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The right to believe, to worship and witness
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The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: New trial, long prison terms, heavy fines and deportation

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Nine Muslim men in Bukhara - eight of whom have been held since December 2008 - went on trial on 22 April, accused of belonging to an "extremist" organisation. Family members have told Forum 18 News Service the nine are peaceful followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. The brother of one of the defendants, Ikrom Merajov, told Forum 18 he "only read Said Nursi's books, which were published and sold openly in Uzbekistan". Three other followers of Said Nursi received prison sentences at a Tashkent trial of between twelve and eight years in prison, while a further trial is underway. After a Protestant's Tashkent home was raided by the police and secret police on 10 April, three of those present were each fined more than eight years' minimum wages. Bibles and recordings of Christian songs were among material confiscated. One of those present, a Kazakh citizen legally resident in Uzbekistan, was taken by officials and dumped over the border in Kazakhstan, Protestants told Forum 18. Officials have refused to comment to Forum 18 on why all these individuals are being punished for their peaceful religious activity.

Four months after they were arrested in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro], the trial of nine men accused of being followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi began on 22 April, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The trial is part of a continuing crackdown on religious organisations and individual believers across Uzbekistan. In separate cases, two criminal courts in the capital Tashkent have handed down prison sentences on three Muslims of between eight and twelve years and enormous fines on Protestant Christians, and begun another trial against four more Muslims who were witnesses in a previous court case. Also in April, Rodion Sayfutdinov, a Protestant Christian, who holds Kazakh citizenship but who was officially registered to live in Tashkent, was detained, taken to the border and "dumped" in Kazakhstan with "no money" on him, Protestants from Tashkent who wanted to remain unnamed told Forum 18.

Religious activity has been under very tight government control in Uzbekistan for more than a decade, but this control is now increasing. Muslim, Protestant Christian, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna communities have particularly suffered in the latest official attacks, which have included raids, arrests, beatings, 15-day imprisonments, sentences of up to 12 years' imprisonment, confiscation and court-ordered destruction of religious literature, and deportations. Officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 why pressure on religious communities has stepped up.

Criminal trial of nine Muslims in Bukhara

The trial that began at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court on 22 April under Judge Tursunbai Tangriyev is of Ikrom Merajov, a University lecturer from Bukhara, and eight others allegedly involved in a "radical Turkish Muslim Nursi movement".

However, Judge Tangriyev insisted to Forum 18 on 23 April that the trial of Ikrom Merajov and the eight others had not begun and would start "next week". He refused to talk about the case. Yet his secretary (who did not give her name) said "perhaps" the hearing already started. Merajov's brother, Ilhom Merajov, who lives in Russia, told Forum 18 on 23 April that his mother and father "already participated" in the trial that started on 22 April.

On 22 December 2008, police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police burst into the Merajov family home in Bukhara. They arrested Merajov and eight other men: Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Shuhrat Karimov. Religious books and other materials were confiscated in what the family insists was an "illegal" raid. The tenth man, Yadgar Juraev, was arrested several days later. Jumaev and Musaev were freed after 15 days' detention. Jumaev had to sign a document promising not to leave his home town, while no charges were lodged against Musaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

Bukhara Regional NSS Department also refused to talk about Merajov's case to Forum 18 on 23 April. When Forum 18 asked for Farhod Oltiyev, the NSS Investigator who supposedly led Merajov's case, the officer who answered the phone (he did not give his name) took down the name of Forum 18, and asked to wait on the line while he would see if Oltiyev was available to talk. A few minutes later the officer said, "We do not have anyone named Oltiyev working for us." When asked who Forum 18 could then talk to, he said "it is a wrong number."

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Ilhom Merajov, Ikrom Merajov's brother, was surprised to hear Judge Tangriyev's denial that the Regional Court started the hearings on the case. "My brother and eight others are being tried together under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 3 Point A and Article 244-2 Part 1, and the trial already began on 22 April," he insisted to Forum 18 from Russia on 23 April. "My mother and father participated in the hearing, and were told it would continue on Friday [24 April]."

Ilhom Merajov was equally surprised to hear the claim to Forum 18 from Jamshid Yusupov of the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office that no complaint had reached it regarding his brother. "It was from the official letter addressed to my father by Sayora Rashidova, Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson, that we found out the exact charges against my brother."

Ilhom Merajov said his brother was "never" involved in an extremist organisation. "Ikrom only read Said Nursi's books, which were published and sold openly in Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18. Ilhom Merajov said the Uzbek authorities are "confusing" extremism and terrorism with peaceful practice of Islam. "We have never even heard it announced officially that some court somewhere in Uzbekistan made a decision to ban Nursi's books."

Called back at the Regional Court, Judge Tangriyev was not available to talk. His secretary told Forum 18 that the she was "not sure when but perhaps" started on 22 April, and also she was "not sure" if it would continue on 24 April. She refused to answer further questions saying Forum 18 would need to "come to the court to find answers."

Neither was Bukhara Regional Prosecutor Ibadullo Nurov available to comment on the case. The Assistant Prosecutor (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 23 April that Nurov was on a business trip. Asked if Nursi's books were banned by a court decision in Uzbekistan, he said, "I cannot answer such questions over the phone." He refused to talk further, saying that he was "not allowed to talk over the phone."

Jamshid (who would not give his last name), an official of the Supreme Court, said he could not say whether or not Nursi's books were banned in Uzbekistan by a court decision. "Please, write a letter to the Foreign Ministry, and then they would send the letter to us," he told Forum 18.

Sentences on Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) contributors

On 6 April, Tashkent City Criminal Court led by Judge Mirzajanov (first name unknown) handed down eight-year prison sentences to Davron Tajiev, a correspondent of the newspaper "Yetti Iqlim" (Seven Climates), and Shavkat Ismoilov, an employee responsible for the paper's distribution. Sentenced to twelve years in prison in the same court hearing was Mammadali Shahobiddinov, a Muslim preacher from Namangan in the Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. All three were arrested on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi," the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 17 April.

Tajiev, Ismoilov and Shahobiddinov were found guilty under Criminal Code's Article 244 Part 2, which punishes creating, leading or participating in a religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other prohibited organisation. In addition, Shahobiddinov was also found guilty under Article 233, which punishes illegal exit from and entry into the country.

Another Tashkent trial, controversy over rejected appeal

Tashkent City Court also began the trial of four more Muslims – Ibrohim Khudoybergenov, Talat Pulatov, Jahongir Kurbonov and another unknown man – all of whom are suspected of having ties with the Nursi movement, Ezgulik told Forum 18. "Based on the unconfirmed information the four are also journalists, and are related to the convicted Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim journalists."

The four men were witnesses in the court cases against the convicted Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim journalists. Khamza Jumayev, the main witness in those court cases, is in the "worst" situation – possibly another court case is awaiting him, Ezgulik told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, human rights defenders told Forum 18 that among the panel of judges at Tashkent City Court who on 31 March rejected the appeal against their long prison sentences lodged by five Muslim prisoners of conscience who had contributed to the Irmoq (Spring) Islamic-inspired journal was Judge Farhod Yigitaliev, who had handed down the original sentences in February.

Of the five Irmoq contributors, Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafoyev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

Officials avoid comment on increased pressure

As is its usual practice, the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent was unwilling to talk to Forum 18 on 23 April. Asked why there have been so many cases in Uzbekistan with heavy prison sentences and enormous fines on religious believers, the official who answered the phone (who did not give his name) said, "If you want to talk to us, come to our office," and hung up the

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phone.

Jamshid Yusupov of Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson Office said none of the Muslims or Protestants in these recent cases has so far complained to them. Asked how he could explain the increase of the pressure by the Uzbek authorities on religious believers in recent months, Yusupov told Forum 18 on 23 April, "People can complain to us, and we talk to the authorities on concrete cases." Asked specifically what measures his office took in regards to Merajov's case Yusupov claimed that they had not received any compliant about his case. When asked who they concretely helped recently, Yusupov said, "Soon, in the beginning of May, we will publish on our new website the human rights situation report for 2008."

The City Court Chancellery refused to allow Forum 18 on 17 April to speak to Judges Yigitaliev and Mirzajanov. An official from the Court Chancellery, who did not give his name, said that the court has "forbidden" judges to speak to the public about the Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim cases. The official would not confirm or deny whether the court sentenced Tajiev, Ismoilov and Shahobiddinov on 6 April. "If you want to know you should come and participate in the trials," he told Forum 18 on 17 April. He then hung up the phone.

While the City Court does not share any information on the trials, it is believed that relatives of the defendants also have been "pressured" by the court not to share information with outsiders, the Central Asian news agency Voice of Freedom reported on 11 April.

Enormous fines given to Protestants

On 13 April a criminal court in Tashkent's Mirzo-Ulugbek District, in a case led by Judge Sagdulla Ashirmatov, found three Protestant Christians guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 201 Part 2, which punishes violation of the procedure of arranging, holding of meetings, gatherings, street marches or demonstrations, and Article 240, which punishes violation of the Religion Law. The verdicts, a copy of one of which Forum 18 has seen, record that the three Protestants – Nargiza Abdurakhmonova, Kibriyo Kamilova, Oksana Bugayeva – were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary or 2,804,000 Soms (12,618 Norwegian Kroner, 1,452 Euros or 1,923 US Dollars).

Protestants complained to Forum 18 that the court did not "even" ask for an expert opinion of the confiscated materials in the pre-trial stage, nor did the judge indicate on which of the two parts of Article 240 he based his decision.

Judge Ashirmatov's assistant told Forum 18 on 16 April from Tashkent that the Protestants were fined for holding an "illegal" religious meeting in a private flat. Asked how the court came to that conclusion, he responded: "They [the three Protestants] told the court that they are Christians." When Forum 18 insisted on talking to the judge he said, "We already fined them, and there will be no more discussions," and hung up the phone.

The court case followed the raid on Abdurakhmanova's flat in Mirzo-Ulugbek District on 10 April by nine officers of Tashkent City NSS secret police and regular police. NSS officers, who presented themselves as Timur and Rustam (last names unknown), police officers Major Ergash Turgunov and Captain Elbek Khayrullaev and five other officers broke into Abdurakhmanova's flat at 3 pm when Abdurakhmanova, Kamilova, Bugayeva together with Vyacheslav Ten, Mamura Umarova and Rodion Sayfutdinov, were having lunch.

Christian literature confiscated and a Protestant deported

Protestants from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the officers who raided Abdurakhmanova's flat confiscated a Bible, Children's Bible, four CDs and two audio-tapes with Christian worship songs. "Then all who were present at the lunch were taken to the local Karasu-6 mahalla committee [local administration] and kept there for three hours. Everyone except Sayfutdinov was released." Sayfutdinov, a Kazakh citizen who lived in Tashkent city with official registration, was detained, taken to the State border with Kazakhstan, and "dumped" in Kazakh territory with "no money".

Major Turgunov told Forum 18 on 16 April that he was not "personally" involved in the deportation of Sayfutdinov. When asked why the Police raided Abdurakhmanova's flat he hung up the phone.

Several foreign Protestants legally resident in Uzbekistan who were active in religious communities have been summarily expelled in recent years, often with no explanation. Also forced out in 2008 were Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich (see F18News 1 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1124). (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=1170.

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Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief 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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