

4 October 2016

UZBEKISTAN: Contradictory "expert analyses", four people fined

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan arrested four men, confiscating a book a government "expert analysis" stated was permitted. Adventist Pastor Andrei Ten was later shown a second "expert analysis" banning the book and fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three being each fined smaller amounts.

Police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police on 2 August arrested four men riding in a taxi in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent. They then confiscated copies of a religious book, "The Great Controversy", which the Religious Affairs Committee had in writing stated that after "expert analysis" was allowed to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

On 8 August one of the men, Pastor Andrei Ten of the registered Seventh-day Adventist Church, was summoned to a police station and asked to write a statement that he gave out copies of the book. He was only then shown a second "expert analysis" in which the Religious Affairs Committee contradicted itself banning the book. Pastor Ten was on 19 August fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, the other three men being each fined five times the minimum monthly wage (see below).

Many similar cases take place in Uzbekistan against physical and electronic religious literature held by people of many beliefs, often involving sometimes very large fines and jail sentences. In some cases, rape threats and physical abuse has been used by male officials against female religious believers (see below).

Arrested in taxi

On 2 August, police and NSS secret police officers in the Olmazor District of north-western Tashkent detained Pastor Andrei Ten, Olimzhan Mirzamambetov, Anarvoy Ergashev and Rahim Tursunov while they were riding in a taxi. Pastor Ten is from the officially registered local Seventh-day Adventist Church, but Mirzamambetov, Ergashev and Tursunov are not part of this Church and had been hired to do work on its building. Adventists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 September. Officers searched the men and confiscated from each of them a copy of a Russian translation of "The Great Controversy", a book by Ellen White. She was one of the founders of what would become the Adventist Church.

Adventists told Forum 18 that the Religious Affairs Committee had on 2 May written to the Bible Society stating that, after "expert analysis", it was allowing "The Great Controversy" to be imported and distributed in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. There is a de facto ban on religious literature of any faith in homes and if found such literature is frequently ordered to be destroyed. State pressure is so great that for their own safety some religious believers have destroyed their own sacred texts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Contradictory "expert analysis"

On 8 August, six days after the men were stopped in the taxi and the books confiscated from them, Officer Shavkat (who did not give his last name) of Olmazor District Police phoned Pastor Ten. Shavkat asked Ten to come to Olmazor Police Station at 5 pm the same day. When Ten came to the Police Station, Officer Shavkat demanded that he write a statement that he gave the books to the three men.

After Pastor Ten wrote the statement, police then showed him another "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee. This contradicted the first "analysis" and stated that "The Great Controversy" is banned.

So-called "expert analyses" are often flawed, or even violate published law. Court trials also often violate the rule of law (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Shovkat Khamdamov, Press Secretary of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to tell Forum 18 on 27 September why the Committee contradicted itself on the book "The Great Controversy". He referred Forum 18 to Begzod Kadyrov, Chief

Expert of the Committee. Khamdamov also refused to answer Forum 18's other questions, and put the phone down. The phones of Kadyrov and other Committee officials were not answered on 27 September.

Cases launched

After showing Pastor Ten the contradictory "expert analysis", Olmazor Police then opened cases against all four men under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

Olmazor Police told Forum 18 on 26 September that the only officer named Shavkat who works for Olmazor District Police is Deputy Chief of Olmazor Police Myrzajanov. Forum 18 on 26 September called the mobile phone number from which Ten was called. Officer Shavkat (who refused to give his last name) answered the phone. But after Forum 18 started asking about the case he then claimed that it was a "wrong number" and put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Deputy Police Chief Myrzajanov's land line phone number went unanswered on 26 September.

"Anti-terrorism"?

Asked why cases were opened against Ten and the other three men, Olmazor Police Department on 26 September referred Forum 18 to Makhmud Tolipov, the head of the local Anti-Terrorism Police. Police did not explain what so-called "anti-terrorism" has to do with these cases.

Asked about the case on 27 September, Anti-Terrorism Police officer Tolipov refused to comment. "These are internal issues of Uzbekistan," he claimed to Forum 18. "Talk to our Foreign Ministry and they will explain them to you." He put the phone down.

Four fines

On 19 August Judge Musa Yusupov of Olmazor District Criminal Court of Tashkent fined Pastor Ten, Mirzamambetov, Ergashev and Tursunov. Ten was fined 100 times the minimum monthly wage, 13,024,000 Soms. The other three men were each fined five times the minimum monthly wage, 651,200 Soms. (Large discrepancies exist between the market and official currency exchange rates.) "Judge Yusupov unlawfully ordered the confiscation of the books," the Adventists stated.

Olmazor Court officials (who would not give their names) between 26 and 27 September refused to comment on the case or put Forum 18 through to Judge Yusupov.

Many fines, jail sentences, rape threats and assaults

Many similar cases take place in Uzbekistan. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that between January and July 2016 at least 51 Jehovah's Witnesses across all of Uzbekistan were fined for "offences" related to the possession of religious literature. Fines imposed varied between three and 60 times the minimum monthly wage. They commented that "the use of or even the mere possession of the Bible" outside the building of their only state-registered religious community, in Chirchik, "is considered to be an administrative violation".

Only belief communities that have state registration are allowed to exist, violating international human rights law (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

These kind of fines and other punishments for having religious literature affect people of many beliefs. One Baptist, Stanislav Kim, was on 26 August given two years corrective labour living in his home for having religious books at home (see F18News 29 September 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2219). Similarly, two Jehovah's Witnesses were on 27 January jailed for 10 days and, with 28 others, fined for "illegal" literature and meeting for worship (see F18News 28 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2192).

Materials in electronic form are also targeted, Jehovah's Witnesses noting that religious literature and electronic devices were confiscated from the homes of two Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik on 11 May and from two others in Fergana on 11 June. No prosecutions appear to have followed. Bakhtiyor Khudaiberdiyev was arrested on 9 January at Tashkent Airport for having suras [verses] from the Koran and other material on his phone, and at least two Muslims are serving five-year prison terms for the Koran and sermons in their mobile phones (see F18News 7 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2165).

During some of raids and confiscations in 2016, male police threatened female Jehovah's Witnesses with rape and also physically assaulted women (see F18News 25 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2182). Torture is "routine" in Uzbekistan, the United Nations (UN) Committee has found (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862). (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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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

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