

30 March 2017

UZBEKISTAN: Police excuses for literature seizure raids

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

"Anti-terrorist measures", "pre-Novruz inspection", "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer are excuses police gave to raid homes and seize religious literature. Police checking for "banned" sermons have not yet returned all computers seized from Muslim college students.

In at least five further known cases since the beginning of the year, police in and around Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent have raided homes and seized Christian and Hare Krishna literature. Police used excuses for the raids, such as "anti-terrorist measures", a "pre-Novruz inspection", a "passport regime inspection" and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer. In Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan, officers seized computers from students of a Muslim college, hunting for "banned" sermons.

After the raid on a Hare Krishna devotee's home, the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent told her that devotees can have only one copy of the religious faith's five main books at home. Any other books have to be held at their state-registered temple (see below).

Police officers in other raids have told individuals that they are not allowed to have any religious books at home (see below).

After a raid on a Baptist home in mid-March, police tried to pressure a church member to spy for them (see below).

Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court in December 2016 refused to overturn large fines on 20 Protestants for holding a meeting to celebrate harvest festival (see below).

Begzod Kadyrov, responsible for work with non-Muslim religious organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, refused to discuss the recent raids on Protestants and the Hare Krishna devotee and confiscations of their literature. "We cannot hold a telephone conversation with you," he told Forum 18 on 30 March, asking it to send questions in writing.

The Committee official responsible for Muslim communities claimed that all the computers seized from the Muslim students in Andijan had been checked and returned (see below).

Literature censorship, raids, seizures, destruction, punishments

Uzbekistan enforces strict censorship of all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution. The authorities also impose a de facto ban on religious literature of any belief in homes or in public places. 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. The so-called "expert analyses" used to justify such freedom of religion and belief violations are often flawed, or even violate published law. The resulting 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>).

One Tashkent-based religious believer told Forum 18 that they were so scared about the quantity of religious literature in their home that they took it out into the yard of their block of flats and burnt it.

The harshest punishments for the possession of banned religious literature, including on electronic devices, are normally imposed on Muslims. For example, in late 2016 courts imprisoned two more foreign citizens - for five years and three years - for having Islamic sermons on their mobiles as they entered Uzbekistan. One was tortured. Three Tashkent Muslims were given suspended prison sentences, after the father of one was "severely tortured" (see F18News 19 December 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2241>).

As well as widespread seizures of religious literature in raids, customs officers routinely seize such literature or electronic devices containing religious material from people returning to the country (see F18News 10 February 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2255>).

Tashkent: pre-Novruz inspection, literature seizure

Two officers of Tashkent's Yashnobod District Anti-terrorist Police raided the home of a Baptist couple, Konstantin and Susanna Binkovsky, mid-morning on 11 March. The officers "claimed that it was part of a regular inspection for security reasons on the eve of the Novruz holiday," Council of Churches Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 30 March. Novruz is the Persian New Year celebrated in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the region.

However, as soon as the officers entered the Binkovskys' home, they asked the couple whether they had religious literature. "When they saw a family Bible on the table and a notebook with notes, they seized them immediately," Baptists complained to Forum 18. "Then without a warrant and making records they checked the bookcase and seized all the Christian books." Officers did not provide the couple a copy of the Police report.

Officers then took the husband to Yashnobod District Police Station. His wife later decided to go there also. "Officers questioned both of them, and told them that they will send the literature for expert analysis." Officers asked the husband to "cooperate with the Police, but he refused."

Then on 27 March, after discovering that fellow Baptists had published information about the raid and literature seizure on the internet, the same officers came back to the Binkovskys' home. They threatened the couple that they should not tell others, including fellow Baptists living abroad, about the police actions. Officers again questioned the couple.

Yashnobod Anti-terrorist Police Chief Jabbor Rizkulov insisted that the Police acted lawfully. Asked on 30 March about the reasons of the raid and confiscation of Christian literature, including a Bible, he refused to comment. "You are calling from a foreign country, but this is Uzbekistan with its own laws," he told Forum 18 on 30 March.

Asked why - if the Police acted lawfully - officers threatened the Baptists not to tell their fellow-believers, Rizkulov responded: "Send any further questions through the Foreign Ministry." He then refused to talk to Forum 18.

Tashkent: Bibles, phones, computer seized under "passport regime inspection"

Three Police officers, who included Anti-terror Police Officer Tuychi Azizov and a local Police Officer who gave his name as Batyr (who did not give his last name), raided the home of Protestant couple Andrei and Tursuna Li in Tashkent's Uchtepe District in the early evening of 28 February.

"Officers broke into the flat and conducted an unauthorised search under the guise of a passport regime inspection," Protestants who asked not to be identified told Forum 18.

Officers confiscated two Bibles in Russian, two Bibles in Uzbek and a Concordance (Bible index) in Russian. They also seized two mobile phones and a laptop computer. The Bibles were bought from Uzbekistan's officially registered Bible Society, and "their distribution in the territory of Uzbekistan is legal", the Protestants pointed out.

Jamshid Tillabayev, Chief of Uchtepe District's Criminal and Anti-terrorism Police, confirmed the confiscation. "The confiscated materials are still being examined," he told Forum 18 on 30 March. "When we have finished the examination and religious expert analysis we will return the materials," he claimed.

Asked why Police seize Bibles, a holy book for Christians, Tillabayev did not say. "Call me back later, I'm busy now," was all he said.

Almalyk: Looking for alleged drug dealer in Baptists' flat?

Major Mamur Saparov, Anti-terror Officer of Tashkent Regional Police, Captain Gairat Abdullayev Chief Investigator of the Region's Pskent District Police, Captain Sh. Makhmudov of the same Department, Shokhrukh Safarov, the local Police Officer and two more unidentified officers, broke into the home of Zinaida and Pyotr Brislavsky on the morning of 27 February, "violating their privacy".

The couple are members of the officially registered Baptist Church in the town of Almalyk [Olmaliq], 50 kms (30 miles) south-east of Tashkent.

The Police confiscated 40 Christian books, including a Bible, a New Testament, Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, and an antique book on Russian Orthodox monasteries published in 1895. Also confiscated were 40 copies of the Baptist journal "Fraternal Herald", 45 audio-cassette tapes containing Christian songs, and 15 CDs and DVDs with Christian materials.

Officers presented to the Brislavskys a search warrant signed by Prosecutor Botyr Norov of Pskent District that day. The search warrant was approved by Investigator Captain Abdullayev.

The search warrant said that an unidentified person, who travelled in the same car with Kutbiddin Abdulakhatov, both of whom are suspected of possessing illegal narcotic drugs, escaped the Police and hid in the area where the Baptists' flat is situated.

Based on the words of a witness, the unidentified person is "either hiding in Zinaida Brislavsky's private flat" (her address was then added) or "he may be storing his private items in the same flat."

The Baptists complained that the search warrant is "falsified because among many violations of the Criminal Procedure Code, it does not indicate when the alleged criminals were apprehended. No names or positions of officers involved in the arrest are indicated."

The Baptists insisted that the search warrant was used "as a pretext to raid" the Brislavskys' flat. The Police "came up with a new idea now, to make the Baptists accomplices of drug dealers!"

"Interestingly, officers demanded the couple hand over the 'missionary' literature," the Baptists noted. "That is to say, they were no longer interested in the fugitive and drugs."

Akmal (who refused to give last name), Deputy Prosecutor of Pskent, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 30 March or put it through to Prosecutor Norov. Asked if Forum 18 could talk to Prosecutor Norov on the reasons of a search warrant to look for a drug dealer in the Baptists' home, he claimed: "He is busy." When Forum 18 persisted with its questions, the Deputy Prosecutor put the phone down. Subsequent calls to the Prosecutor's Office on the same day went unanswered.

Asked about the case on 30 March, Officer Kholmurod (who refused to give his last name) of Tashkent Regional Anti-terrorism Police wrote down the details and asked Forum 18 to call back in 30 minutes. "I will find out for the reasons for the inspection and will answer you," he said. Called back, he refused to talk to Forum 18. "Send a letter to the Interior Ministry," he said and put the phone down.

Captain Abdullayev of Pskent Police also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. "I cannot talk to you over the phone. Please, come to our Police Station, and I will explain everything to you." He then put the phone down.

Tashkent: Police's fake witnesses at raid

Eleven officers of Tashkent's Sergeli District Police on 8 February raided the home of Alijon and Natalya Khatamov, members of the officially registered Baptist Church. "Police officers broke into the flat at 5 pm and conducted an unauthorised search," fellow church members complained to Forum 18.

Police confiscated 20 Christian books, including a Concordance, Old and New Testament Commentaries, and a Brockhaus Bible Encyclopedia, all of which were bought from the Bible Society. Police also confiscated Baptist songbooks and a desktop computer's hard disc.

The officers did not include the titles of the books in the records of the confiscation. The police report was also signed by one person who "falsified signatures of two fake names as two witnesses of the confiscation." No exact addresses of the alleged witnesses were given, the report only indicating that they are from Namangan and Kashkadarya Regions. The Police "has used this trick more than once, to make it difficult to verify these witnesses."

The Police sent the literature for "expert analysis" to the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. The Baptists said that they are "expecting fines after the religious expert analysis".

Tashkent: Hare Krishna devotee fined, community warned

In early 2017 police raided the home of a member of Tashkent's Hare Krishna community. Officers seized about 35 religious books and booklets from her, a fellow-devotee, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 27 March. The devotee did not want to disclose details of the case for security reasons but said that the woman was later "warned and punished with a small fine".

The police "seized some 40 books from her flat and sent it for 'expert analysis'," the devotee told Forum 18. "The Religious Affairs Committee later returned her five books, which are our main religious books, to her and handed over the rest of the books to the Temple in Tashkent."

The Committee "warned the community that each believer can only keep in their homes one copy of each of the five main books, while the rest of the officially allowed literature can only be held within the Temple."

The Hare Krishna devotee said that "we have stopped distributing books in the street or other public places since 2008, since the

[Religion] Law banned it." They lamented that "Now we realise that we cannot keep at home religious literature other than those five books."

Andijan: Computers seized on suspicion of "banned" sermons

In the eastern city of Andijan, police seized the personal laptop computers from several students of the city's state-sponsored Sayyid Mukhyiddin makhдум madrassah (Islamic secondary school) in late January.

"Officers suspected that the students may have listened to the sermons of Imam Obid Nazarov or other Imams, which are banned in Uzbekistan, or visited some Islamic sites banned in Uzbekistan," Saidjahon Zaynobiddinov, an independent human rights defender, told Forum 18 on 29 March.

Exiled Imam Nazarov was the subject of a 2012 murder attempt in Sweden, for which his family accuse the Uzbek government of responsibility. Individuals have been punished for listening to his sermons, as well as those of Andijan Imam Abduvali Kori Mirzayev (who "disappeared" with his assistant at Tashkent airport in 1995), and former prisoner of conscience and Muslim sports journalist Khairullo Hamidov (who was released in February 2015) (see F18News 19 December 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2241>).

Zaynobiddinov said that people familiar with the case told him that "some students already received back their computers". However, officers are still checking the computers of others.

Andijan Regional Administration officials (none of whom would give their names) between 29 and 30 March refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 or put it through to any officials overseeing local religious organisations.

Officials of the Andijan Department of the state-sponsored Muslim Board did not want to discuss the computer seizures. One official told Forum 18 on 29 March that he "cannot comment on the case." He also refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials.

Mukhammadbobur Yuldashev, responsible for work with Mosques and Muslim organisations at the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 30 March that the computers had been returned to the students on the same day they were seized. Told that parents of some of the students complained that the computers had still not been returned, he repeated his claim.

Asked why the computers were checked, Yuldashev said that the authorities want to make sure that the students do not read or listen to sermons which are banned in Uzbekistan. He confirmed to Forum 18 that Imam Nazarov's sermons are among those banned.

Parents of some of the students whose computers were seized complained to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service in mid-March that it has been "already two months that the Police is checking the computers". They noted that in the meantime their children experience difficulties with doing their homework "since there not enough books in the school library and they have to read materials on the internet." They complained, asking: "Why is it taking so long to return the computers?"

The madrassah director, Nurulla Kadyrov, refused to talk to Radio Free Europe in mid-March. He put the phone down when asked why the computers were seized and why the Police did not return them.

Nukus: Fines for harvest festival meeting upheld

The Supreme Court in the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qaraqalpakstan] autonomous republic on 26 December 2016 upheld the large fines given in autumn 2016 by Nukus City Court to a group of twenty Protestants, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

A total of 18 - Nazigul Niyazova, Gulsina Aypova, Altyngul Uteniyazova, Injikhon Khojamuratova, Roza Kazakbayeva, Sveta Ubaydullayeva, Peruza Jenmuradova, Shokhista Jumbayeva, Uzildik Jumashova, Makhmudjan Kasymov, Bagila Uteshova, Salamat Kutlumuratov, Zholdasbay Zhanabergenov, Almagul Edilbekova, Kalbike Allabergenova, Kyzlargul Orazniyazova, Aykan Zhumagaliyeva, Bibiyasha Eshmuratova - were each fined 2,995,520 Soms or 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The other two - Kuatbay Nurmanov and Aykhan Seytmuratova - were each fined 3,744,400 Soms or 25 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2.

Article 184-2 punishes "Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons". Fines for individuals are between 20 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage, plus confiscation of the materials and items used to manufacture or distribute them.

According to the Supreme Court decision, the punishments followed a Police raid as part of "anti-terrorist measures" on the group's harvest festival worship meeting. Officers confiscated personal mobile phones, which contained Christian materials, from most of the group members. They also seized a desktop computer's hard disc from Seytmuratova and a New Testament from Niyazova, as well as other books and notebooks.

The Court decision claims that the Protestants "illegally stored or carried" the Christian materials. The telephones, books and notebooks were not returned. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief 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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