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UZBEKISTAN: No sermons, children or cars at Ramadan night prayers

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

New instructions have been issued by the state-controlled Muftiate over how the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began in Uzbekistan on 13 September, is to be observed. Imams have been banned from preaching at night prayers, which must end by 10 pm, with the imam confirming this each night to the regional leader, Mukbil Toshotarov reported from Namangan for the website ferghana.ru. Children are banned from attending night prayers. Saidbahrom Gulyamov of the International Department at the Muftiate categorically denied this to Forum 18 News Service, though he conceded that "suggestions" were issued. He declined to discuss who had decided to initiate the instructions. Religious affairs officials in the Fergana Valley – where restrictions are tightest – issued blanket denials of such restrictions to Forum 18. Tashkent-based opposition activist Vasila Inoyatova told Forum 18 the government is behind the instructions. "They fear that religious people will gather at the fast-breaking meal [after sunset]."

Uzbekistan's state-controlled Muftiate or Spiritual Administration issued special instructions on how local imams are to observe the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began in Uzbekistan on 13 September. Journalists and human rights activists have insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the instructions include restrictions – especially on the length, timing and content of the Tarawih prayers conducted in mosques at night and who may attend. However, Saidbahrom Gulyamov, head of the International Department at the Muftiate, categorically denied this. "No special procedures are in force during Ramadan," he told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 19 September. "No such instructions were issued." He then conceded that "suggestions" were issued.

Muslims outside Uzbekistan told Forum 18 that although the timing of Tarawih prayers is flexible, it should be the decision of the local imam and community as to how much of the Koran is read, who should read it and how long the prayers should last. They stressed that it was normal for an imam to preach and explain the meaning of the readings and said it is up to parents to decide whether their children should attend the prayers.

Neither Artyk Yusupov, head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, nor any of its officials were available to explain the restrictions. Two men who answered different phones at the committee on 20 September told Forum 18 they were students and that no other officials were present.

Although restrictions are reported to be tighter in the Namangan, Andijan [Andijon] and Fergana [Farghona] Regions of the Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan, no religious affairs official in these regions would discuss the restrictions with Forum 18, merely issuing blanket denials.

Tashkent-based opposition activist Vasila Inoyatova says the government is behind the instructions. "They fear that religious people will gather at the fast-breaking meal [after sunset]," she told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 September. "The police presence has been strengthened at mosques, especially in the Fergana Valley." She said that local people had reported to her that in Andijan Region, Muslims were banned from attending mosques in cars and that bags are being searched at mosque doors. "They fear religious literature could be brought in cars and bags and distributed during prayers."

Azamat Abdurahmanov, religious affairs official at the Namangan Regional Hokimat (administration), denied to Forum 18 on 20 September that any restrictions are in place. He said he had not attended a 5 September meeting called by the Muftiate's regional representative Abdulhai Tursunov at which the instructions were passed on to local imams. He then put the phone down.

Shukhrat Turdykulov of Fergana Regional Hokimat told Forum 18 on 19 September only that "prayers are underway" and put the phone down. Reached on 12 September just before Ramadan began, Shaket Gulomov of Andijan Regional Hokimat denied that any instructions had been issued or that any restrictions would be imposed. "Nothing is banned – imams can preach," he told Forum 18. "No limits are in place on how many people can attend mosque, or on the number of cars that can be parked outside mosques." He added that "no special provisions" have been imposed on children's attendance at mosques, though he would not confirm whether they are allowed to attend or not.

Away from the Fergana Valley, religious affairs official Muhto Ibadullaev of the Hokimat of Samarkand Region in central

Uzbekistan denied to Forum 18 on 19 September that any restrictions on Muslim prayers were in place during Ramadan. However, he declined to discuss anything further and put the phone down.

In an article published by the independent Central Asian news website ferghana.ru on 7 September, Mukbil Toshotarov wrote from Namangan of restrictions imposed by the Muftiate in Tashkent. He said an order from the Muftiate banned imams from preaching during the night prayers and that prayers must be concluded by 10 pm. He added that each imam must contact the regional leader to confirm that prayers have finished and report any incidents before being allowed to go home.

Imams are responsible for ensuring that school-age children do not attend the night prayers. "If you invite children to the mosque you will burn in hell," Toshotarov quoted Abdulhai Tursunov, the Regional Muslim leader, as telling local imams, "and because of you your mosques will be closed and you will be punished with the curses of the people."

Tursunov also reportedly insisted that only koris (Koran readers) who had studied at Namangan's Mullah Kyrgyz madrassa (Islamic college) were to be allowed to read the Koran in mosques. He said local imams had to give the names and contact numbers of all Koran readers.

Imams were also instructed to tell those coming to mosques to travel on foot, not by car. Tursunov, the Regional Muslim leader, reportedly told them that otherwise "something could happen to the cars", while the imams themselves would be in trouble.

Toshotarov said the order was passed on at a regular meeting of all imams in Namangan Region called by Tursunov at Namangan's main mosque on 5 September. Toshotarov reported that the order was sent to regional Muslim leaders across Uzbekistan.

When pressed, Gulyamov of the Muftiate in Tashkent admitted to Forum 18 that Ramadan instructions had gone out, but said it was "only suggested" to imams not to allow night prayers to last too long. "It was suggested that imams not read more than two of the thirty sections of the Koran each night so as not to tire the people," he maintained. "There were complaints that night prayers were going on too long," he told Forum 18. "It was a suggestion, not an order, that prayers should be entirely over by 10 pm." He said these prayers generally begin between 8.30 and 9 pm.

Gulyamov dismissed as "rumours" spread by "dishonest people" the claim that imams have to report in each night that prayers have finished. He categorically denied the claim that imams were told to stop children from attending night prayers. "Who's stopping them?" he asked. Gulyamov refused absolutely to discuss who had decided to initiate the instructions or any other question and put the phone down.

An official of the Samarkand Regional Muftiate who preferred not to be named insisted to Forum 18 that "all is free and open" over prayers during Ramadan. He said "bad people" must be spreading reports of restrictions on sermons, children's attendance at mosque and who can read the Koran. "No-one ordered when night prayers must end." He maintained that each imam decides whether to preach during night prayers or not, said people can come to the mosque by car and "children of course can come".

But the Muftiate official defended keeping the Tarawih night prayers short. "They begin at 8.30 pm and last 45 minutes, an hour at most," he told Forum 18. "One hour is enough – people have to sleep or they will be tired." The official declined to discuss whether the state was pressuring Muslims over the timing and length of night prayers.

Tashkent-based human rights activist Surat Ikramov said he had heard of restrictions in Namangan Region but did not know how widely they extend across the country. "Everything depends on the imam – some follow the authorities very closely, but others don't," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 September. "These instructions are unlikely to be followed in every mosque."

Ikramov pointed out that the government has a long track-record of interfering in Muslim worship, especially during Ramadan. In 2006, the authorities told Muslims when Ramadan was to end. "They said Ramadan should finish one day early, but many people didn't follow that," he told Forum 18. "Although the Muftiate supported it, the decision came from the government and was promoted through the media. This was government interference."

Ikramov also complained of the spying by officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. "They are in every mosque, just as in Soviet times," he complained to Forum 18. "They pretend to pray like ordinary believers, but are there to spy."

The NSS conducts extensive human and electronic surveillance on many religious communities, sending overt and covert spies to spy on worshippers and to try to recruit members of religious communities as agents (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Ikramov stressed that local imams are compelled to attend regional meetings, where not only the Muftiate representative but state officials also take part. "If an imam doesn't come he could be removed," he told Forum 18. "Of course secret police and Hokimat officials also attend and speak at these meetings."

Writing for ferghana.ru, Toshotarov notes that restrictions on mosque attendance in Namangan Region are already tight. School

children face problems if they attend regular Friday prayers and each Friday the police and education authorities raid mosques to hunt for school children. He adds that imams were earlier warned not to allow more than a hundred cars to be parked outside a main mosque, citing a case in 2006 when an imam at a Namangan mosque had to write a statement for the police explaining why more than a hundred cars were outside his mosque.

Both Ikramov and Inoyatova expressed concern that prisoners will be punished for trying to fast and pray during Ramadan. "Labour camp administrations insist that praying and fasting violates the camp regime," Ikramov told Forum 18. "It is too early for individual reports from this year, but Muslims who prayed and fasted during Ramadan in earlier years were punished." Inoyatova said early reports reaching her indicate that punishments and forced feeding of those trying to fast have begun again this year.

Ikramov added that some prisons routinely punish Muslims who try to pray the namaz at any time of the year. He cited a woman who was allowed to meet her brother, Shauket Akhmetov, in Zarafshan prison in Navoi [Nawoiy] Region on 10 September, before Ramadan started. "He told her that praying the namaz was banned." Similar concerns about bans on praying in prison have long been voiced (see F18News 2 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=772).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Abdukarim Shodiev, head of the prison directorate in the Interior Ministry in Tashkent, to find out why prisoners are punished for observing Ramadan. His secretary said on both 19 and 20 September that he was in meetings.

State officials and Muslim leaders have made clear to Forum 18 that state officials are again this year making decisions over who can and cannot take part in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (see F18News 19 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1064).

Forum 18 notes that while Uzbekistan's government controls all other faiths from the outside, it controls the Islamic community from the inside. The Muftiate is widely seen as an arm of the government, fulfilling the duty of overseeing and controlling the Muslim community.

A document from Andijan Regional Hokimat from last April, leaked to Forum 18, made clear that officials have no compunction about issuing orders to Muslim, Christian and other religious communities. Regional officials issued orders requiring imams to speak out against "extremism", "terrorism" and "perversions of true Islam" and "to strengthen the struggle with people conducting illegal religious education and organising small religious gatherings." This is despite the separation of religion and the state set out in Uzbekistan's Constitution (see F18News 21 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=959). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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