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UZBEKISTAN: "Sacred primary source of one of world's major religions" destroyed

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

A Tashkent-based man, Vladimir Shinkin, has appealed to numerous state agencies right up to President Islam Karimov in his bid to have his son (an atheist) and daughter-in-law exonerated on charges of holding religious meetings he says they never held, for which they received fines totalling 110 times the minimum monthly wage. He is also seeking the return of confiscated Christian literature his daughter-in-law inherited from her late father which a judge ordered destroyed, family members told Forum 18 News Service. "This means that he is destroying Bibles which represent the sacred primary source of one of the world's major religions," Shinkin complained to parliamentarian Svetlana Artikova. But she denied to Forum 18 she had received the complaint, though she had earlier responded to Shinkin that it had been passed to the Supreme Court.

A Tashkent-based man, Vladimir Shinkin, has so far failed to get any response to his appeals to find out why his son Vyacheslav and daughter-in-law Snezhana Galiaskarova were fined in April 2011 for religious meetings he says they never held and why religious books seized from them – including Bibles his daughter-in-law inherited in 2003 – were ordered destroyed. Vladimir Shinkin sent complaints to various state agencies in 2011 and 2012, including a renewed complaint sent on 17 September to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, family members told Forum 18 News Service.

Uzbekistan retains tight state controls on all religious literature published, distributed or held in people's homes in the country or imported into the country (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Many raids and religious literature confiscations have taken place in recent years, often accompanied by media attacks on the victims. Police in August raided the Tashkent home of a Russian Orthodox mother Valentina Pleshakova and her disabled daughter Natalya, seizing their religious literature and beating Natalya. Officers pressured Natalya to adopt Islam. Although their heavy fines were changed into an official warning on appeal, no books were returned (see F18News 11 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1740).

Shovkat Hamdamov, press-secretary of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 17 September that religious books are seized so that the authorities can make sure they are officially allowed religious books, "for example that the Bible is indeed the Bible". Asked what the Committee does with the books after they give their expert analysis and decision, he claimed that the books are returned to the owners.

When Forum 18 told him that in many cases owners have complained that they were not returned, Hamdamov claimed: "We at least send it back to whoever it was that sent it to us for expertise." When Forum 18 asked if the books are sent back to the courts or other officials who sent them, he responded "yes".

Hamdamov would not comment on specific cases, including that of the Pleshakovas or Shinkin's son and daughter-in-law.

Outraged

In his 18 April 2012 written complaint to Svetlana Artikova, Chair of Parliament's Senate Committee on Legislative, Judicial and Legal Issues, seen by Forum 18, Vladimir Shinkin states that the whole case against his son and daughter-in-law was "fabricated" by Tashkent's Mirabad District Police "under the dictation" of the local authorities to silence him and others because they "exposed the corruption" of the local authorities, who "appropriated" state funds.

Shinkin states in his complaint that he is outraged that the police can fabricate a case against his son - who is not even a believer in God - and against his daughter-in-law - who is a believer but is not involved in religious activity - that they organise religious services. He also condemns Judge Begzot Ermatov's 4 April 2011 order that all the confiscated books be destroyed.

"This means that he is destroying Bibles which represent the sacred primary source of one of the world's major religions," Shinkin

complained.

Forum 18 notes that Uzbek courts frequently order Christian, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness and other religious literature destroyed.

No response

Family members told Forum 18 that they received a letter from Senator Artikova in May that she had forwarded the complaint to the Supreme Court. They said they have not heard either from her or the Supreme Court since. They said that they want the literature to be returned, and Vyacheslav Shinkin and Galiaskarova to be exonerated.

Senator Artikova told Forum 18 on 10 September that she could not comment on court decisions, because this would constitute "interference by the law-making branch of government in the judiciary, which is independent". Asked by Forum 18 what she did with Shinkin's complaint, she said: "Usually we send such complaints to the Supreme Court for further investigation." However, she claimed that her staff told her that they had received no letter from Shinkin.

Officials at the Supreme Court referred Forum 18 to its Complaints Department. However, on 13 September the Complaints Department official put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 identified itself.

Massive fine

Judge Ermatov of Tashkent's Mirabad Court on 4 April 2011 found Vyacheslav Shinkin and Galiaskarova guilty of illegally storing religious books and materials, and illegally conducting religious services in their private home, family members told Forum 18. Shinkin was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage or 4,973,500 Soms (15,860 Norwegian Kroner, 2,030 Euros, or 2,930 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) and Galiaskarova one tenth of that, 497,350 Soms. Tashkent City Court rejected their appeal on 29 April 2011.

Vladimir Shinkin complains that on 3 April 2011, Mirabad District Police officers "under the guise" of passport check-ups in her absence broke into Galiaskarova's private flat in Mirabad District, which she rented out. Without a warrant from the Prosecutor's office, officers confiscated the private library of her deceased father, which consisted of Christian and secular fiction books.

Shinkin says that Galiaskarova's father – who died in 2003 - was a Christian theologian, and attended the Church of Christ, a legally registered Tashkent congregation. Among the confiscated books were three rare historic editions of the Bible.

Shinkin also complains that on the same day, police in Tashkent's Hamza District in cooperation with Tashkent City and Mirabad District Police officials, again without prosecutors' approval raided the flat of his son and daughter-in-law. The police again made an "unlawful" search, and confiscated several Christian books, including a Children's Bible, as well as works of fiction which are sold openly in bookshops.

Shinkin explains that the Christian books belonged to his daughter-in-law, who comes from a Christian background, while his son is an atheist, who respects his wife's beliefs.

The police took Galiaskarova to Mirabad Police Station, holding her there from 5 pm on 3 April 2011 till 8 pm the following day. She was then taken to Mirabad Court after the police, promising that she would be released, compelled Vyacheslav Shinkin and Galiaskarova to sign the "fabricated" police reports that Shinkin allegedly stored banned religious literature and conducted religious services in his private home.

The confiscated books were immediately sent to the Religious Affairs Committee for an "expert analysis", family members told Forum 18. In its 4 April statement, the Committee declared that although the Christian books contained nothing harmful to the state, they were not to be used to teach religion to children. "Judge Ermatov used this as the basis to confiscate the books – including the rare Bibles - and order them destroyed though there was no evidence they had used the books to teach religion to children. It is all stupid."

The same Judge Ermatov fined the Pleshakovs in August 2012. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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=1862.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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