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Uzbekistan turning down the volume on Islam

By [Chris Rickleton](#)

[RFE/RL](#) (20.09.2023) - At the start of last week, top Uzbek officials and representatives of pro-government public organizations gathered in the cabinet of ministers building to discuss a vexing problem.

Uzbekistan, said Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and State Security Service chief Abdusalim Azizov, was facing a new wave of "religious radicalization."

The meeting was unannounced and no statement on it having taken place was released until September 14.

But sources that attended the meeting and spoke to RFE/RL's Uzbek Service on condition of anonymity said that along with the supposed rise in radical interpretations of the country's main religion, officials raised alarms about an increase in polygamy and the emerging problem of citizens -- including state officials -- attending prayers during working hours.

Officials should either "choose religion or work for the state," Aripov said, according to the sources.

After coming to power in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoev's government banked credit at home and abroad by easing draconian restrictions on religious practices, particularly Islam, which about 90 percent of the country of some 35 million people adheres to.

But now, everything points to government policy edging back toward the time of Mirziyoev's predecessor, authoritarian Islam Karimov, when extensive state control stifled the religion and thousands of devout believers were jailed and tortured as extremists.

On the Friday before the meeting, September 9, Uzbekistan's most senior religious cleric called for "restraint" in regard to Islamic clothing and beards amid "excesses" that he said were visible everywhere among practicing Muslims.

"An opinion has formed that Islam implies wearing certain clothes and having a certain appearance," said Mufti Nuriddin Kholiqnazarov, appearing to strike out at the niqab veil that covers all of a woman's face except the eyes.

"There is a rule left to us by our prophet. Islam does not have a specific form, it is impossible, it is not a religion of one nation, it is not a religion of one climate," the cleric said.

And if that message came over loud and clear for believers, then the "azon" -- or call to prayer -- is reportedly getting much quieter in some of the country's neighborhoods.

This month alone, correspondents for RFE/RL's Uzbek Service heard multiple instances of the volume of the call to prayer being lowered, including in a district in Tashkent, where a correspondent was able to visit and confirm that observation.

In response to RFE/RL's request for comment, a representative of the Muftiate said the reports "do not correspond to reality." The State Committee on Religious Affairs, the government body that oversees religion, did not respond before to requests for comment.

Walking The Streets Freely?

This new development is ironic because Mirziyoev only recently touted the azon's return to loudspeakers in late 2017 as one of the symbols of his "New Uzbekistan."

It was one of several developments that led to Tashkent no longer finding itself being termed "a country of particular concern" by the U.S. State Department -- a designation for the very worst offenders of religious freedom that currently applies to 12 countries.

Other changes included the lifting of an unofficial but rigorously enforced ban on minors attending prayers, the opening of new mosques, and the claimed reduction of a lengthy "blacklist" of citizens under surveillance due to allegedly extreme religious beliefs.

During an appearance in the religiously conservative Andijon Province prior to his reelection this summer, Mirziyoev said Uzbeks could now "walk the streets freely and without any fear" -- an indirect reference to the repressions of the Karimov era.

"I want to cry when I hear the azon, [knowing] that we have reached these days," he said. "When did we last have this?"

But in the last few years Muslims have been walking the streets with more apprehension than Mirziyoev's comments suggest. Detentions and interrogations of religious believers have increased, and there have been a stream of reports regarding forced beard shavings.

Uzbek officials are, moreover, no longer in regular contact with either the United Nations' special rapporteur on freedom of religion or the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, according to a government source who spoke to RFE/RL. The special rapporteur was slated to visit the country at least three times in recent years only for these visits to be canceled, the source said.

Ilkham Umarakhunov, an expert on Islam in Central Asia based in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, told RFE/RL that there was currently a "big gap between what the international community wants to see and what the government is prepared to do in terms of religious freedom."

"In Uzbekistan, even talking to experts there, religion is still seen more from the point of view of security rather than freedom," he said.

Most worrying for the authorities is the idea that people will abandon secular institutions completely in favor of "Islamic ecosystems," Umarakhunov added. "On the one hand there is an issue of freedom of religion, on the other there is a possibility that one group can grow quickly and try to impose their rules on others, potentially causing a conflict. They are very afraid of that."

Indeed, on September 5, lawmakers in the rubber-stamp lower house of parliament approved a law that will introduce fines for perceived violations of the secular order. Targets for the law include marriages blessed in Islamic ceremony but not registered with the state and clothing that makes the wearer "unidentifiable" in public -- code for the niqab.

Lawmakers backed the bill "after heated discussions and long polemics," the press service of the lower house said, without offering further details. It is now due for consideration by the upper house, the Senate.

'Our Voice Is Silenced'

The Uzbek regime's historic concerns -- and paranoia -- regarding Islam are not completely without basis.

Early independence saw the rapid emergence of religious groups prepared to openly challenge secularism in Uzbekistan.

One such group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is still active more than two decades after authorities accused it of carrying out a series of car bombings in Tashkent.

And the IMU is still nominally committed to toppling the Uzbek regime, even if the days when it could pose a serious threat to Tashkent appear long gone, with a struggle for survival in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan a more pressing concern for the extremist group.

But there is no doubt that Muslims committed to a more conservative interpretation of Islam than the version overseen by the government-loyal Muftiate have been raising their voices in recent years.

In the early years of Mirziyoev's rule, these conservative voices spoke out against bans on the hijab inside state educational institutions as well as the school uniforms that they found too revealing, among other things.

Now the space for secular and religious voices alike is shrinking.

Last month, Mubashshir Ahmad, the founder of the popular online channel and website Azon.uz, announced the closure of its various projects in a perfunctory Facebook message.

Emerging in 2017 and hosting debates and opinion pieces on Islam and its history in Uzbekistan, Azon was an example of the new opportunities appearing in the Uzbek information space.

In April, popular blogger Xodjiakbar Nosirov was sentenced to 15 days in prison for a video in which he argued that a number of yogurt brands popular in Uzbekistan should be considered "haram," or unfit for consumption by Muslims, due to a food colorant in them that is extracted from the cochineal beetle.

While Islamic scholarship differs on the permissibility of the carmine food colorant, it is well within the realm of legitimate theological debate -- outside Uzbekistan, at least.

Given these incidents and regular reports of religious bloggers being hauled into police stations for questioning, it is perhaps surprising that religious voices are still heard from at all.

And yet they are.

One example was a fiery September 11 Facebook post on Azon by Shermurod Togay a former Tashkent imam who warned that Uzbekistan would "not achieve greatness" if it turned its back on Shari'a law.

"Now they want to turn off the call to prayer. Our voice is silenced. [But] the call to prayer will not fade. The voice of those who demanded silence will be silenced. Their place will be in hell," Togay fumed in the post, further pledging that "the number of worshipers will increase" and insisting that "curses will fall upon the grave of the wretched, bloodthirsty."

Togay's post generated plenty of pushback in the form of posts defending the secular state. But it also attracted comments of approval.

One commenter bemoaned the fact that the call to prayer had already been muffled in Andijon -- the same part of the country where Mirziyoev was hailing its return earlier this year.

Chris Rickleton is a journalist living in Almaty. Before joining RFE/RL he was Central Asia bureau chief for Agence France-Presse, where his reports were regularly republished by major outlets such as MSN, Euronews, Yahoo News, and The Guardian. He is a graduate of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Devout Muslim jailed after return to country

Mushfig Bayram

Forum18 (26.05.2023) - Prisoner of conscience and devout Muslim, 52-year-old Alijon Mirganiyev has been transferred to a strict regime prison to serve a six and a half year sentence imposed after he returned to Uzbekistan from Turkey.

He was promised he would not be arrested if he returned to end criminal charges brought against him for his exercise of freedom of religion and belief, but was arrested on arrival at Tashkent Airport. "This is one of the numerous fabricated cases made against influential Muslims," says human rights defender Yelena Urlayeva.

On 12 April, 52-year-old prisoner of conscience Alijon Mirganiyev was transferred to Zarafshon's strict regime prison No. 12 in Navoi Region. After losing his appeal, Mirganiyev is serving a six and a half year strict regime prison term imposed for forming a "criminal conspiracy" with his family to go to Turkey to "raise his children in the spirit of extremism", "to engage their children in drug use and drug trafficking", and "created and participated in the activity of an extremist religious organisation". No evidence was produced for any of these allegations.



Alijon Mirganiyev (in defendant's box on left), Tashkent Regional Court, 10 March 2023
Yelena Urlayeva

The drugs-related charges were dropped on appeal as the Judge found no evidence of this, but other charges were upheld, including the same charge he had earlier been jailed in 2006 under - Criminal Code Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") (see below).

Prisoner of conscience Mirganiyev and his family moved to Turkey in 2013, "to follow our faith could be risky for us, and we were also not sure of the future of our family in Uzbekistan," his wife told Forum 18. Human rights defender Alisher Ubaydulloyev, who knows the family, told Forum 18 that Mirganiyev, as a former prisoner, could not easily find employment in Uzbekistan, and could not provide for his family. While in Turkey, Mirganiyev faced a failed 2019 extradition attempt which was rejected by a Turkish court as Uzbekistan had produced no evidence (see below).

After a criminal case was opened against him in February 2014 by Uzbekistan's Yangiyul District Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department," and repeated calls to him in Turkey from Uzbek officials, Mirganiyev decided to return to Uzbekistan to end the criminal case. Uzbek officials had promised him that he would not be arrested, but immediately he arrived at Tashkent Airport on 11 June 2022 he was arrested. He has been in detention ever since (see below).

Police Lt Col Davron Mirzakhojayev could not explain to Forum 18 what, if any, evidence there was for any of the charges. Captain Murat Mamirov of the CID also did not want to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 25 May 2023, claiming that he could not hear Forum 18's questions. Tashkent Regional Prosecutor's Office did not answer its telephones between 23 and 25 May (see below).

Miraganiyev's arrest on return despite being promised this would not happen parallels a case involving a Muslim reader of theologian Said Nursi's works, Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov. He was promised he would not be jailed if he returned from Russia, but was arrested at Tashkent Airport on arrival on 11 April 2022 and on 23 June jailed for 5 years 1 month (see below).

Mirganiyev was brought to trial on 18 October 2022, and an appeal hearing was held on 10 March 2023. Human rights defender Yelena Urayeva, who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, attended Alijon Mirganiyev's appeal hearing. "This is one of the numerous fabricated cases made against influential Muslims," Urayeva, who is also familiar with the 2006 case, told Forum 18 on 25 May. "The authorities do not like strong examples of devout Muslims because they can influence the masses" (see below).

Targeted, jailed in 2006 for being devout Muslim

On 28 June 2006, Alijon Makhmudovich Mirganiyev (born 17 September 1970), a Muslim from Zangiota District in Tashkent Region, was given a five and half year jail term by Tashkent City Criminal Court. He was jailed under [Criminal Code Article 244-2](#) ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") and was accused of being a disciple of Imam Obid Nazarov.

Imam Nazarov is a popular Muslim theologian who has [strongly criticised the regime's restrictions on Muslims](#) exercising their freedom of belief. He is in exile and has political asylum in Sweden, where he was [the target of an assassination attempt](#) in 2012.

In the years around 2006, Muslims the regime saw as respected by other Muslims and linked with Imam Nazarov, such as [former Tashkent imam Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov](#), were given long jail terms. Prisoner of conscience Fahrutdinov was [freed in August 2020](#), but has to pay 20 per cent of his earnings to the regime.

Mirganiyev's wife Khanifa Mirganiyeva told Forum 18 on 23 May 2023 that the family think Mirganiyev was targeted in 2006 as she was teaching female family members to read the Koran, Mirganiyev was praying and discussing Islam with other men, and their children were being raised as Muslims.

The regime is hostile to all three of these expressions of freedom of religion and belief, and has [fined and jailed Muslims](#) who have engaged in them. The regime warned the family to stop doing this, "but we did not and then they arrested and imprisoned Alijon." His wife thinks she was not arrested as there would have been no-one to look after the family's children.

Family moves to Turkey, still targeted by Uzbekistan



Alijon Mirganiyev, Istanbul, spring 2022
Khanifa Mirganiyeva

Alijon Mirganiyev was released from prison in June 2011 at the end of his sentence. In 2013, the family moved to Turkey as in Uzbekistan "to follow our faith could be risky for us, and we were also not sure of the future of our family in Uzbekistan".

The family moved to Turkey because "they wanted to have religious freedom to practice their faith without interference from the state authorities," human rights defender Alisher Ubaydulloyev, who knows the family, told Forum 18 on 25 May 2023. He added that Mirganiyev, as a former prisoner, could not easily find employment in Uzbekistan, and could not provide for his family.

On 5 February 2014, Major B. Mirzakobilov of Yangiyul District Police ["Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department"](#) opened a criminal case against Mirganiyev.

Turkish Border Police stopped the family at Istanbul's Ataturk International Airport on their way to and from the Haj pilgrimage in February 2019. "Both times we were warned that Uzbekistan has opened a criminal case against us, but we were released after a few hours after police found that there were no reasons to detain us," Mirganiyev's wife told Forum 18. "It was very unpleasant and troublesome for us."

Also in 2019, Uzbekistan tried to extradite Mirganiyev from Turkey. Istanbul Regional Administration brought a case in the Istanbul Administrative Court, which on 28 November 2019 rejected the case in a decision Forum 18 has seen.

Mirganiyev's wife noted that Mirganiyev and his family were accused by Uzbekistan of being with Daesh in Syria and Iraq. However, the family was able to prove to the Turkish authorities that they were not with Daesh but in Turkey when Uzbekistan accused the family of being with Daesh. Mirganiyev was also accused of encouraging Uzbeks in Turkey to join Daesh in Syria and Iraq. No evidence was produced, and the family adamantly deny the allegations.

The Court found that Mirganiyev was legally resident in Turkey, that Uzbekistan had provided "no evidence of extremist activity [by Mirganiyev]", and there was a risk of unjust imprisonment if he was extradited to Uzbekistan.

Lieutenant Colonel Davron Mirzakhojayev of Tashkent Criminal Investigation Department (CID) could not explain to Forum 18 what concrete acts of terrorism Mirganiyev was

alleged to have committed, and why Uzbekistan could not provide the Turkish authorities with any evidence of these allegations. "I am in a meeting at the moment, could you call me back in 15 minutes," Lt Col Mirzakhojayev told Forum 18 on 25 May 2023. He did not answer his phone whenever Forum 18 called him back.

Mirganiyev arrested on return to Uzbekistan



Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov, 2021
Private [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0]

Throughout 2018 and 2019, officials of Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry and possibly also the [State Security Service \(SSS\)](#) secret police called Mirganiyev. They invited him to return to Uzbekistan "to clear our names from the criminal case opened against us in 2014", his wife told Forum 18. The officials promised that he would not be arrested. The family does not know how the officials found his phone number.

Mirganiyev eventually decided to put an end to problems with Uzbekistan, and "returned believing the promises of the authorities that he will not be arrested". Officials arrested him on 11 June 2022 at Tashkent's International Airport on arrival from Turkey.

"They [police] told me he would be held in Tashturma [Tashkent's central prison] for three days," Mirganiyev's brother [told Human Rights Watch](#). "They promised that he would be questioned and then released. But once they detained him, they didn't release him again."

In a similar case, in 2010 amid a wave of arrests and jailings of Muslim readers of theologian Said Nursi's works, Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov fled from Uzbekistan to Russia where he was [arrested after an extradition request from Uzbekistan](#). Tukhtamurodov managed to overturn the extradition order, but was ordered to leave Russia in February 2022. Despite [assurances from the Uzbek authorities that he would not be arrested if he returned](#), officials arrested him at Tashkent Airport on arrival on 11 April 2022.

On 23 June 2022, the 47-year-old Tukhtamurodov was jailed for 5 years 1 month for participating in a group that met in 2010 to study the works of Nursi. Judge Akrom Rakhimov [told Forum 18](#) that prisoner of conscience Tukhtamurodov was jailed as: "He not only read literature, but spread his beliefs and met others."

Charges

Tashkent Regional Police took over the criminal case against Alijon Mirganiyev after his arrest on 11 June 2022. CID Investigator Otabek Begmatov questioned Mirganiyev.

Mirganiyev was accused of drugs-related charges (dropped on appeal as there was no evidence of this – see below), illegally leaving the country, and the same charge he was jailed in 2006 under - [Criminal Code Article 244-2](#) ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations").

The family has evidence – seen by Forum 18 - that the accusations of leaving the country illegally and entering other countries illegally are false.

Mirganiyev was accused of "continuing his criminal activities after having served his punishment in 2006 by participating in the activity of a religious extremist organisation named 'Jihadist' created by [Imam Obid Nazarov](#)."

Investigators also accused Mirganiyev of forming a "criminal conspiracy" with his family to go to Turkey to "raise his children in the spirit of extremism", "to engage their children in drug use and drug trafficking", and "created and participated in the activity of an extremist religious organisation". No evidence was produced for any of these allegations.

Deputy CID Chief Lt Col Karim Raimjanov, CID Lt Col Mirzakhojayev, and CID Senior Lieutenant (now Captain) Murat Mamirov signed the indictment on 30 July 2022. Deputy Tashkent Regional Prosecutor Abdukhamid Kamilov endorsed it on 4 August 2022.

CID Lt Col Mirzakhojayev could not explain to Forum 18 what, if any, evidence there was for any of the charges. Captain Mamirov of the CID also did not want to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 25 May 2023, claiming that he could not hear Forum 18's questions. Tashkent Regional Prosecutor's Office did not answer its telephones between 23 and 25 May.

Seven-year jail term

On 18 October 2022, Judge Aziz Khonkeldiyev of Tashkent Region's Zangiota District Criminal Court found Mirganiyev guilty of all charges, and gave him a seven year prison term, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Neither Judge Khonkeldiyev nor the Court answered their telephones between 23 and 25 May 2023.

Family members in Turkey told Forum 18 that they could not attend the trial, and cannot visit Mirganiyev in prison as they are afraid they too could be arrested and imprisoned.

"One of the numerous fabricated cases against influential Muslims"



Yelena Uralyeva protests against jailing of Alijon Mirganiyev outside General Prosecutor's Office, Tashkent, February 2023, [Yelena Uralyeva](#)

Human rights defender Yelena Uralyeva, who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, attended Alijon Mirganiyev's appeal hearing. She also protested outside the General Prosecutor's Office in Tashkent in February 2023.

"This is one of the numerous fabricated cases made against influential Muslims," Uralyeva, who is also familiar with the 2006 case, told Forum 18 on 25 May. "The authorities do not like strong examples of devout Muslims because they can influence the masses."

The regime has consistently [targeted devout Muslims](#) exercising their freedom of religion and belief outside state control, including [Muslims who are respected by their fellow-believers](#).

Appeal

On 10 March 2023, Judge Khayrilla Rakhmonov of Tashkent Regional Court heard prisoner of conscience Alijon Mirganiyev's appeal. The Judge decided on 12 March that "not enough evidence was found" to substantiate the drugs charges, and reduced the sentence by six months to a six and a half year jail term. He upheld the other charges.

The appeal decision - seen by Forum 18 - says that Mirganiyev can appeal against the verdict to the Supreme Court, and the family intend to do this.

Mirganiyev's wife observed that, as he was arrested on 11 June 2022, her husband will be in prison for another five and half years.

Neither Judge Rakhmonov nor his Assistant (who refused to give his name) wanted to discuss the case or answer Forum 18's questions on 24 or 25 May 2023.

Transfer to strict regime prison

On 12 April, prisoner of conscience Mirganiyev was transferred to Zarafshon's strict regime prison No. 12 in Navoi Region. "His two sisters visited him in prison on 16 May, and stayed with him there in a special room for visits," his wife told Forum 18. "They told

me that his health is fine, that he is allowed to do namaz prayer, but is not allowed to have his own Koran as they have it in the library. Alijon sleeps at night in a barracks with other prisoners."

Prison conditions [can be harsh](#). Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk [banned prisoners from fasting during 2023's Ramadan](#), threatening those that do.

Prisoner of conscience Mirganiyev prison address is:

Uzbekistan
Navoiy viloyati
Zarafshan shaxri
Sharq ko'chasi, uy No. 1
Navoiy viloyati
Ichki ishlar boshqarmasi
Jinoyati Ijro Etish Bo'limi
12-sonli Jinoyati Ijro Etish Kolonoyasi
Alijon Makhmudovich Mirganiyev

The duty officer at Zarafshon Prison confirmed to Forum 18 on 24 May that Mirganiyev is in the prison and confirmed the conditions Mirganiyeva described to Forum 18. He refused to discuss other questions or put Forum 18 through to Prison Governor Farhod Qobilov.

15-day jail for haram yoghurt videos

Forum 18 (13.04.2023) - Hojiakbar Nosirov, a 25-year-old consumer rights activist from Tashkent, posted a video on social media on 5 April declaring that the red colouring agent carmine he had found in locally-sold yoghurt is haram (forbidden) for Muslims. Police investigated and commissioned an "expert analysis" from the regime's Religious Affairs Committee that claimed Nosirov had expressed "enmity, intolerance or discord". A 3-minute closed online trial jailed him for 15 days. "The experts quickly conducted a literary examination, wrote down the conclusion and decided the fate of an individual", his lawyer complained.

A Tashkent court has jailed a young activist Hojiakbar Nosirov for 15 days for two short social media videos that claim that an animal-derived product used for colouring yoghurt red is haram (forbidden) for Muslims and therefore so is yoghurt containing the colouring which he found on sale in the city.

Nosirov, who is 25, posted his videos on his Telegram channel on 5 and 6 April. The police immediately began investigating, commissioned an "expert analysis" from the regime's Religious Affairs Committee and brought administrative charges against him. On 8 April, the court had found him guilty in a 3-minute online hearing and jailed him for 15 days (see below).

Judge Bobir Rakhimov found Nosirov guilty on charges of "Production, storage or distribution of works promoting national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred" and "Failure

to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order" (see below).

A Tashkent police statement on the case issued the same day complained that Nosirov had spoken about the colouring in several brands of yoghurt "based on his personal religious views without obtaining conclusions from relevant experts" (see below).

Hojiakbar Nosirov's lawyer, Sirojiddin Ishpulatov, immediately lodged an appeal against his client's sentence and jail term to Tashkent City Criminal Court. He rejected accusations that his client had distributed materials "promoting religious enmity". "Is there evidence of this in the case file?" he asked. "Has anyone complained about their religion being insulted?" He accused the police and Religious Affairs Committee officials of "imprisoning innocent people for no reason" (see below).

The lawyer Ishpulatov also questioned how on the same day the "expert analysis" could be commissioned, the request sent to the Religious Affairs Committee, "the experts quickly conducted a literary examination, wrote down the conclusion and decided the fate of an individual", and the analysis sent to the police. Ishpulatov noted that "expert analyses" are normally produced in between 15 to 30 days (see below).

Ishpulatov also expressed concern about Nosirov since the hasty trial. "That day was the last time I saw Hojiakbar Nosirov," he wrote in the appeal. "Until now, they have been hiding Hojiakbar's whereabouts and preventing him from meeting his lawyer" (see below).

Lieutenant J. Kobilov of the Police's Criminal Investigation Department – who appears to have initiated the case and interrogated Nosirov at the police station - did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called and did not answer written questions (see below).

Telephones at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

The regime imposes prior compulsory censorship of all material on religion, including of printed and electronic publications, social media posts and journalistic articles on religious themes (see below).

Books, materials, social media posts, journalism on religion censored

The Religion Law imposes [prior compulsory state censorship](#) of all "materials of religious content". Article 10 defines these as all printed and electronic materials, including on the internet, as well as signs and symbols, "expressing the dogmatic bases, history and ideology of the teaching and commentary on it, the practice of rituals of different religious faiths, as well as an evaluation from a religious position of individual personalities, historical facts and events".

Religious literature can only be produced, distributed or imported after it has undergone state censorship and received a positive "[expert analysis](#)" from the regime's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. Those who violate these provisions face punishment. Books confiscated in the course of such cases are often ordered destroyed.

After Uzbek customs officials at the land border seized Bibles and other Christian books on 20 February from a Baptist visiting from Kazakhstan, Nikolai Smirnov, they sent the books to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an "expert analysis". Although it found there was nothing illegal in the books, Smirnov is [facing prosecution for "illegally" importing the books](#).

Journalists and editors from Azon.uz and Kun.uz were fined in June 2021 for [publishing articles on religious themes](#) without Religious Affairs Committee permission.

One of the articles the Committee objected to was about the New Zealand Police adopting the hijab as part of police uniform, which Kun.uz sourced from a BBC report. The regime has told journalists that every article which the Religious Affairs Committee might be interested in must be sent to them for pre-publication ["expert analysis"](#).

The regime also [targets ordinary members of religious communities who express their views](#). Officials warned Shia Muslims in Bukhara and Samarkand in June 2021 "not to publish religious materials on their social media." One human rights defender stated that "after the warning many deleted their accounts, or deleted religious materials." A human rights defender noted that "some even stopped talking to or associating with people who had been warned".

A human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals [told Forum 18 in June 2021](#) that "the regime wants to shut people up and does not want citizens to freely exchange their thoughts or ask questions about Islam." They commented that "this will not lead anything good but will lead to extremism," noting that "we need real reforms and freedoms, including freedom of religion and belief, if we do not want extremism."

Two short videos on yoghurt colouring

Hojiakbar Nosirov, a 25-year-old consumer rights activist from the capital Tashkent, investigates the quality of food on sale and posts film of his investigations on the Activist UZ Telegram channel and on YouTube.

On 5 April, Nosirov posted a 51-second video filmed in a supermarket with a trolley containing yoghurts from various companies. He held up to the camera the lists of ingredients for several of them, showing that they contained the colouring carmine, which is usually made from dead insects. He said this was haram (forbidden) for Muslims and so too therefore was yoghurt using carmine as a colouring. He pointed to three websites containing information on what food is halal or haram.

On 6 April, Nosirov posted a 3-minute video discussing the yoghurts he had found on sale in Tashkent that contain carmine. He pointed again to the three websites, as well as to WorldofIslam.info. (WorldofIslam.info puts carmine in the "doubtful" category, while noting that Islamic scholars in the UK and South Africa considered it haram but others do not.) Nosirov clarified that the carmine itself was haram, not the other ingredients of the yoghurt.

Police, Religious Affairs Committee "expert analysis"

Shaykhontohur District police commissioned a ["religious studies expert analysis"](#) of Nosirov's videos on carmine in yoghurt from the regime's Religious Affairs Committee. The same day, B. Karimov prepared a 2-page analysis (seen by Forum 18).

This analysis found that Nosirov's videos did not promote extremism, fanaticism, separatism, extermination or displacement of people, or create panic in the population. However, Karimov found that they cause "enmity, intolerance or discord against population groups, aimed at humiliating national honour and dignity, insulting the feelings of citizens based on their religious beliefs".

The analysis also claimed that Nosirov's views "do not have a scientific basis" and that he was "blindly absorbing his religious views".

Dilshod Mamadkulov, a Deputy Chair at the Religious Affairs Committee, sent the analysis to Shaykhontohur District police the same day.

In his subsequent appeal, Nosirov's lawyer Ishpulatov questions how on the same day the "expert analysis" could be commissioned, the request sent to the Religious Affairs Committee, "the experts quickly conducted a literary examination, wrote down the conclusion and decided the fate of an individual", and the analysis sent to the police. Ishpulatov noted that "[expert analyses](#)" are normally produced in between 15 to 30 days.

Telephones at the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 12 and 13 April.

Police then brought a case against Nosirov under two Administrative Code Articles:

- Article 184-3 ("Production, storage or distribution of works promoting national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred"). Punishments under this Article are a fine of between 50 and 100 base units (about 5 to 10 months' average wages) for individuals, or for officials between 100 and 150 base units (about 10 to 15 months' average wages) or up to 15 days in jail, plus confiscation of the materials.

- 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"). Punishments under this Article are a fine of between 1 and 12 base units (about 3 days' to 1 month's average wages).

Summons, case handed for trial

On 7 April, the day it received the "expert analysis", Shaykhontohur District police summoned Nosirov for interrogation (though they failed to write his name on the summons).

The following day Nosirov went to Shaykhontohur District police with his lawyer Sirojiddin Ishpulatov, where they were received by Lieutenant J. Kobilov of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Lieutenant Kobilov and about seven other officers questioned Nosirov about his videos. Although the Interior Ministry orders that all such interviews should be filmed, officers interrogated Nosirov in a room with no cameras, according to his subsequent appeal. Officers pressured Nosirov and shouted at his lawyer to shut up, the appeal notes. Officers refused to allow Nosirov to write a statement setting out his position.

Lieutenant Kobilov did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called on 12 and 13 April. He did not answer written questions sent on 12 April.

The administrative case against Hojiakbar Nosirov was handed to Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District Court. However, the police insisted that the court case should immediately be heard online, with Nosirov and his lawyer Ishpulatov in the police station.

Jailed for 15 days in closed 3-minute online



Shaykhontohur District Administrative Court, Tashkent, 20 February 2019
Yelena Uralyeva [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0]

At the hastily-arranged hearing on the afternoon of 8 April, Nosirov's lawyer Sirojiddin Ishpulatov insisted that the defence wanted the case to be heard not online but in person at Shaykhontohur District Court. Judge Bobir Rakhimov summarily rejected Ishpulatov's request to hold the hearing in person and on another day when he had had time to familiarise himself with all the materials in the case. The Judge claimed (wrongly) that Ishpulatov had refused to acquaint himself with the case materials.

Judge Rakhimov found Nosirov guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 184-3 ("Production, storage or distribution of works promoting national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred") 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").

The Judge handed down on Nosirov a 15-day jail term under Article 184-3 and a fine of 300,000 Soms (3 days' average wage) under Article 194, Part 1. The judge then combined these punishments into a 15-day jail term, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The 15-day term was deemed to begin at 4 pm that day.

A Tashkent police statement on the case issued the same day complained that Nosirov had spoken about the colouring in several brands of yoghurt "based on his personal religious views without obtaining conclusions from relevant experts". It claimed he had violated others' constitutionally-guaranteed right to privacy "as well as the right to be protected from interference in their personal life". It also claimed those whose business reputation has been harmed have the right to bring a case in court and demand compensation.

No business is known to have brought a case against Nosirov because of his videos on yoghurt.

The Tashkent police statement noted that Article 10 of the Religion Law bans the distribution of religious materials which have not undergone state censorship and received a positive religious studies "expert analysis". (The Religious Affairs Committee's "expert analysis" made no mention of any violation of this Article.)

"Where are the promises of constitutional changes in our country, which are supposed to ensure freedom of speech?" a post on Nosirov's Telegram channel noted that day. "We are waiting for the reaction of the relevant authorities in this situation. We ask them to prove exactly which word or content used by Hojiakbar is related to religious extremism."

Appeal

Hojiakbar Nosirov's lawyer, Sirojiddin Ishpulatov, immediately lodged an appeal (seen by Forum 18) against his client's sentence and jail term to Tashkent City Criminal Court. He complained that Judge Rakhimov had considered the case against Nosirov "superficially". He called for the case to be examined in person in an open hearing with Nosirov being present and for the conviction to be overturned.

On behalf of Nosirov, Ishpulatov rejected accusations that his client had distributed materials "promoting religious enmity". "Is there evidence of this in the case file?" he asked. "Has anyone complained about their religion being insulted?" He accused the police and Religious Affairs Committee officials of "imprisoning innocent people for no reason".

Ishpulatov rejected accusations in the police statement that Nosirov had offended businesses. "None of the yoghurt companies asked or demanded that he delete or reject the video," he pointed out.

Ishpulatov also argued that because of the procedural violations over the 7 April interrogation of his client, materials from that interrogation should be ruled inadmissible. He noted that the Interior Ministry refused to allow him to file a complaint about the violations against the officers who interrogated Nosirov.

Ishpulatov objected to the characterisation of the trial as open. "How can an open court hearing be held inside a police building?" he asked. "An open court hearing means that any citizen can freely enter and observe the court."

Ishpulatov also expressed concern about Nosirov since the hasty trial. "That day was the last time I saw Hojiakbar Nosirov," he wrote in the appeal. "Until now, they have been hiding Hojiakbar's whereabouts and preventing him from meeting his lawyer."

Tashkent City Criminal Court has not yet set a date for the appeal hearing.

Easter church raid, Baptists tortured, prison Ramadan fast ban

Felix Corley

Forum 18 (11.04.2023) - Police raided the Baptist Church in Karshi during worship on Easter Sunday, 9 April. They "damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members", Baptists said. Police "brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers" and "used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate" church members. Police refused to explain why they raided the church and tortured church members. Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk banned prisoners from fasting during Ramadan, threatening those that do.

On Easter Sunday, 9 April, police raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Karshi in the southern Kashkadarya Region during their morning worship meeting. "Police officers and officials damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members," Baptists told Forum 18 the same day.



Police raid on Baptist Council of Churches congregation, Karshi, 9 April 2023
Baptist Council of Churches

Baptists state that police tortured church members. "Today police brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers," they said.

"They also used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate the brothers and sisters. Church members cried and prayed during those difficult minutes." Video posted online shows Ibragimov collapsing to the ground against a wall in the yard, and then a police officer standing next to him (see below).

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment requires the regime to arrest and put on criminal trial for torture officials suspected of involvement in torture. The regime routinely ignores this human rights obligation (see below).

Local Baptists said 10 church members, including young people, were taken to the police station. Video images show police officers holding one church member Yokub round the neck as he was on the ground, and as they put him in a police van. The officer warns another officer that a church member is filming the arrest and a man runs towards the camera. Another church member, Yusuf, was already in the police van in handcuffs (see below).

No official from the police, the Kashkadarya Regional Interior Ministry (which oversees the police), or the district administration would answer Forum 18's questions about the raid or the torture of Baptists (see below).

Church members say the raid followed the Church's attempts to rent 15 local halls for presentations of the Christian faith to mark Easter. Visiting German musicians were to be involved in these meetings. All the rental attempts were blocked (see below).

On 10 April, police raided the special Easter worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Denov in Surkhandarya Region. They said the meeting was illegal and forcibly dispersed those present. The German Baptist musicians had travelled there

from Karshi for the meeting. As in Karshi, the Church had tried to rent a venue. "Invitations had been handed out, but everywhere there was a ban on renting premises," church members noted (see below).

Council of Churches Baptists fear that the authorities may disrupt further events in the tour of Uzbek cities by the visiting German Baptists (see below).

Prisoners in at least one prison have been warned not to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began in late March and is due to end on or about 21 April. The administration of Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk in Tashkent Region banned Muslim prisoners from fasting during Ramadan (see below).

"They threatened prisoners that, if they fast, they will be accused of violating prison regulations and will be sent back to the prison camp," one Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "They also began to close the canteen for suhur, the morning meal before the start of the fast" (see below).

Neither Major Shukur Jurayev, the acting head of Open Prison No. 49, nor the Interior Ministry has been willing to answer Forum 18's questions about why prisoners are banned from fasting during Ramadan, and why the prison has closed the canteen for prisoners wanting to eat the pre-dawn meal (see below).

On 20 February, Uzbek customs officials detained a Baptist from Kazakhstan, Nikolai Smirnov, at the Gisht-Kuprik border crossing point, Baptists told Forum 18. Border guards had found in his car 237 Christian books, including calendars and Bibles. They seized all the Christian literature and handed it over to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an "expert analysis". This found that there was nothing illegal in the literature, but officials refuse to return it and Smirnov faces a possible fine for "illegal" import of religious literature (see below).

Religious Affairs Committee officials did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called to question them about the incident (see below).

Karshi: Police raid on Baptist Church



Baptist church member (right) talks to official apparently leading raid, Karshi, 9 April 2023, Baptist Council of Churches

Police raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Karshi in the southern Kashkadarya Region during their morning worship meeting on Easter Sunday, 9 April. Council of Churches Baptists do not seek state permission to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, as is [their right under international human rights law](#). Fellow Baptist musicians from Germany were among those taking part in the worship meeting.

Officials arrived during the service, refusing to say who they were except that they were from the mahalla (local district) committee. They said they were acting in accordance with a circular from the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent (signed by Deputy Chair Dilshod Mamadkulov) and the Culture Ministry in Tashkent (signed by Deputy Minister Bahodir Ahmedov) saying events involving the musicians from Germany were not allowed. The officials then called in the police.

"Police officers and officials damaged the door of the prayer house, behaved crudely, and arrested three church members," Baptists told Forum 18 the same day.

Video of the raid posted online show church members trying to prevent the police coming in from the yard through a church door the police broke down, while musicians carry on singing a Christian song at the front of the packed place of worship.

Further images show six or seven uniformed police walking through the congregation with the large letters "PPX" (which indicates police who patrol local areas) on the backs of their jackets. The video also shows a church leader asking a man in plain clothes, who appears to be leading the raid, if he is from the Hokimiyat (district administration).

Karshi: Police torture Baptists



Baptist church members try to prevent police entering church, Karshi, 9 April 2023
Baptist Council of Churches

Baptists state that police tortured church members. "Today police brutally beat David Ibragimov and a few more church members in front of our fellow believers," they said. "They also used electric shock prods and other implements to incapacitate the brothers and sisters. Church members cried and prayed during those difficult minutes."

Video posted online shows Ibragimov collapsing to the ground against a wall in the yard, and then a police officer standing next to him.

Local Baptists said 10 church members, including young people, were taken to the police station. Video images show police officers holding one church member Yokub round the neck as he was on the ground, and as they put him in a police van. The officer warns

another officer that a church member is filming the arrest and a man runs towards the camera. Another church member, Yusuf, was already in the police van in handcuffs.

Police held all those they had detained until 3 pm. They drew up records of an offence before releasing them. They threatened one of them, Yokub Boboyev with a criminal charge of injuring a police officer, accusations church members insist are false.

The head and deputy heads of Kashkadarya Regional Interior Ministry (which oversees the police) did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called on 10 April. The man who answered the phone of press secretary Major Javlon Bakhtiyev put the phone down as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members.

The United Nations (UN) [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) requires the regime to arrest and put on criminal trial for torture officials suspected of involvement in torture.

The regime [routinely ignores](#) this human rights obligation, for example in relation to [the torture of Muslim prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev](#).

The duty officer at Karshi City Police on 10 April referred all enquiries to the city's 2nd Police Station, in whose area the Baptist church is located. The 2nd Police Station duty officer put Forum 18 through to another officer, who put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members. All the officers refused to give their names.

Anvar Kobilov, the Deputy Head of Kashkadarya Regional Hokimiyat (administration) responsible for youth policy, social development and spiritual and educational affairs, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began to ask about the raid on the Baptist Church's Easter service and torture of church members.

The official who answered the phone at the City Hokimiyat (administration) refused to put Forum 18 through on 10 April to any official there.

Church members say the raid followed the Church's attempts to rent 15 local halls for presentations of the Christian faith to mark Easter. The visiting German musicians were to be involved in these meetings. All the rental attempts were blocked.

Karshi: Earlier raids on Baptist Church

On 19 February, officials from the town Hokimiyat (administration) and the police raided Karshi's Council of Churches Baptist congregation during its Sunday morning meeting for worship, Baptists told Forum 18.

The Karshi congregation has existed for 30 years. It completed its new building and held a special service to dedicate it on the afternoon of 21 November 2021. Police and local officials came into the yard as the special service was underway. They tried to halt the service and force their way into the building to disperse those present, but church members prevented them from entering.

Police brought a bus to the church building and threatened to take away church members who were blocking their entrance. However, they did not do so. Church members said the police mostly behaved correctly, though some jostled church members as officers tried to gain entry. One officer tried to seize the mobile phone from a church member who was filming what they were doing.

Police also threatened to record personal details of any foreign citizens who were at the service, to ban them from further entry to the country. However, they did not do so. Police left mid-afternoon and the special dedication service continued undisturbed until the evening.

Police and other officials have raided the Church on numerous earlier occasions and fined church members, including in [2013](#), [2015](#), [2017](#), and [2018](#).

Denov: Worship meeting raided, banned

On Monday 10 April 2023, police raided a special Easter worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Denov in Surkhandarya Region. They said the meeting was illegal and forcibly dispersed those present.

The German Baptist musicians had travelled there from Karshi for the meeting. As in Karshi, the Church had tried to rent a venue. "Invitations had been handed out, but everywhere there was a ban on renting premises," church members noted. They decided to hold the worship meeting in their own church.

More tour events to be banned?

Council of Churches Baptists fear that the authorities may disrupt further events in the tour of Uzbek cities by the visiting German Baptists.

"We would like them to take part in several meetings for worship in various cities of Uzbekistan over the next three days," Baptists told Forum 18 on 10 April. "The authorities have promised to follow this group in all its meetings with local Baptists."

Prisoners banned, threatened over Ramadan fasting

Prisoners in at least one prison have been warned not to fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began in late March and is due to end on or about 21 April. Muslim prisoners have in the past been [tortured for praying the namaz or fasting during Ramadan](#).

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, [A/C.3/70/L.3](#)) requires the regime to respect prisoners' exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Rule 2 includes the provision: "The religious beliefs and moral precepts of prisoners shall be respected."

Yusup Bahodiy, Deputy Head of the Medical Division of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, [claimed to Forum 18 in December 2021](#) that "I have never heard of the Rules. Please e-mail them to us."

The administration of Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk in Tashkent Region banned Muslim prisoners from fasting during Ramadan. "They threatened prisoners that, if they fast, they will be accused of violating prison regulations and will be sent back to the prison camp," one Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 4 April 2023. "They also began to close the canteen for suhur, the morning meal before the start of the fast."

Prisoners in an open prison can be sent to a prison with harsher conditions for violating the prison regime. Human rights defenders told Forum 18 that prison administrations can easily fabricate alleged violations of prison regulations when they want to increase a prisoner's punishment. One told Forum 18 that the administration of Open Prison No. 49

has already sent two prisoners to a prison camp in late March, and is preparing to send two more.

A human rights defender, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that prisoners state that such transfers to harsher regime camps are made on the orders of the [State Security Service \(SSS\) secret police](#).

Forum 18 called Major Shukur Jurayev, the acting head of Open Prison No. 49, on 10 April to find out why prisoners are banned from fasting during Ramadan, and why the prison has closed the canteen for prisoners wanting to eat the pre-dawn meal. After Forum 18 introduced itself and began asking the questions, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls were not answered. Major Jurayev has not replied to written questions.

An official who refused to give his name of the [Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments](#) in Tashkent (which is responsible for prisons) put the phone down on 10 April as soon as Forum 18 began asking about the ban on fasting during Ramadan in Open Prison No. 49.

Administrative prosecution, confiscation follow literature seizure on border

On the evening of 20 February, Uzbek customs officials detained a Baptist from Kazakhstan, Nikolai Smirnov, at the Gisht-Kuprik border crossing point, Baptists told Forum 18. Border guards had found in his car 237 copies of a book of children's stories "God's Miracle", about 60 copies of another children's book, 199 calendars and 31 Bibles, as well as postcards. They seized all the Christian literature and handed it over to the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent for an ["expert analysis"](#).

Customs officials questioned Smirnov and then released him that evening. The following day they summoned him again to the border post for further questioning. On 24 February, they allowed him to leave Uzbekistan. Smirnov has relatives who live in Uzbekistan and fears the Uzbek authorities might ban him from entering the country.

The 2-page Religious Affairs Committee "expert analysis" found nothing illegal in the books. Smirnov was allowed to read the "expert analysis" but not given a copy. "Officials said earlier that if the expert analysis finds nothing illegal in the books they would hand them back," Smirnov told Forum 18 from Kazakhstan on 11 April. "But they deceived me. They then said they wouldn't return them as they were brought into Uzbekistan illegally. I would like them back."

On 7 March, officials drew up a case against Smirnov under [Administrative Code Article 184-2](#). This punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials" with a fine for individuals of 20 to 100 base units (currently 6,000,000 to 30,000,000 Soms, two to 10 months' average wage) plus confiscation of the materials.

Officials then handed the case against Smirnov to Tashkent District Criminal Court in the town of Keles. However, no date has yet been set for a hearing, Smirnov told Forum 18.

[Religious Affairs Committee](#) officials, including Begzod Kadyrov, head of the Department for Non-Islamic Faiths, did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called on 10 April.