Bukhara has been freed on parole. He was among 20 Shias detained in Bukhara in February 2017 and tortured. Kulijanov was jailed for five years in September 2017 for having works on Shia history on his mobile phone (see below).

Kulijanov must give the regime 20 per cent of any salary he earns, report to police weekly, cannot leave his home town without police permission, and must not leave Uzbekistan, relatives who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. His parole will end in 2022 when his Labour Camp sentence ends. Police allow him to attend a mosque, but relatives pointed out "unless the authorities decide that it is lawful to read Shia history on the internet, we cannot do this" (see below).

The state Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent told Forum 18 that it does not know whether any texts about Shia Islam are legally available in the country (see below).

### ***Illegally extradited, jailed for 16 years, exposed to TB***

Kazakhstan illegally extradited Khayrullo Turdiyevich Tursunov (born 4 April 1975) to Uzbekistan in March 2013. He was sentenced in June 2013 to 16 years in jail for meeting privately with other Muslims without state permission to study the Koran and pray. Shortly after his sentence, Tursunov was apparently deliberately exposed by the regime to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis.

Tursunov's health has given concern to his relatives throughout his imprisonment, and in 2016 he was apparently tortured. "Khayrullo was either tortured in prison or is in deep

depression, his sisters did not know the exact reasons," Tursunov's relatives outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18 in February 2016. "But he sounded like he was saying his last goodbye to his sisters because he thought the end of his life is coming."

Tursunov's state of health later improved. But relatives told Forum 18 on 20 May 2019 that he appears to be suffering from stomach problems, for which he needs medicine relatives buy him.

### ***"No one will release you"***

Following the release in 2018 of some prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief, Tursunov's family hoped that he too could be freed. From March 2018 onwards, relatives asked the regime, including the prison and the Interior Ministry, to free him. One of his sisters, Mukaddas Tursunova, also phoned President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's office.

Both the Interior Ministry and the President's office stated that Tursunov himself must personally write an appeal for a pardon to President Mirziyoyev.

Tursunova wrote to the Interior Ministry asking whether her brother had been told he had to ask for a pardon himself. The Interior Ministry's Deputy Chief of Staff A. Kodyrov wrote back on 18 April 2018 saying that officials had told Tursunov of this.

On 18 April Korovulbazar Labour Camp officers Captain A. Latipov, Senior Lieutenant B. Jamolov, and Lieutenant F. Shabanov notified Tursunov of this in writing. "However these Labour Camp officials told Khayrullo that this is just a formality," a relative told Forum 18. "Even if you write a letter it will not help you. No one will release you." Officials also laughed at Tursunov for thinking that he could be pardoned.

Since April 2018 Tursunov's family have been trying to convince him to write to the President for a pardon, a relative told Forum 18. However, due to the behaviour of officials (for example torturing him – see below) Tursunov does not think there is any point in doing this.

Tursunov's Labour Camp address is:

Uzbekistan  
Bukhara Region  
Korovulbazar sh.  
Uchr. UYa-64/25  
Tursunov Khayrullo Turdiyevich

### ***Prisoner of conscience tortured***

On 17 April 2019 officials from the southern Kashkadarya Region, where Tursunov comes from, questioned and tortured Tursunov in Korovulbazar Labour Camp where he is serving his sentence. The officials tortured him to extract statements from him against a distant relative, Bayramali Yusupov.

Yusupov fled Uzbekistan in 2006 after "extremism" criminal charges were opened against him, he told Forum 18 from exile on 15 May 2019. "I actively attended the Kuk Gumbaz (Blue dome) Mosque of Karshi [Qarshi] and prayed at my work in a Turkish construction company, after gaining my education in a Turkish-run lycee," he stated. "The authorities claimed that almost everyone who finished a Turkish-run school and was active in mosques might be 'extremist'. I was questioned many times, long before they opened a criminal case against me."



Yusupov – like others - has asked to be allowed to return with a guarantee of no prosecution, but the regime has refused to do this. "In March and April 2019, up to 20 Muslim men were questioned about me, some of whom are serving prison terms," he told Forum 18.

Human rights defender Mutabar Tajibayeva of Fiery Hearts told Forum 18 from exile in Paris on 15 May that she thought that "the authorities are afraid that if Yusupov comes back to Uzbekistan he will speak about many of their crimes against innocent Muslims".

Tursunov was over an approximately six hour period on 17 April 2019 "beaten and put under psychological pressure", a relative told Forum 18. Officials pressured Tursunov "to sign statements against Yusupov that the officials had prepared in advance, and threatened that his Labour Camp sentence would be extended unless he signs". However, despite the torture, Tursunov did not sign the pre-prepared statements.

Unfair trials with the use of false evidence are common in Uzbekistan.

The family suspects that the officials were from the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, as it is known that the investigation against Yusupov is being led by Investigator Turgun Umirov of the Kashkadarya Region SSS.

A Kashkadarya SSS secret police officer (who refused to give his name) on 20 May claimed to Forum 18 – after consulting other officials - that it is a "wrong number" as soon as Forum 18 asked about Tursunov and Yusupov.

### ***"How is it possible?"***

During a 2 May visit by relatives to Tursunov they complained to Labour Camp officials about the questioning and torture. "Officials told us that they know nothing about it," they told Forum 18. One relative asked: "How is it possible that officials come and interrogate Khayrullo in the Labour Camp, and the Labour Camp authorities know nothing about it?"

Mukaddas Tursunova, Tursunov's sister, complained about the torture to: the head from February 2019 of the SSS secret police Abdusalom Azizov; parliamentary Human Rights Ombudsperson Ulughbek Mukhamadiyev; Prosecutor General Otabek Murodov; and Interior Minister Pulat Bobojonov, [dunyouzbeklari.com](http://dunyouzbeklari.com) noted on 10 May.

Tursunova stated that Tursunov was thinking of writing to ask for a pardon, but after being tortured and interrogated for six hours he does not think he will be pardoned.

She also asked the government to identify the three officials who tortured Tursunov and pressured him to testify against an innocent person, and punish the officials according to the law.

Under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Uzbekistan has a binding international legal obligation to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture, and to try them under criminal law.

An official who refused to give his name who answered the phone of Colonel Bakhrombek Adylov, Deputy Interior Minister and head of the Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, refused to comment on the torture of Tursunov. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to other officials, or talk further. No other Interior Ministry official was prepared on 17 May to talk about the impunity torturers enjoy.

### ***"What do you expect?"***

The regime frequently uses extreme and repeated pressure – including torture - against people of all faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Among other recent examples the mother-in-law of a Protestant Christian was ordered by police to physically attack her and evict her from her home, and the use of other forms of torture. Contrary to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no prosecutions appear to have been brought in these and other cases.

Repeated attempts – for example by Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants – to end the impunity officials enjoy to commit torture and other illegal actions have not resulted in prosecutions or jail sentences for the officials concerned.

"I know of no cases when officials were arrested or put on trial for torture of Christians," one Protestant told Forum 18 on 20 May. "Officials violate the law, the Constitution, international obligations, and even internal regulations of the law-enforcement agencies. But they are 'not guilty' because they are doing their job."

The Protestant added: "What do you expect when the Religious Affairs Committee thinks that even the post cards we send each other on Christian holidays are extremist?"

### ***Shia Muslim released on parole, but still no legal Shia texts***

Jahongir Kulijanov, a Shia Muslim from Bukhara [Bukhoro], was among 20 Shias detained in Bukhara in February 2017 and tortured, and fined in August 2017. Kulijanov was jailed for five years in September 2017 for having works on Shia history on his mobile phone. Munojot Parpiyeva, his lawyer, lodged an appeal with Bukhara Regional Court on 29 June 2018.

On 5 February 2019 Kulijanov was freed on parole, relatives who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 2 May. He must give the regime 20 per cent of any salary he earns, report to police weekly, cannot leave his home town without police permission, and must not leave Uzbekistan. His parole will end in 2022 when his Labour Camp sentence ends.

No officials responsible for torturing any of the 20 Shia Muslims in Bukhara in 2017 appears to have been either arrested or put on criminal trial.

Police allow Kulijanov to attend a mosque, but relatives pointed out "unless the authorities decide that it is lawful to read Shia history on the internet, we cannot do this." Uzbekistan imposes severe censorship of all religious materials.

Mukhddin Khakimov, who is responsible for state Religious Affairs Committee work with mosques, told Forum 18 on 17 May that he does not know whether any texts about Shia Islam are legally available in the country. He referred Forum 18 to officials of the Committee's "Expert Analysis" Section who - like the head of the Committee – did not answer their telephones on 17 May.

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## **Supreme Court challenge to student hijab ban**

**By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18**

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*Two women are awaiting Supreme Court hearings in their challenges to the ban on female students wearing hijab in Tashkent's state-run International Islamic Academy and its secondary school. The Academy expelled Luiza Muminjanova in 2018, while Abdukakharova was allowed back after complaining. The state took over the Muslim Board's Academy in 2018.*

Forum 18 (29.04.2019) - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2472](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2472) - Uzbekistan's Supreme Court in the capital Tashkent is preparing to hear the appeals of two Muslim women, Luiza Muminjanova and Nazimakhon Abdukakharova. Muminjanova is appealing against her expulsion from Tashkent's state-run International Islamic Academy for insisting on wearing hijab (Islamic headcover) to classes. Abdukakharova is appealing against the ban on wearing hijab in the Islamic secondary school attached to the Academy.

No date has yet been set for the Supreme Court hearings, Muminjanova told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 29 April.



**Female students outside Islamic Academy, Tashkent, 2018 ozodlik.org (citizen journalist)**

Between September and December 2018, the Islamic Academy forced at least six other female students to leave for insisting on wearing hijab to classes, Yelena Urlayeva, an independent human rights defender from Tashkent, complained to Forum 18 on 16 April (see below).

"Muminjanova was officially expelled for her extended absence from classes, and others were compelled to write their own requests to the Academy to quit, allegedly for lacking finances and other reasons," Urlayeva told Forum 18.

A Tashkent Muslim who knows the female students who were forced to leave the Academy, on condition of anonymity for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 16 April that the "Academy threatened that otherwise it will complain against them to the law-enforcement agencies."

"Muscular men and women", likened by one Tashkent Muslim to Soviet-era civilian militia, prevented female students wearing hijab from entering the Academy (see below).

Before the expulsions, the Academy had warned students several times that while attending the Academy they must abide by the secular dress code for secondary and higher education institutions the Government adopted on 15 August 2018 (see below).

Abdukakharova was allowed to continue wearing hijab while attending the Academy's secondary school after launching her complaints (see below).

From 1 April 2019, both the Academy and its secondary school have allowed female students to wear a headscarf, but still not hijab (see below).

More than a thousand students, mostly from within Uzbekistan, currently study at the Academy.

### ***Religious education under tight state control***

Religious education is under tight state control. Only state-recognised religious communities with centralised religious bodies (such as the Muslim Board, Russian Orthodox diocese or Baptist Union) are allowed to run educational establishments. Those who conduct religious education outside these officially-approved organisations are fined or jailed.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev created the state-run International Islamic Academy with a presidential decree of 16 April 2018 by merging Tashkent Islamic University and the Islamic Academy. (He also decreed the creation of a Hadith School in Samarkand.)



**Imam Al-Bukhari Islamic Institute, Tashkent** [Carpodacus/Wikimedia Commons](#)  
[CC BY-SA 4.0]

The University had been founded as a state-run institution by then President Islam Karimov in April 1999. The Academy was founded by the Muslim Board as a non-state institution and approved by Presidential decree in December 2017. The merger had the effect of ending the Muslim Board's control of the Academy after only four months' existence.

The state-backed Muslim Board still operates the Imam al-Bukhari Islamic Institute in Tashkent, founded in 1971, as well as ten Madrassahs in various cities. Independent Islamic education is banned.

"Young women in Madrassahs and students of the Islamic Institute are allowed to wear hijab," Muminjanova told Forum 18. "However, not many can study in the few existing Madrassahs because of the limited numbers of places and the Islamic Institute accepts only those who graduated from a Madrassah."

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[Bloggers and others who have criticised the hijab ban and the state controls over the Muslim Board have faced punishment.](#)

### ***Court challenges to ban on hijab***

Two Tashkent-based Muslim women, Luiza Muminjanova and Nazimakhon Abdulkakharova, filed complaints against the bans on hijab imposed in 2018 by the International Islamic Academy and its secondary school. But both Tashkent City's Shaykhantaur District Court (first instance) and Tashkent City Appeal Administrative Court between February and March supported the ban.

The two women appealed to the Supreme Court on 28 March. "The Supreme Court is studying the cases and has two months to hear the appeals," Abduvokhid Yakubov, Abdulkakharova's father, told Forum 18 on 10 April. Yakubov also is the legal representative in the Court for both Abdulkakharova and Muminjanova (who is originally from Urgench).

"Although my daughter was allowed to attend classes in hijab from the end of November 2018," Yakubov added, "when we began complaining about the ban on hijab to the authorities, we still pressed on with the complaint against the ban because other students are not allowed to wear it."

He explained that "they permitted my daughter to wear hijab but others were not allowed to do so. The students were told that it is because my daughter challenged the ban in the courts."

Yakubov told Forum 18 that "not all the students appealed against their expulsions because they are afraid of the authorities."

### ***New secular dress code***

A government decision of 15 August 2018, signed by Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov, imposed a secular dress code in all educational institutions. This meant a de facto ban on female students covering their heads by wearing hijab.

Muminjanova complained that soon after she was accepted to the Academy in September 2018, she found out that she could not attend classes in hijab. The Academy cited the government's new secular dress code, she told Forum 18 on 15 April 2019.



**Dress code notice outside Islamic Academy, Tashkent, 2018 Ozodlik.org (citizen journalist)**



"My daughter also could not at first attend her secondary school because of the same government dress code," Yakubov, Abdukhakhorova's father, similarly complained. He explained that the dress code does "not explicitly mention hijab but the model photo presented in the dress code has a knee-high dark skirt and a white blouse without any head cover, where legs, arms, neck and head are seen."

The Academy put up several signs outside its building in late 2018 illustrating what clothing was and was not acceptable for male and female students, based on the government decision. The signs showed that female students must wear knee-length skirts and the head must be uncovered. The examples of photos of women in long dresses covering their legs and head scarves covering their neck and head were crossed out with red lines, indicating that such dresses were not allowed.

The stands were removed on 16 April 2019, Muslims from Tashkent told Forum 18.

### ***"Muscular men and women" enforce hijab ban***

Muminjanova told Forum 18 that in September 2018, the Academy held several meetings and threatened students who insisted on wearing hijab to classes with expulsion from the Academy.

A Tashkent Muslim, who wished to remain unnamed for fear state reprisals, said women and men stood in front of the Academy, stopping female students wearing hijab from entering. "These were muscular men and women who acted like civilian militia during the communist [Soviet] times," the Tashkent Muslim told Forum 18 on 17 April. "They used obscene words and shouted at the young women who wore hijab."

### ***Eviction from dormitory was first punishment***

The first punishment for Muminjanova was her own "forceful eviction" from the Academy dormitory, she complained to Forum 18.

Later, the Academy stopped allowing Muminjanova to attend classes, and officials prevented her from entering the Academy building at the entrance. "After many unsuccessful attempts to enter the Academy building, I was informed that it had sent a letter of notification to my parents that I was expelled for many absences."

Other female students besides Muminjanova were forced to leave the Academy. These included Aziza Sayfullayeva, Munisa Mirilyosova, Shakhnovoz Godirova and Shakhlo Almatova, all first year students, and Fotima Isroilova, a third year student.

"Another third year female student in December 2018 took academic leave because of the hijab ban," the Tashkent Muslim told Forum 18.

"I heard rumours that up to ten students may have been expelled because their parents also received warnings," human rights defender Urayeva told Forum 18. "Many other female students, fearing expulsion, took off their hijabs and began wearing long wigs of artificial hair to the Academy to cover their hair and heads," Urayeva added.

### ***First suit fails***

Both Abdukakharova and Muminjanova lodged suits to court, challenging the hijab ban. Both suits were heard in Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Administrative Court.

Abdukakharova's suit against the hijab ban and her expulsion from the Academy was the first to reach court.



Judge Sharof Muminov of Shaykhantaur District Administrative Court on 15 February heard Abdukakharova's suit against the hijab ban enforced by the Academy's secondary school.

Participating in the case were Shaislom Akmalov, Lutfullo Abdulkadirov, Legal representatives of the Islamic Academy; Ulugbek Bozorov, Legal representative of the government's Secondary and Higher Education Ministry; Sobitjon Sharipov, Legal representative of State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA); as well as Ikramjon Mardonov, Legal representative of the Muslim Board.

Sharipov of the SCRA told the Court the Academy's secondary school is subject to secular dress code under the auspices of the Islamic Academy.

At the end of the 15 February hearing, Judge Muminov rejected Abdukakharova's suit, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Judge Khasanov of Tashkent City Court on 13 March rejected Abdukakharova's appeal against Judge Muminov's decision, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Judge Muminov on 26 April refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Asked why Abdukakharova or other young women are not allowed to wear hijab to classes to a secondary school which teaches Islam, Judge Muminov brushed it off, "I do not need to answer you. Also we are not authorised to give comments on our decisions over the phone."

### ***Second suit fails, rights defender and witness not allowed in Court room***

Judge Sardor Rakhmudinov of Tashkent's Shakhantaur District Administrative Court heard Muminjanova's suit on 20 February.

Participating in the case were Shaislom Akmalov, Lutfullo Abdulkadirov, Legal representatives of the Islamic Academy; Ulugbek Bozorov, Legal representative of the government's Secondary and Higher Education Ministry; Sobitjon Sharipov, Legal representative of State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA); as well as Ikramjon Mardonov, Legal representative of the Muslim Board.

Sharipov explained to the Court that the Islamic Academy is an "independent from the Muslim Board secular education Institution based on the Government's 22 June 2018 decision No. 466." He stated to the Court that "based on the 15 August 2018 decision No. 666 of the Government, the dress code of the Academy is the common secular dress code for all secular education institutions."

On the orders of Shavkat Zulunov, Chair of the Shakhantaur Court, Urayeva was not permitted in the Court room as an observer at the 20 February hearing of Muminjanova's suit, the human rights defender told Forum 18. "When I was able to enter the yard of the Court building, the Police officers present there expelled me by force."

Shakhlo Almatova, one of the expelled first-year students, "waited at the Court doors for several hours to be called upon as a witness, to tell it how the Faculty of the Islamic Academy pressured the female students not to wear hijab," Urayeva told Forum 18. "In the end she was not allowed to enter the Court room."

At the end of the 20 February hearing, Judge Rakhmudinov rejected Muminjanova's suit by qualifying the Academy decision to expel her as "correct", according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

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The Court's Chancellery official (who did not give his name) refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Rakhmudinov, who had heard Muminjanova's suit. "He will not talk to you anyway," he told Forum 18 on 26 April, and then put the phone down.

Judge Kholmamat Khasanov of Tashkent City Administrative Court on 25 March rejected Muminjanova's appeal against Judge Rakhmudinov's decision, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Tashkent City Administrative Court's officials (no names given) on 26 April refused to say why Judge Khasanov upheld both decisions given against hijab or put Forum 18 through to any other officials who could speak to Forum 18. The official (who did not give his name), who answered Judge Khasanov's number on 26 April, also refused to comment on the decisions or put Forum 18 through to the Judge.

### ***Academy dress code "totally against Islamic norms"***

The Shaykhantaur Court decisions "explicitly say that female students must be dressed according to the model photos of the dress code", Yakubov noted.

"Shukhrat Yovkochev, Rector of the Islamic Academy and its faculty as well as the leadership of the Muslim Board, in grave violation of Islamic canons, support secular dress code for women," Urayeva complained to Forum 18.

Exiled Uzbek Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev, human rights defender Urayeva and Yakubov emphasised to Forum 18 that according to Islamic tradition, women must cover their heads, hair, shoulders, breast, which is why Muslim women traditionally wear hijab. "Muslims must live according to the moral principles from the Koran," Urayeva said. Yakubov complained that "The enforcement of the dress code for the Academy is totally against Islamic norms."

### ***"No one was expelled for wearing hijab"***

Asked about the ban on hijab and expelled students, the Academy official, who answered the phone of Rector Shukhrat Yovkochev on 23 April (who did not give his name), referred Forum 18 to Bakhodiy Akhmedov, Yovkochev's Assistant.

"No one was expelled for wearing hijab," Akhmedov insisted to Forum 18 the same day. "But some students were expelled for missing classes." However, he refused to specify which students were expelled. When Forum 18 insisted and said that Muminjanova and others were not allowed into the territory of the Academy for wearing hijab and asked why the Academy did so, he replied: "Because of the Government's 15 August 2018 dress code."

Asked why the dress code photo examples indicate that dresses that cover women's legs and scarves covering the head and neck are not acceptable, Akhmedov said: "It is the Government's decision, and we are a secular state education institution." He refused to answer Forum 18 when asked why the institution is named the "Islamic" Academy.

Told that the case is now with the Supreme Court, and asked whether the Academy would permit hijab and restore students who were expelled if the Supreme Court rules in favour of the plaintiffs, Akhmedov responded: "I don't know. It is up to the appropriate authorities." He then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Asked about the ban on hijab and his [February insistence to Forum 18 that the state had imposed no ban on the hijab](#), Otabek Bazarov, Chief of the Higher Education Ministry's Ethical Issues Department, on 24 April, claimed to Forum 18 that "I did not know that

the students were not allowed to wear hijab under the government decision. However, the Islamic Academy is a secular institution, and I do not see a problem here."

Asked why then the Academy is advertised as the Islamic Academy, and why its name is not changed to a secular name, Bazarov could not answer.

Asked why students of the Islamic Academy cannot wear hijab to classes, and if this is not an ethical problem, Bazarov referred Forum 18 to the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA). He then declined to talk further.

### ***Will hijab ban for Islamic Academy and secondary school be lifted?***

Yakubov and Muminjanova told Forum 18 that "as of 1 April the Academy and its secondary school began allowing female students to wear traditional Uzbek scarves or head-wear covering their heads but not the neck."

"We do not know if this is an indication that hijab will be allowed in the Academy or its secondary school," Yakubov said. "We complained in the court against the dress code, and for its annulment for the Academy and its secondary school."

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## **Bloggers jailed for criticising Muftiate**

**By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18**

*Muslim bloggers Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov face criminal charges launched by the SSS secret police, which still holds Karimov. The two completed 15-day jail terms on 23 April, but only Astanov was freed the following day. They were jailed the same day Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused them of being "hooligans" and disrespectful to Muftiate "spiritual leadership".*

Forum 18 (25.04.2019) - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2471](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2471) - Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov, two Muslim bloggers, face criminal charges brought by the State Security Service (SSS) secret police. The secret police claim the men had "extremist" material in their mobile phones. Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, a day after a 15-day jail term expired. But Karimov is still in SSS secret police custody, relatives told Forum 18.



**Dress code notice outside Islamic Academy, Tashkent, 2018 Ozodlik.org (citizen journalist)**

A Tashkent court jailed Astanov and Karimov on 8 April for 15 days for criticising Uzbekistan's lack of freedom of religion and belief. They were arrested and jailed the same day they met the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate (see below).

At the 8 April meeting Astanov and Karimov had asked Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur among other things why the hijab (Muslim head covering for women) is banned, why imams have to be appointed by the state and preach sermons prepared for them by the state, and why the Muftiate does not help Muslims when their freedom of religion and belief is violated.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused Astanov and Karimov of being "hooligans", and being disrespectful to the Muftiate's alleged "spiritual leadership". The men were then arrested and jailed, one of the charges being "hooliganism" (see below).

The Polish authorities had deported Karimov back to Uzbekistan earlier in 2019 after refusing him asylum (see below).

All religious communities in Uzbekistan are under tight government control. [The regime uses the Muftiate to impose complete control on all public manifestations of Islam, including appointing all permitted leaders, controlling what they preach, and deciding on the numbers and locations of mosques. All public manifestations of Islam outside the Muftiate are banned.](#)

### ***Muslims arrested and jailed the same day they question Deputy Chief Mufti***

Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov, two Muslim bloggers, were on 8 April jailed for 15 days after criticising Uzbekistan's lack of freedom of religion and belief. They were arrested the same day they had a meeting with the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate.

At the 8 April meeting at the administrative building of the Muftiate, Astanov and Karimov had asked Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur why the hijab (Muslim head covering for women) is banned, why imams have to be appointed by the state and preach sermons prepared for them by the state, why licensing of halal food products does not exist, and why the Muftiate does not help Muslims when their freedom of religion and belief is violated.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused Astanov and Karimov of "raising their voices in his office as hooligans", and being disrespectful to the alleged "spiritual leadership" of the state-controlled Muftiate and state-appointed imams. The police arrested both men on the same day after the meeting, and they were then jailed.

After their 15-day jail terms expired, both Astanov and Karimov now face criminal charges being brought by the State Security Service (SSS) secret police. Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, one day after the jail sentences expired.

However, Karimov remains in SSS secret police custody, relatives told Forum 18.

### ***Muslims raided, fined, jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues***

Karimov had earlier sought asylum in Poland. But the Polish authorities rejected his application and earlier in 2019 had deported Karimov back to Uzbekistan, Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service noted on 11 April.

This is not the first time Astanov has been jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues. In an attempt to stop public discussion of freedom of religion and belief issues, ordinary police and State Security Service (SSS) secret police officers between late August and early September 2018 raided without warrants the homes of at least 10 bloggers. The bloggers, including Astanov, had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls for women to be allowed to wear hijabs (headscarves), men to have beards, and children to be allowed to pray in mosques.

While in jail in 2018, Astanov had his beard forcibly shaved off, a relative told Forum 18 on 25 April 2019. He was also verbally warned not to use Facebook to criticise the regime.



**Fazliddin Parpiyev Ozodlik.org (RFE/RL)**

The raids took place in at least five regions of Uzbekistan. Courts then fined many of the bloggers with jail terms of up to two weeks, Forum 18 notes. The authorities "wanted to showcase the jailings to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms", a relative of one of the bloggers told Forum 18.

Following the raids, fines and short-term jailings, Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev protested about this and publicly himself also raised freedom of religion and belief issues. He was fired from his post, and the Muftiate, ordinary police and SSS secret police subjected him to questioning. Officials also intimidated his relatives. He then fled Uzbekistan "for my safety" in December 2018 after appealing to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev "as Muslims .. cannot have full freedom of religion and belief".

Muslims are in 2019 being blacklisted for memorising the Koran for a state-run competition, and imams are rotated to stop them influencing congregations.

### ***Muftiate "spiritual leadership"?***

Following their 8 April visit to the Muftiate, Astanov and Karimov published several videos of their meeting on Facebook, seen by Forum 18. But later the same day, Tashkent Police arrested them and published their own Facebook video, also seen by Forum 18, of the meeting with Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur where he accused Astanov and Karimov of "raising their voices in his office as hooligans", and being disrespectful to the alleged "spiritual leadership" of the state-controlled Muftiate and state-appointed imams.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur on 16 April refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 16 April, twice picking up his phone but then putting it down when Forum 18 introduced itself.



Akmalkhan Shakirov, Head of the Muftiate's International Relations Department, on 16 April refused to answer when asked what is wrong with the questions the two bloggers raised, and why why Mansur accused the two bloggers of "hooliganism". Shakirov claimed that "you need to come to our door and show your identification documents for us to answer you", before refusing to talk more to Forum 18.

### ***Jailed for 15 days***

Tashkent's Almazar District Court on the same day as the Muftiate meeting and subsequent arrests imposed 15-day jail terms on both Astanov and Karimov. They were jailed under Administrative Code Article 183 ("Hooliganism") and Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order").

Colonel Rustam Sayfulov, Chief of Staff of Tashkent Police, on 16 April refused to explain to Forum 18 why Astanov and Karimov were arrested. "The Court has given them jail terms. You need to ask the Court," he claimed before putting the phone down.

Ilham Tokhirov, Chief of the Chancellery of Almazar District Court also refused to answer Forum 18's question on 16 April, referring Forum 18 to an official who refused to give his name and claimed to be Assistant of the Chair of the Court. "They can appeal against our decision if they decide to do so," the Assistant told Forum 18, but refused to comment on the short-term jailings. "You can send your questions to us only through the Supreme Court", he claimed when Forum 18 asked why the bloggers were jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues and criticising the state-controlled Muftiate.

### ***Public protest***

Yelena Uralyeva, an independent human rights defender from Tashkent who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, held a public protest with Mukhayyo Astanova (Astanov's wife) in central Tashkent on 11 April, demanding that Astanov and Karimov be freed.

### ***Appeals rejected***

On 16 April Judge Iroda Mirzayeva of Tashkent Administrative Court rejected an appeal by the men and upheld the short term jailings. A Court official who refused to give her name on 25 April refused to tell Forum 18 why Judge Mirzayeva upheld the jailings. Other Court officials did not answer calls.

### ***New detention after short-term jailing, criminal charges brought***

On 23 April, when their short-term jail sentences expired, state-controlled media stated that Astanov and Karimov were then put into SSS secret police custody. The SSS opened criminal cases under Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 1 "after Tashkent Police referred the case to them for legal evaluation". The SSS "discovered materials on their mobile phones of banned extremist organisations, which propagate ideas of religious dogmatism", state media claimed.

[Criminal Code Article 244-1 punishes the "production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order", Part 1 punishing "production and storage". In April 2016, Article 244-1's possible punishments were increased to imprisonment of between 5 and 8 years, instead of the previous up to 5 years' jail or a fine of between 300 and 400 times the minimum monthly wage. It is normally used only against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Since](#)



[2013 the regime had increasingly used this Criminal Code article to prosecute and jail Muslims carrying the Koran and Islamic sermons on mobile phones.](#)

Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, but Karimov is still in SSS secret police custody relatives told Forum 18. Astanov has also been warned that he will face further questioning.

Irina Sayfuddinova, Head of Tashkent Police Press Service, refused to tell Forum 18 on 24 April why Karimov and Astanov were not immediately released at the end of their jail terms, and why they now face criminal charges.

### ***Relatives not told where Karimov and Astanov were jailed***

Human rights defender Urayeva told Forum 18 on 15 April that it is not clear where Astanov and Karimov were held. Tashkent Police refused to tell Astanov's wife where he was held, and Tashkent Central Detention Centre (where short-term jail terms are usually served) told her that he was not there. Urayeva suspects that "Astanov and Karimov were being held in secret police custody right from the beginning".

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## **Imam forced to flee after freedom appeal**

***Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev fled Uzbekistan "for my safety" after appealing to President Mirziyoyev "as Muslims .. cannot have full freedom of religion and belief". Muslims are blacklisted for memorising the Koran for a state-run competition, and imams are rotated to stop them influencing congregations.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (11.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NtW8FR> - A 33-year-old Tashkent Imam, Fazliddin Parpiyev, had to flee Uzbekistan in December 2018, two months after he appealed to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev over violations of freedom of religion or belief for the country's Muslims. Religious Affairs Committee, State Security Service (SSS) secret police, ordinary police, Prosecutor's Office and Muftiate officials immediately pressured and threatened him and his father after he issued his video appeal.

Imam Parpiyev on 7 September 2018 published a video appeal to President Mirziyoyev "as Muslims still suffer injustice and cannot have full freedom of religion and belief". The same day eight Religious Affairs Committee and SSS secret police officials visited him. The same day Imam Parpiyev repeated his appeal at Friday prayers in his Tashkent mosque, and the same evening he was visited and threatened by Religious Affairs Committee officials.

The following day Imam Parpiyev's father was summoned to Tashkent from eastern Uzbekistan and pressured by Religious Affairs Committee and Muftiate officials. Imam Parpiyev refused to make a video withdrawing his original appeal, but his father was then forced to record a video appeal against his son. The same day, on 8 September, the Chief Mufti fired Imam Parpiyev from his post as Imam of a Tashkent mosque.

On 12 September, Tashkent Prosecutor's Office and police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officials summoned Imam Parpiyev and banned him from speaking about freedom of religion and belief issues. Imam Parpiyev refused, pointing out: "I only expressed people's dissatisfaction," he pointed out. "Do you not see that people hate it

when the authorities forcefully take off their head coverings? That is when they were provoked, not because I spoke."

On 17 September state-run television broadcast a programme attacking Imam Parpiyev, featuring among others Religious Affairs Committee and Muftiate officials. Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that the television programme influenced people against him.

On 18 December Tashkent Prosecutor's Office again summoned Imam Parpiyev for another warning and "made threats against me demanding that I must not make further public statements or talk to independent media or human rights defenders about freedom of religion and belief" Imam Parpiyev stated. "I had to leave the country [on 19 December 2018] because I was afraid for my safety", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

Ordinary Muslims and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime has started adding Muslims who regularly attend mosque and who are thought to be influential to the Preventative Register. "Muslims on black lists, including those who were on these lists in the past, are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings," one human rights defender told Forum 18.

One source used to identify Muslims for surveillance and warnings has been state-run competitions to find Koran Hafizes, who have memorised the Koran. The SSS secret police then questioned winners, a practice that Imam Parpiyev strongly criticised. Other Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined recently, but declined to give details for fear of state reprisals.

One Muslim, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 February that "the authorities monitor video cameras in mosques, identify persons who are active and regularly attend mosques, and put their names in those lists."

Human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the regime has also begun rotating Imams, to break their influence over their mosque communities.

A human rights defender from outside Tashkent told Forum 18 on 30 January that this began around late August 2018. "Regional religious affairs officials and Imams say this was a Religious Affairs Committee decision to stop Imams becoming influential". The Religious Affairs Committee has also decided that Tashkent Imams will also travel to regions to conduct Friday prayers periodically.

### ***Appeal for freedom of religion and belief attacked***

Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev was on 11 August 2018 appointed as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque, in the capital Tashkent's Yunusabad District. On 7 September on his Facebook page, Imam Parpiyev made a video appeal to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. "I was asking for help as Muslims still suffer injustice and cannot have full freedom of religion and belief," he told Forum 18 on 30 January 2019.

Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that immediately after he made his appeal, Muzaffar Kamolov of the regime's Religious Affairs Committee with seven State Security Service (SSS) secret police officers visited him in the morning. One of the SSS secret police officers gave his name as Farhod (he would not give his last name), but none of his SSS colleagues identified themselves with documents, Parpiyev told Forum 18.

"Why did you write that human rights are violated, the officials asked me," Parpiyev stated. When the Imam told them about violations of freedom of religion and belief, they asked him: "If you wanted to appeal to the President, why did you have to do it through

Facebook, why didn't you send your appeal through the [state-controlled] Muftiate?" Imam Parpiyev answered them: "It is my right to complain to the President. Every citizen has this right."

That same day, 7 September, after Friday prayers in the mosque, Imam Parpiyev repeated his appeal verbally to his mosque community. He also asked attendees to also raise freedom of religion and belief with President Mirziyoyev. The same evening Kamolov, Erdon Esanov, Ayubkhon Kamolov, Rakhmatillo Sayfuddinov and other Religious Affairs Committee officials visited the Imam. "They demanded that I deactivate my Facebook account," the Imam told Forum 18. "I did so."

Islam, because it has the largest number of followers, is the community the regime is most interested in controlling. This control is mainly exercised through the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. In addition, all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by anyone – including in print and online – is under tight state control. The import, production and possession of literature – including the Koran and the Bible – and other material including electronic material is strictly controlled with compulsory prior censorship by the regime's Religious Affairs Committee. Punishments for those who violate these restrictions can be severe, including imprisonment.

### ***Father detained***

Regime officials summoned Imam Parpiyev's father Shakhobiddin to Tashkent from his home in Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan. When he arrived at Tashkent Airport on the morning of 8 September, regime officials detained him and ordered Imam Parpiyev to come to the Muftiate offices.

### ***"Repent, ask for forgiveness"***

Imam Parpiyev arrived at 10 am and was met by Esonov, Kamolov and lawyer Ikrom Mardonov from the Religious Affairs Committee. The Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department, Khomid Ishmatbekov, was also present, Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18. "Kamolov led the meeting and stated that the meeting was arranged to convince me to make a video appeal to President Mirziyoyev that I made a mistake, had repented, and asked for forgiveness."

The lawyer Mardonov claimed to Imam Parpiyev: "You violated the Constitution. You cannot make complaints to the President from a pulpit." However, Imam Parpiyev asked: "How is it possible then to thank the President from a pulpit and pray for him?" He also asked the officials to show him what law prohibits complaints to the President.

Lawyer Mardonov then changed his argument and claimed that "it is not acceptable to complain to the President from a pulpit". Parpiyev responded: "I deemed that the pulpit is a holy and high place from which to address the President, who has a high status."

The officials "argued with me for a long time to make the video appeal but I refused to do so, because I did not do anything illegal", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

### ***Pressure on father to make dictated video appeal***

The officials then "pressured my father and recorded a video appeal where he stated that 'my son made a mistake and please forgive him'." Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that he saw his father sitting in the office of Deputy Chief Mufti Dilshod Khoshimov. "He held papers in his hands and was memorising the text of a video appeal written for him. He was under such pressure." When the Imam tried to convince him not to make the appeal, his father answered: "I have to make this appeal, I have no choice."

The regime frequently uses extreme and repeated pressure against people of all faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief. This for example includes ordering the mother-in-law of a Protestant Christian to physically attack her and evict her from her home, and the use of other forms of torture.

### ***Imam fired***

The same day, on 8 September, the Chief Mufti dismissed Imam Parpiyev from his post as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque.

This was part of the regime's nationwide crackdown on people arguing for freedom of religion and belief. From late August 2018, the regime arrested at least 10 bloggers across the country for expressing their opinions on freedom of religion or belief issues, such as the freedom of Muslim women to wear the hijab (headscarf), men to grow beards, and children to be allowed to attend mosques. At least eight were given short-term jail sentences of up to 15 days.

Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur refused to tell Forum 18 why Imam Parpiyev was fired. "Why are you asking me? Journalists twist my words," he claimed on 7 February 2019. "And so I will not answer your questions."

### ***Imam summoned to Prosecutor's office***

Imam Parpiyev told Radio Free Europe what had happened and after their report the regime did not publish his father's appeal. However, on 12 September 2018, Shokir and Sherzod (who refused to give their last names or show identity documents) of Tashkent's Uchteppa District Police visited Imam Parpiyev's home. "They demanded that I go with them to Tashkent Prosecutor's Office." When the Imam asked if he could invite his lawyer, they told him: "It is not necessary, because the Prosecutor just wants to talk to you."

At the Prosecutor's Office, the Imam was met by Tashkent City Prosecutor Sherzod Oblokulov, the Head of Tashkent police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department Lieutenant Colonel Abduvokhid Shukurov, and an official named Ravshan who refused to give his last name or show identity documents.

### ***"We warn you and prohibit you from making such public statements"***

Prosecutor Oblokulov asked Imam Parpiyev why he had made public statements on freedom of religion and belief. The Imam told him that Muslims are dissatisfied with the regime, for example with its forcing girls in schools and female students in higher education institutions to take off head coverings. Oblokulov claimed in reply that "your statements provoke people against the authorities".

Officials give contradictory answers when asked about the issues Imam Parpiyev identified. For example, Bakhrom Mamadiyev, Vice Rector of Tashkent's Islamic Institute, told Forum 18 on 7 February 2019 that as a secular education institution the Higher Education Ministry only allows the Institute's students to wear secular dress. Yet that same day Otabek Bazarov, Head of the Higher Education Ministry's Ethical Issues Department, claimed to Forum 18 that there is "no ban on head cover from the Ministry". Asked if women are allowed to wear head coverings if any education institution allows it, Bazarov emphatically replied "Yes".

When Imam Parpiyev pointed out to Prosecutor Oblokulov that "I only expressed people's dissatisfaction. Do you not see that people hate it when the authorities forcefully take off

their head coverings? That is when they were provoked, not because I spoke", Prosecutor Oblokulov replied: "We warn you and prohibit you from making such public statements."

The officials then made Imam Parpiyev sign a statement that he had been warned. Shokirov of the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department also warned him not to speak on social media or give interviews to journalists.

Tashkent Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officers on 7 February 2019 refused to answer Forum 18's questions. They repeatedly claimed that Lieutenant Colonel Shokirov was "not available to talk".

Numerous calls to Tashkent City Prosecutor's office on 7 February went unanswered.

### ***State-run media attack Imam***

On 17 September 2018 state-run television broadcast a programme attacking Imam Parpiyev. Among the participants was a Religious Affairs Committee "expert" Sobitkhon Sharipov, Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur, the Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department Homidjon Ishmatbekov, the Muftiate's official responsible for work with mosques Rahimberdi Rahmonov, Tashkent imam Odilkhon Yunuskhon, and Saidafzal Saidjalolov from Tashkent's Islamic Institute named after Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari.

(The regime's censorship means that al-Bukhari's collection of hadiths, which Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic compilation, is no longer available in Uzbekistan).

Television programme participants attacked Imam Parpiyev for his public complaints about the regime's violations of Muslims' freedom of religion and belief. The Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department Ishmatbekov claimed that Imam Parpiyev "divided our society into two parts and sowed confusion among the people. He is a liar, and he provoked people". Saidjalolov from Tashkent's Islamic Institute claimed that "instead of appealing to the President and thanking him for his reforms and pardoning of 16,000 prisoners, he [Imam Parpiyev] made a negative video appeal, abused the teachings of our Imam al-Bukhari and our other Imams, and insulted them by speaking in their name. Were this a different country, he [Imam Parpiyev] would have been dealt with more seriously." Tashkent Imam Yunuskhon said that Imam Parpiyev "abused the pulpit, which is a holy place. It cannot be used for preaching inappropriate, negative, divisive, words."

Sharipov of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed: "Freedom of conscience means that every citizen can freely choose to believe or not to believe in religion. Everyone, without regard to their beliefs, is equal before the law and citizens cannot be forced to believe in religion. Freedom of conscience is not expressed in wearing beards or convincing others to wear beards." He did not address the denials of Imam Parpiyev's freedom of religion and belief.

Feruz Olimova, who was described as a psychologist, compared receiving religious information from the internet – such as Imam Parpiyev's appeal – to looking at immoral photographs on the internet. "This kind of religious information can cripple young people's psychology," she claimed.

Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that the television programme influenced people against him. "My relatives and friends asked me 'what have you done?'. Even people I don't know criticised me on the street." He said that the television programme's goal "was to influence public opinion against me".

Saidjalolov from Tashkent's Islamic Institute refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the programme on 7 February 2019. "I am not ready to answer this sensitive question, you just called spontaneously. I need to think about it first." He then claimed: "I talked [on the programme] to my own people of Uzbekistan, I am not going to ask your permission for that." When Forum 18 asked again about the programme, Saidjalolov replied: "I am not going to answer your questions. Please talk to higher authorities."

Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur also refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the programme on 7 February 2019.

Sharipov of the Religious Affairs Committee's telephone went unanswered on 7 February 2019, and other Religious Affairs Committee officials refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

### ***Prosecutor's Office again warns Imam Parpiyev***

On 18 December 2018 Tashkent Prosecutor's Office summoned Imam Parpiyev for another warning. Ikrom Narimov, First Deputy Prosecutor of Tashkent, in his office "made threats against me demanding that I must not make further public statements or talk to independent media or human rights defenders about freedom of religion and belief," Imam Parpiyev stated.

### ***Imam leaves country "because I was afraid for my safety"***

"I had to leave the country [on 19 December 2018] because I was afraid for my safety", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

Imam Parpiyev is 33 years old and has a wife and two children. He is a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, and of Tashkent's Islamic Institute named after Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari.

### ***Secret lists of Muslims on Preventative Register***

Ordinary Muslims and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime has started adding Muslims who regularly attend mosque and who are thought to be influential to the Preventative Register. This is used to target "prevention measures" against individuals, including: prophylactic talks; official warnings; "social rehabilitation"; referral for compulsory treatment; and administrative supervision.

One human rights defender told Forum 18 on 6 February 2019 that "Muslims on black lists, including those who were on these lists in the past, are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings."

One source used to identify Muslims for surveillance and warnings has been state-run competitions to find Koran Hafizes, who have memorised the Koran. The SSS secret police then questioned winners, a practice that Imam Parpiyev strongly criticised. A different imam, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 1 February that "After the regime identified who hafizes are, they put their names on the secret lists."

One imam told Forum 18 that the SSS secret police asked competition winners why they memorised the Koran, who supported them in this, who financed them, etc." Asked why he thinks the regime did this, one imam stated "because they might be influential in future." Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined recently, but declined to give details for fear of state reprisals.



Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur refused to answer Forum 18's questions on why the regime questioned hafiz competition winners.

A Muslim from Tashkent, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 February that "the authorities monitor video cameras in mosques, identify persons who are active and regularly attend mosques, and put their names in those lists".

Two human rights defenders who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, as well as human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov, agreed with this assessment. "President Mirziyoyev recently restored these lists. The purpose is keep Muslims under pressure and the population in fear so they do not become so active in mosques," Rustamov told Forum 18 on 1 February.

Surveillance and targeting of anyone attending places of worship of any faith is normal in Uzbekistan.

### ***Rotating Imams to deny influence***

Human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the regime has begun rotating Imams, to break their influence over their mosque communities.

A human rights defender from outside Tashkent notes that this began around late August 2018. "Regional religious affairs officials and Imams say this was a Religious Affairs Committee decision to stop Imams becoming influential," the human rights defender told Forum 18 on 30 January. The Religious Affairs Committee has also decided that Tashkent Imams will also travel to regions to conduct Friday prayers periodically.

Various human rights defenders have noted that this policy has begun to be implemented. For example, Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 on 1 February that he knew several Imams in Tashkent who have been sent to other mosques.

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## **Fined for giving New Testament away**

***Police searched a woman's flat in Bukhara to seize a New Testament Shukhrat Safarov had given her. A court fined Safarov and ordered the book destroyed. The government's Religious Affairs Committee claimed that using the New Testament for "missionary purposes" is illegal.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (30.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2UsgMZh> - In the southern city of Bukhara, a court fined a Christian, Shukhrat Safarov, about two weeks' average wages for giving an Uzbek-language New Testament away as a present. The judge ordered that the New Testament be destroyed. Police had found the New Testament during a search of the recipient's home. The authorities committed multiple illegalities throughout the case.

After a late September 2018 police raid on a group of 40 Protestants meeting in Tashkent Region, where police "psychological pressure" resulted in a woman and a 5-year-old girl being hospitalised, a court has upheld the fines on 27 local Christians and deportations of four South Korean Protestants (see below).

No prosecutions appear to have been brought against the police who carried out torture, despite Uzbekistan's legally-binding obligations under the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (see below).

And after a large November 2018 raid involving the National Guard and other agencies on Baptists meeting for Sunday morning worship in Yashnobod District in the capital Tashkent, police returned some of the Christian literature they confiscated. However, they have not returned children's literature, song books, and music notes. The authorities do not appear to have brought any prosecutions or other actions against the officials who acted illegally (see below).

### ***Bukhara: Fined for New Testament gift***

In December 2018 Shukhrat Safarov, a Protestant in the southern city of Bukhara [Bukhoro], gave a local woman an Uzbek-language New Testament. Police subsequently searched her flat in Karakul District and found the New Testament, local Protestants who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 27 January 2019.

Police officer Begzod, who refused to give his last name, told Safarov on 5 January that the search allegedly happened because of "because of complaints against her from residents of her mahalla [residential area]". Police confiscated the New Testament, even though she told officers it was a gift.

Police often search homes for religious literature of all kinds, and mahalla committees are a key part of the regime's attempts to control all of society.

On 27 December 2018 a police officer illegally forced his way into Safarov's flat without being invited, without a search warrant, and refusing to show any identification. The unidentified officer then demanded that Safarov accompany him to Bukhara Police Station. Safarov refused to do so without the legally required officials summons.

Police routinely break the law, and unfair trials are also common.

When Safarov received an official summons he came to the Police Station on 5 January. There, a police officer who claimed his name was Begzod – illegally without giving his last name, or showing his identification – told Safarov he was being charged with breaking 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"), and Article 240, Part 2 ("Attracting believers of one confession to another (proselytism) and other missionary activity"). Officer Begzod also broke the law by not showing Safarov the police case files.

Against international human rights standards, the regime has made it illegal for anyone to share any beliefs with anyone else.

Officer Begzod did show Safarov an "expert analysis" of the New Testament by Begzod Kadyrov, Chief Specialist of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Kadyrov stated that the New Testament was legally imported, but its use for missionary purposes is illegal. Local Protestants pointed out that this violates the legally-binding international human rights standards that the regime has signed.

Kadyrov refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 28 January. "I have no time to listen to your fables," he claimed, before putting the phone down.

Uzbekistan imposes total censorship of all printed and electronic religious literature, and police often confiscate books which have passed the state's compulsory censorship. The regime has repeatedly tried to stop followers of religious beliefs, including Christians, from reading their own sacred texts in their own homes.

Bukhara Police told Forum 18 on 29 January that Safarov's case is being dealt with by Begzod Toshpulatov of Bukhara Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department.

Toshpulatov refused to explain why he broke the law during his questioning of Safarov, or why any action is being taken against Safarov. "I do not know you, and I cannot discuss this with you over the phone," he claimed on 29 January. "You need to come to our Police Station so we can talk." When Forum 18 asked why people are punished for owning Bibles or New Testaments or giving them to others, Toshpulatov repeated his previous claim and refused to talk more.

On 15 January, Judge Ruslan Zairov of Bukhara Administrative Court fined Safarov three times the minimum monthly wage or 552,900 Soms. This is equivalent to about two weeks' average wages for those in formal work. The Judge also ordered the destruction of the confiscated Uzbek-language New Testament.

Courts often order the destruction of confiscated religious literature, and the regime is particularly hostile to non-Muslim religious believers using Uzbek (the state's official language) in religious texts. The use of Uzbek by non-Muslims as the main language of public worship is banned, even though the ban has no legal basis.

A Bukhara Court Chancellery official, who refused to give her name, refused to tell Forum 18 on 28 January why Safarov was fined. Judge Zairov "is busy and cannot come to the phone", she claimed.

### ***Tashkent Region: Impunity for torture continues***

After a late September 2018 police raid on a group of 40 Protestants meeting in Tashkent Region, where police "psychological pressure" resulted in a woman and a 5-year-old girl being hospitalised, a court imposed large fines on many of the participants. The prosecution used four women who accompanied police on the raid as witnesses in the case, despite being accused by Protestants of stealing property from some of the Protestants. Neither the thieves nor the officials suspected of torture were prosecuted.

On 19 December, Judge Uchkun Tursunov of Tashkent Region's Administrative Court upheld the fines on 27 local Christians and deportations of four South Korean Protestants. No prosecutions appear to have been brought against the police who carried out torture, despite Uzbekistan's legally-binding obligations under the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Court officials have repeatedly refused up to 25 January 2019 to answer Forum 18's questions as to why there was no investigation of the police's illegal actions, including torture.

### ***Tashkent: Some confiscated literature returned, no prosecutions***

On 25 November 2018, 20 plain clothes officials rising later to 40 officials raided Baptists meeting for Sunday morning worship in Yashnobod District in the capital Tashkent. For the first known time in such raids, members of the military – the National Guard – took part in the raid. Other agencies participating in the raid included the State Security

Service (SSS) secret police, the Justice Ministry, and Yashnobod District Police. When Baptists asked why the SSS secret police and the National Guard were on the raid, the raiders responded: "It is a special operation".

Officials searched every part of the building, which was "ransacked", Baptists complained. Officials confiscated about 7,800 items of literature and DVDs, including all books and songbooks the Church uses for its meetings for worship. When one woman tried to conceal some songbooks used for worship, an official "screamed at her that you are liars, Christians must not hide anything". Police threatened Baptists they "will come every Sunday and disrupt the Church service every time until we give up and stop our activity".

However, the authorities have not yet carried out those threats. On 27 December police returned some of the Christian literature they had confiscated during the raid. However, Andrei Serin of the Church told Forum 18 on 22 January that the "we still need the children's literature, song books, and music notes to be returned as we need them for conducting worship".

The authorities do not appear to have brought any prosecutions or other actions against the officials who acted illegally.