

29 April 2009

UZBEKISTAN: More severe jail sentences for Muslim prisoners of conscience

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Uzbekistan has today (29 April) imposed severe jail sentences on nine followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the fourth such trial this year, university lecturer Ikrom Merajov was given nine years' imprisonment. Of the other eight prisoners of conscience, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar Juraev were each given six year jail terms. Three - Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev - each received sentences of five and a half years in jail. "The Uzbek government shouldn't fear Muslims who pray regularly, read the Koran regularly and meet in homes regularly," Merajov's brother Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18. Officials have refused to discuss the harsh sentences with Forum 18. The sentences imposed today bring to 25 the number of Nursi-related prisoners of conscience known to have been convicted this year, with sentences totalling nearly 200 years' imprisonment. Further convictions are likely as cases against others continue.

In the fourth set of convictions in Uzbekistan so far this year of followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Bukhara [Bukhoro] Regional Criminal Court today (29 April) handed down heavy terms of imprisonment on nine local Muslims, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. University lecturer Ikrom Merajov received the heaviest term, nine years' imprisonment, while the rest received sentences of between five and a half and six years' imprisonment. Families of the nine rejected the state's accusations the men were involved in any "illegal" activity. "The Uzbek government shouldn't fear Muslims who pray regularly, read the Koran regularly and meet in homes regularly," Merajov's brother Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 on 29 April. Officials have refused to discuss the harsh sentences with Forum 18.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that of the other defendants, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar Juraev were each given six year terms of imprisonment. The other three, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev, received sentences of five and a half years' imprisonment each. The prosecutor had demanded an 11-year sentence on Ikrom Merajov and eight year sentences for the other eight.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the nine men were told the written verdicts would be issued on 2 May. He said all nine are set to lodge appeals against their convictions.

The sentences handed down in Bukhara bring to 25 the number of people known to have been convicted this year in Uzbekistan in Nursi-related prosecutions, with sentences totalling nearly 200 years' imprisonment. Further convictions are likely as cases against others continue.

Non-Nursi related religious prisoners of conscience

Among other religious prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and four Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, Irfon Khamidov and Olim Turaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

Widespread official attacks on freedom of religion or belief

The campaign against Nursi followers since late 2008 has coincided with increased threats to children who attend places of worship, whether mosques, churches or temples. Also threatened have been parents who take their children to worship or who allow them to attend. Protestant Christian and Hare Krishna meetings have been raided in recent months. Protestants particularly face a wave of police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raids, with heavy fines, detentions of up to 15 days, confiscations and court-ordered destruction of religious literature and, in one recent case, a Kazakh citizen legally resident in Uzbekistan was summarily deported to Kazakhstan with no explanation (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Procedural violations at Bukhara trial?

Eight of the nine defendants were arrested in a police and NSS secret police raid on the Merajov family home in Bukhara on 22 December 2008. All eight were detained, though one, Jumaev, was freed in early January after 15 days' detention (apparently because he was younger) and awaited trial at home. Also detained during the raid was Abdurahmon Musaev, but he was freed after 15 days' detention and no charges were lodged against him.

Arrested a few days after the 22 December raid was Juraev: he was among the eight defendants held in pre-trial detention for four months and has now been given a six year jail sentence.

The trial of the nine began at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court on 22 April under Judge Tursunbai Tangriyev. The nine faced accusations that they were allegedly involved in a "radical Turkish Muslim Nursi movement". Merajov was accused of violating Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 3 Point A, which punishes "preparation or distribution of materials containing a threat to social security and social order" by a group or with foreign support, and Article 244-2 Part 1, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations". The other defendants faced similar charges (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Ilhom Merajov, the defendant's brother, told Forum 18 from Novosibirsk in Russia that the trial was open and the relatives of the accused were allowed to attend. However, he complained that defence requests for prosecution witnesses to be named and to attend court for questioning were rejected. "Their alleged testimony was simply read to the court anonymously and no possibility was given to challenge it," Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18.

Ilhom Merajov also complained that the defendants were never given the written indictments. "They were simply read out in the courtroom. This is a violation of procedure."

The man who answered Judge Tangriyev's telephone on 29 April told Forum 18 the judge was not there, adding that he was "just a citizen who happens to be in his office". Subsequent calls went unanswered.

The assistant to Bukhara Regional Prosecutor Ibadullo Nurov, who did not give his name, said he could not answer why Merajov and the other eight were so harshly punished by the court. "If you want to talk, come to our office," he told Forum 18 on 29 April.

Kayum Kholov, the official responsible for religious literature issues at the Regional Justice Department, refused to tell Forum 18 on 29 April whether Said Nursi's books are prohibited in Uzbekistan or why Merajov and his associates were punished by the court for reading and studying them together. As soon as Forum 18 finished the question he hung up. Several later calls went unanswered.

Other Nursi-related Muslim prisoners of conscience

The Bukhara trial and convictions were the latest in a wave of similar cases which began with arrests of Nursi followers across Uzbekistan in 2008.

A 16 February television programme broadcast on Uzbekistan's First Channel entitled "Light leading to darkness" said Tashkent City Criminal Court recently found eight "former members of the Nurcular sect" guilty of "preparing and distributing materials that pose threat to public security and order; setting up, leading and being involved in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organisations". The eight - Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiev, Olimjon Musaev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov and Baht Abdugafforov - were given sentences of between six and a half and eight years' imprisonment (see F18News 10 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1265).

The state-controlled mass media is often used to encourage intolerance of religious groups the government dislikes, and opposition to freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

On 26 February, Judge Farhod Yigitaliev of Tashkent Criminal Court imposed harsh prison sentences in the trial of five writers for the Islamic-inspired periodical "Irmoq" (Spring). Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafoev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. All five were found guilty of violating Article 244-1 and Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code. Their appeals were rejected on 31 March (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

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 "Yeti 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" (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Other Nursi-related prosecutions underway

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 (see F18News 24 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1286).

Sources in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 29 April that the trial of the four men is continuing.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that cases are also underway against Nursi followers in Andijan. He expects trials to follow there soon. (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.

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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