

19 May 2016

TAJIKISTAN: Imprisonments "designed to scare the population"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

With imprisonments of Muslims for up to 16 years, Tajikistan's officials refuse to explain what crimes they committed. Punishments are "designed to scare population away from the Salafi movement and Islamic Renaissance Party, or any active movement spreading Islam," rights defenders told Forum 18.

Since early 2016 Tajikistan has been conducting mass raids and arrests targeting alleged followers of the Salafi Muslim movement across the country, particularly in the northern Sogd Region and in and around the capital Dushanbe, human rights defenders who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. However, the authorities have repeatedly refused to say what crimes – if any – the men might have committed.

Since the beginning of 2016, courts handed down prison sentences to at least 55 Muslim men, many of whom were accused of participating in the activity of and spreading the teachings of the Salafi movement. One Judge in Khujand in Sogd Region alone in February convicted 46 men accused of being members of various Muslim movements. The longest known sentence of 16 years' imprisonment was handed down in Dushanbe. Those sentenced include Imams of mosques appointed with the approval of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) (see below).

Among those awaiting trial and possible imprisonment are seven Imams of Cathedral Mosques in Sogd Region, Faizinisso Vokhidova, human rights defender and lawyer of one of the Imams, told Forum 18 on 16 May (see below).

Tajikistan has repeatedly punished people (notably Muslims) exercising their freedom of religion or belief for their alleged ideas, not their actions. Questioned by Forum 18, officials have repeatedly refused to explain what alleged crimes the Muslims targeted have committed (see F18News 21 January 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2030). This is part of the state's attempts to impose total state control of Muslims and others exercising freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

This control is continuing using mosque demolitions, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, a ban on state employees at Friday prayers, and youth activists to prevent prayers not in Hanafi or Ismaili tradition (see F18News 6 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2175).

"Designed to scare the population away"

The government appears determined to stamp out any remaining followers or activity of the Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat and other Muslim movements banned in the country, as well as the banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Forum 18 notes.

The Supreme Court banned Salafi Islam in a ruling that came into force in February 2009, even though an official admitted to Forum 18 that adherents of the Salafi school of Islamic thought had committed no crimes (see F18News 23 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243).

"In many cases it will be enough for the Police to arrest people if they see them wear short trousers or long beards," one human rights defender told Forum 18.

"The purpose of the arrests and imprisonments is to publicise widely the harassment and lengthy prison terms," several human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 12 May. "It is also designed to scare the population away from the Salafi movement and Islamic Renaissance Party, or any active movement teaching or preaching and spreading Islam." They explained that though the "authorities on purpose try to avoid mentioning the name of the IRP publicly, but when they speak against illegal Islamic parties they mean it."

The IRP was until it was banned in August 2015 Central Asia's only legal faith-based political party (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

The human rights defenders added that in some cases it may also be that local authorities "seize this chance and arrest innocent Muslims and later release them, having extorted money from them."

Arrested for being active Muslims

The arrested Muslim men (or their relatives) deny any wrongdoing and complain that they were arrested for being active Muslims, teaching and spreading Islam, as well as for wearing long beards and Islamic dress.

Arrests of followers and alleged followers of the Salafi movement across the country continue, an observer from Tajikistan told Forum 18 on 12 May. "Some of those arrested are released after signing Police reports of Salafi activity and a statement promising that they will not in future be involved in Salafi or any other active Muslim movements," they said, "but many are still kept under arrest."

Court officials confirmed the cases to Forum 18 but declined to give any comments besides telling it and other media that the defendants were punished for being Salafi followers.

Asked why so many Muslims have been arrested and imprisoned, the Prosecutor General's Office on 17 May referred Forum 18 to Manuchehr Mahmudzoda, Chief of its International Department.

Mahmudzoda declined to say why the Muslims had been arrested and imprisoned, or to give figures on how many had been released and how many will be punished. "Please, send your questions to our Foreign Ministry," he told Forum 18. "If they think it is politically expedient, they will refer them to us for answers." He then declined to talk further.

Dushanbe: long prison terms for four alleged Salafis

Judge Jurabek Shirinzoda of Dushanbe's Ismoli-Somoni District Court on 14 April handed down prison sentences to four Muslim residents of the District, Romish Boboyev, Otabek Azimov, Abdurahmon Ismoilov and Khurshed Suvanov. The Court announced on its website - without giving details - that all were convicted for being members of and participating in the "extremist activity" of the Salafi movement.

Boboyev and Azimov received prison terms of 16 years and 14 years respectively, Judge Shirinzoda told Asiaplus on 15 April. Ismoilov and Suvanov each received three years in prison. "All defendants except Azimov admitted their guilt," the Judge claimed. "Azimov's guilt was also proven during the Court investigation."

Asked what crimes the four men committed, and why they were given such heavy punishments, Judge Gayrat Sanginzoda of Ismoily-Somoni Court, who answered the Court's phone on 17 May refused to comment on the case. "They appealed against our decision, and we cannot comment because they are considered innocent until after the appeal case is heard," he told Forum 18. Sanginzoda also refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Shirinozda or any other officials for comments.

Sogd: long prison terms for imam and four associates

Judge Boir Zoirzoda of Sogd Region's Bobojon Gofurov District Court on 18 April handed down an eight year prison term to 58-year old Imam Khamid Karimov. He leads the Mosque in Unji-Bobojon village. The Judge handed down seven year prison terms to each of four members of his Mosque, 35-year old Muhammadsayid Sayidov, 34-year old Abdumajid Abdukadirov, 32-year old Mirzomhammad Rahmatov and 31-year old Farhod Karimov.

Police in Bobojon Gofurov District, where the men live, reportedly arrested all five in January.

All five were convicted under Criminal Code Article 307-3, Part 2, which punishes "participation in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity" with imprisonment of five to eight years. This Article was among several related to "extremism" added to the Criminal Code in December 2015.

In addition, Imam Karimov was also convicted under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media"). Punishments are imprisonment for up to five years. All five men were found guilty of being members of the banned Salafi Muslim movement.

Their "only guilt was active propagation of Islam"

Police told the Court that they found Salafi literature and materials in the men's homes and on electronic devices. "We were told that no evidence was given in Court proving that the Imam and his co-believers did anything criminal or against the State," an individual familiar with the case, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 11 May. "The only thing presented as evidence was that they prayed differently and taught not according to the Hanafi but the Salafi school."

Imam Karimov told the Court that his "only guilt was active propagation of Islam in Sogd and teaching others to do so."

Judge Zoirezoda refused to explain why he gave such heavy punishments to the five men or what crimes – if any - they committed. "They have already appealed and I cannot explain this to you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 12 May. He claimed he could only talk to Forum 18 about his decision in his office. When Forum 18 asked why he punished the men simply for believing and praying differently from the government-approved form of Islam, he claimed: "You have incorrect information." He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered.

However, Judge Zoirezoda told Asiplus on 19 April without any specifics that the five men were convicted for "calls to extremist activity" and "participation in the activity of a banned organisation".

Judge Zoirezoda elaborated that the five were convicted because "the Imam divided the Mosque into two parts. In one his followers gathered where he preached and taught them the ideas of the Salafi movement, banned in the country. The other part was for regular Mosque-goers." The Judge added that Imam Karimov gathered his followers in his home.

Khujand: 46 Muslims imprisoned for up to 4 years

Between February and May Judge Akmal Savriddinzoda of Sogd Region's Khujand City Court convicted altogether 46 individuals for participating in "extremist activity", he told Forum 18 on 17 May. He said that he heard three cases involving 23, 15 and eight men separately.

The eight men – all local residents aged between 29 and 36 - were arrested by Bobojon Gofurov District Police in October 2015. They were "convicted in late February of being followers of the Salafi movement," Judge Savriddinzoda stated. The hearing took place not in the Court but in the building of Khujand City No.1 Detention Centre. Judge Savriddinzoda refused to give Forum 18 any details of the cases.

Asked exactly what crimes the men committed, the Judge referred Forum 18 to Matluba Rahmatullozoda, Chair of the Court. Rahmatvullozoda's phone went unanswered on 17 May.

Savriddinzoda told Asiplus on 23 February that the eight Muslims were charged under Criminal Code Article 307-3, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity"). He said that the defendants received between 42 and 48 months of imprisonment each in labour camp. "All them voluntarily joined the Salafi movement, spread its ideas, and recruited other residents into the movement."

Sogd: 7 imams await trial

At least seven Imam-hatyps of cathedral Mosques in Sogd Region were arrested in early March on the initiative of the Regional Prosecutor's Office. The Imams are being held at a Detention Centre in Sogd. All six had been appointed to their posts with the approval of the SCRA.

Sulaymon Boltuyev was Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Guliston (former Kayrakkum), Maksud Urunov Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Kanibadam, and Abdujamil Yusufi of the cathedral Mosque in Bobojon Gofurov District. Of the four other unnamed Imams, at least two are from Khujand and one from Kanibadam (see F18News 26 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2172).

The case against the six Imams was combined with that of a seventh arrested Imam, the lawyer Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 16 May. She did not know the name of the seventh Imam. The cases were due to be referred to court on 17 May, she added, but did not know which court they would be handed to.

Asked about the case Khurshed Sanginzoda, Chair of Bobojon-Gofurov District Court, told Forum 18 on 13 May that the case of Abdujamil Yusufi who is from Bobojon Gofurov District will "be heard by our Court but the other Imams are from other Districts, and I cannot say anything about them." He said that Yusufi was charged under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Sanginzoda asked Forum 18 to call back later "when I am in my office, and can say more about the case." However, called back on 17 May, Sanginzoda refused to discuss the case. "I talked with our higher authorities, and was told that I cannot talk to you about the case," he told Forum 18.

Rogun: up to 50 young Muslims arrested

In early March Police in Rogun, 90 kms (55 miles) north-east of Dushanbe, "simultaneously in bath houses, on the streets and in

private homes", arrested up to 50 young men aged between 18 and 35, without informing their relatives, catv24, a news agency and internet television channel, reported on 10 March. Police "put sacks on the heads of the arrested" when they were taken to Firdavsi District Police Department in Dushanbe for questioning, it added.

In early March Police arrested 25 residents of the village of Kalai Nav of Rogun alone, an unnamed official of Rogun Administration told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 10 March. Among those arrested were Muboroksho Khasanov, the village Imam-hatyp, and Fazliddin Gadoyev, the village doctor. The arrested men, like the others arrested from Rogun, were brought to Firdavsi Police in Dushanbe.

Friends and relatives told Radio Free Europe that the men were arrested during four days in early March in the village Mosque for "praying the namaz in the Salafi manner".

It published video footage of the parents of some of those arrested who gathered in the morning of 9 March in front of Firdavsi District Police demanding the release of their sons.

Hurinisso Salimova, mother of one of the arrested young men, told independent news agency Asiaplus on 9 March that the Police officers "put a sack on his head" while they arrested him, and took him away. "For several days I have been unaware where my son was taken, she wept," it reported.

Nazrigul Kenjayeva, mother of another of those arrested Ismoil Kenjayev, said her son is only 19 and "still very young". "What wrong could he have done?" she asked. Both mothers told Asiaplus that their sons were arrested on 3 March.

Some relatives told Asiaplus that Firdavsi Police took the food they brought for the arrested men, but "drove them away from the [Police] building".

Avazbek Safarov and Aminjon Musamirov, two of the arrested residents of Kalai-Nav, were released several days later after their relatives met Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda, Radio Free Europe reported on 15 March.

Muhammad Odinayev, Head of the village administration, confirmed the release to the agency on 15 March. But he added: "No one knows whether they and others [from the group] will be freed from responsibility." He claimed that the authorities in Dushanbe are treating the arrested men "according to the Law".

Arrested for how they pray?

Some think their relatives were arrested for wearing long beards, catv24 reported. It cited relatives' question: "How could [Police] see how they prayed when they arrested them not in a Mosque or during prayer?"

Khurshed Shafoyev, Deputy Chief of Firdavsi Police Criminal Investigations Division, denied that the men arrested in Rogun were brought to Firdavsi Police. "We opened a case only against one man from Firdavsi for participating in Salafi activity," he claimed to Forum 18 on 17 May. He declined to give the man's name but said that he was charged under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Shafoyev refused to tell Forum 18 how many Muslims were detained by Firdavsi Police and how many were released, if any.

Asked why they opened a case against the man, what crime he might have committed, and why so many Salafi and other Muslims were being arrested in Dushanbe and across Tajikistan, Shafoyev replied: "These people teach Islam differently, they propagate extremist ideas, and also speak about overturning the government." He claimed that there is "evidence that they have spoken about it," without giving specific details.

Asked why then the central authorities publicly announced that followers of Salafi and other movements will be freed from responsibility, Shafoyev put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Ministry accuses media of misinformation

On its website on 10 March, the Interior Ministry accused unidentified websites of publishing information about relatives of the arrested Rogun residents gathering in front of Firdavsi Police Station which does "not correspond to reality".

It said that a "few residents of Rogun (and residents of other cities) were arrested for being members of terrorist-extremist organisations and other individuals were invited as witnesses."

"None of the relatives of the arrested and witnesses gathered in front of Firdavsi Police since unauthorised meetings are banned by Law."

However, catv24 objected that there are photographs of the relatives gathered at the police station, noting that "obviously the authorities of Tajikistan think that all these photographs are fake".

Khujand: more imams arrested

Five more imams - Alisher Olimov, Kobil Sanginov, Gufron Anvarov, Dovud Okhunov and Khurshed Bofarov – were arrested in Sogd Region's Kanibadam District between 9 and 14 May, Radio Free Europe noted on 19 May. They are all are being held in Khujand District Police Detention Centre. They are accused of being members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Repentance might lead to release

Muhammadrizo Khalifazoda, Press-Secretary of the General Prosecutor's Office, told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 11 May that tens of Salafi followers who "repented were freed from criminal responsibility." He said that "there is no full list of the individuals but tens of individuals admitted their guilt."

Khalifazoda told the agency that those who joined "extremist" movements within Tajikistan and "admitted their guilt and repented from their actions must tell the authorities about it before the authorities will expose them."

Mustafo Abdurakhimov, 23-year old resident of Vahdat District near Dushanbe, told Radio Free Europe on 11 May that "once he was among Salafi believers but later repented before the law-enforcement organs and avoided prosecution."

The Interior Ministry announced on its website on 11 May that individuals who joined banned "extremist organisations such as Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat, Muslim brotherhood, Ansarulloh, Daesh, and others" will be freed from criminal responsibility based on Criminal Code Articles 307-2 ("organising or participating in an extremist organisation") or 307-3 ("organising or participating in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity", as well as Criminal Code Article 401-1 ("Hiring, training, financing, or other material maintenance of mercenaries") – if they "admit their guilt and sincerely repent, and voluntarily visit the law-enforcement organs and testify that they joined these extremist groups because of ignorance and that they were misled."

The Ministry had also announced earlier that it will use young activists to counter young people from joining "extremist Islamic movements and parties" (see F18News 6 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2175). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2138.

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 Tajikistan is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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