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UZBEKISTAN: No imam? No prayers

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

Members of the Toshkuprik Mosque in Samarkand Region's Pakhtachi District were effectively banned from holding Friday prayers from 8 August onwards, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They were told they could not choose one of their number to lead prayers in the absence of their Muslim Board-appointed Imam and one community member lamented to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service that the authorities ban prayers in private homes. Uzbekistan's Deputy Chief Mufti, Abdulaziz Mansurov, insisted to Forum 18: "Please, do not exaggerate - this is not a big problem." In defiance of Uzbekistan's Constitution and published laws, the state enforces a Muslim Board monopoly on all Muslim activity. Mansurov admitted that the Board appoints all Chief Imams of the regions with the consent of the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Meanwhile, secret police and Anti-Terrorism Police officers raided a Baptist community in Andijan as they held a meeting for Sunday worship. They threatened to seize the three children of a widow who lives in the private house where the church was meeting, as well as the house.

A community of Muslims in Uzbekistan's central Samarkand [Samarqand] Region was effectively banned from holding Friday prayers in early August because – in the absence of their Muslim Board-appointed Imam – no-one else was allowed to lead prayers and the authorities ban prayers in private homes, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. At the same time, National Security Service (NSS) secret police and Anti-Terrorism Police officers raided a Baptist community in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region as they held a meeting for Sunday worship.

The Muslims who attend the Toshkuprik Mosque in Samarkand Region's Pakhtachi District also complained that the District Imam's officials asked for a bribe to appoint an Imam to lead their Friday prayers each week. The Mosque is one of 12 Friday Mosques in the District, which has a population of more than 125,000 people.

Two months on, Forum 18 has been unable to confirm whether or not Friday prayers at the Mosque have been allowed to restart. Officials at Samarkand Regional Department of the state-backed Muslim Board refused to tell Forum 18 on 1 October. Toshkuprik Mosque is the only one in Pakhtachi District without an Imam listed on the official website masjid.uz, Forum 18 notes.

"Do not exaggerate"

Asked about the ban on Friday prayers in the Mosque, Abdulaziz Mansurov, Deputy Chief Mufti of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 11 September: "Please, do not exaggerate - this is not a big problem." In the next breath, however, he admitted: "The thing is we do not have enough Imams."

Told that neither the Board nor its Samarkand Regional Department has resolved the issue, and that Pakhtachi District Imam's officials asked the local Muslims for bribes, Mansurov repeated his previous claim: "I have not heard about this." He promised that he would raise the problem before the Board. He added that local Muslims "should not complain to you or others but address the Muslim Board."

Mansurov told Forum 18 on 1 October that after he raised the issue with the Board it "is resolving the issue". He said he did not know if an Imam has now been appointed or whether Friday prayers have restarted at the Mosque.

Dilshod Sapparov, the official in charge of religious affairs at Pakhtachi District Hokimat (Administration), on 1 October claimed to Forum 18 "at the moment all Mosques in the District have Imams." He also claimed that he did "not hear that any of the Mosques was without an Imam."

Threats

During the 14 September raid on Baptist worship in Andijan, NSS secret police and Anti-Terrorism Police officers threatened that the private house where the Baptists met for worship could be confiscated. They also threatened church member and widow Zamira Kurbangaliyeva that her three children could be taken away from her. The authorities are preparing administrative fines against Kurbangaliyeva and another church member (see below).

Under Uzbekistan's harsh Religion Law, state permission is required before any religious community is allowed to organise any meetings for worship or any other activity. Those who continue to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission are subject to administrative or criminal punishment (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

State-backed Muslim monopoly

Unlike with any other faith in Uzbekistan, the government imposes a state-backed monopoly – the Muslim Board – on the Islamic community. The Board alone has the right to seek state registration (and thus permission to exist) for mosque communities and it names all imams, though senior appointments – at least down to Regional level - require state approval.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansurov told Forum 18 that all Chief Imams of the regions of Uzbekistan are appointed by the Muslim Board with the consent of the government's Religious Affairs Committee. The regional Imams then appoint all Imams in the Districts.

Forum 18 is not aware of any published law that requires state approval for naming of Regional Chief Imams.

This state interference in the Muslim community contradicts Article 61 of Uzbekistan's Constitution, which declares: "Religious organisations and associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The state does not interfere in the activity of religious associations."

Friday prayers effectively banned

The last time Friday prayers were known to have been held at Toshkuprik Mosque in Samarkand Region's Pakhtachi District was on 1 August. The Mosque has about 70 regular attendees when Friday prayers are allowed.

An unnamed older Muslim man, a regular worshipper at the Mosque, complained to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service on 18 August that on 8 and 15 August their Mosque community could not perform their Friday prayers. He explained that while the Mosque's Imam was "away attending religious courses", the community was not allowed to name anyone else to lead prayers and so they could not take place.

The Muslim lamented that on those Fridays the local religious authorities and the District Chief Imam (name not given) had "not allowed" him and his fellow Muslims gathered in the Mosque to "select someone from our ranks to lead us in the prayers". Their Imam does "not even have a Deputy, and we were not appointed an interim Imam", the Muslim added.

The Chief Imam even "threatened that if they choose someone to lead the prayers then he will complain to the Prosecutor's Office." However, the Chief Imam's officials told the community that an "Imam can be appointed to lead the Friday prayers if the community agrees to pay 400,000 Soms for each Friday". (This represents 1,000 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros or 170 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate.)

The Muslim lamented that the community "cannot gather at homes" of the believers for Friday prayers since prayers are "only allowed in the cathedral Mosques according to the law".

Asked whether the Toshkuprik Mosque's Imam, who left for Tashkent in early August, is back in Pakhtachi, or who else is substituting for him in his absence, officials of Samarkand Regional Department of Uzbekistan's Muslim Board on 23 September referred Forum 18 to Zayniddin Eshankulov, Deputy Head of the Department. On the same day Eshankulov refused to talk to Forum 18. After introducing himself, he put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's question. On 1 October he put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 reached him.

Without an Imam

Usmon Mukhamadiyev, Secretary at the Muslim Board's Samarkand Regional Department, told Forum 18 on 11 September that Nurullo Islomov, Head of the Department, "is away in Tashkent running some errands." Mukhamadiyev confirmed to Forum 18 that the Mosque was without an Imam.

Asked why no one was leading Friday prayers in the Mosque, he told Forum 18 that the Imam was "attending courses in Tashkent, and no one is substituting at the moment." Asked why members of the community cannot choose one of their number, or have another Imam appointed to lead them in Friday prayers, he repeated his previous response.

Told about the local Muslims' complaint that the Pakhtachi District Imam's office asked them for bribes, Mukhamadiyev claimed to Forum 18 that "I have not heard this." Asked whether he did not think the effective ban on the community holding Friday prayers was a violation of the rights of local Muslims, he claimed, "I do not understand your question." Asked to whom else Forum 18 could speak about this Mukhamadiyev put the phone down.

Echoing Mukhamadiyev, Shovkat Khamdamov, Press Secretary of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 11 September, "I have not heard" that the Muslims were asked for bribes to have an Imam for Friday prayers. Asked why then they had not been provided with an Imam, he claimed that his Committee "does not decide those issues," and referred Forum 18 to the Muslim Board. "Prayers and the appointment of Imams are the internal issues of the Board."

Told that neither the Board's Samarkand Department nor the Board itself had resolved the issue, and asked why the Committee did not raise this issue as a violation of the rights of the local Muslims, he again referred Forum 18 to the Muslim Board.

When Forum 18 asked why, under Uzbekistan's Religion Law, all mosques must register under the Muslim Board and why local Muslims have to depend on the central authorities even to be able to conduct Friday prayers, Khamdamov did not answer. He then put the phone down.

Police and secret police raid

Seven police and secret police officers raided the Sunday worship service on 14 September of Baptists in Andijan, church members, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of further reprisals from the authorities, told Forum 18 on 20 September. The raid was led by Rahmonzhon Ulmasov, Chief of Andijan Anti-Terrorism Police, and Avazbek (last name not known) of Andijan Department of the NSS secret police.

The Baptists complained that at 9:30 am, the officers broke into the private home belonging to them, where a group of their fellow believers from the registered Baptist Church of Fergana arranged a worship service for them. The local Baptists do not have registration with the state.

The officers halted the service. They wrote down the names of nine Baptists as well as confiscated six New Testaments and eight Baptist songbooks. The officers threatened 47-year old Kurbangaliyeva that "they will take her children from her and put her in prison." She has lived in the house with her three children since her husband died seven years ago, church members told Forum 18. Before leaving, the officials also threatened the Baptists that "they will take away the home from them."

Will fines follow?

Three days later, on 17 September, officers Avazbek of the NSS secret police and Ulmasov of the Anti-Terrorism Police came to the Baptists again. They took Igor Milentyev and Kurbangaliyeva, both of whom were present at the worship service to the Andijan City Criminal Court. There they asked Judge Sardor Abdusattarov to fine them under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 and Article 184-2.

Article 240, Part 1 punishes "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Punishments range from fines of 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage to a short term in jail for up to 15 days.

Article 184-2 punishes: "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan with a purpose to distribute or distribution of religious materials by physical persons". Punishments are a fine of between 50 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage, "with confiscation of the religious materials and the relevant means of their production and distribution".

No answers

"When Milentyev told the Judge that the case is fabricated, and that they are not familiar with what is in the case materials, and that they do not have a lawyer, the officers and the Judge were worried," Baptists told Forum 18. The Judge then referred the case back to the Police for further investigation. No subsequent hearings are known to have taken place.

Officer Ulmasov on 24 September confirmed the raid to Forum 18 but refused to explain why police and the secret police had raided the Baptists and threatened Kurbangaliyeva and the other church members. "I cannot talk about this case over the phone to you," he replied. "You need to write a letter to us and we will answer your questions." He declined to talk to Forum 18 further.

Calls to secret police Officer Avazbek on 24 September went unanswered.

Avazbek is also known for pressuring in 2013 Murot Turdiyev, an Andijan Protestant, to cooperate with the NSS secret police (see F18News 24 October 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1889).

Judge Abdusattarov's phones went unanswered on 24 September. (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.

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