

25 April 2019

UZBEKISTAN: Bloggers jailed for criticising Muftiate

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Muslim bloggers Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov face criminal charges launched by the SSS secret police, which still holds Karimov. The two completed 15-day jail terms on 23 April, but only Astanov was freed the following day. They were jailed the same day Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused them of being "hooligans" and disrespectful to Muftiate "spiritual leadership".

Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov, two Muslim bloggers, face criminal charges brought by the State Security Service (SSS) secret police. The secret police claim the men had "extremist" material in their mobile phones. Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, a day after a 15-day jail term expired. But Karimov is still in SSS secret police custody, relatives told Forum 18.

A Tashkent court jailed Astanov and Karimov on 8 April for 15 days for criticising Uzbekistan's lack of freedom of religion and belief. They were arrested and jailed the same day they met the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate (see below).

At the 8 April meeting Astanov and Karimov had asked Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur among other things why the hijab (Muslim head covering for women) is banned, why imams have to be appointed by the state and preach sermons prepared for them by the state, and why the Muftiate does not help Muslims when their freedom of religion and belief is violated.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused Astanov and Karimov of being "hooligans", and being disrespectful to the Muftiate's alleged "spiritual leadership". The men were then arrested and jailed, one of the charges being "hooliganism" (see below).

The Polish authorities had deported Karimov back to Uzbekistan earlier in 2019 after refusing him asylum (see below).

All religious communities in Uzbekistan are under tight government control. The regime uses the Muftiate to impose complete control on all public manifestations of Islam, including appointing all permitted leaders, controlling what they preach, and deciding on the numbers and locations of mosques. All public manifestations of Islam outside the Muftiate are banned. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Muslims arrested and jailed the same day they question Deputy Chief Mufti

Tulkun Astanov and Rustambek Karimov, two Muslim bloggers, were on 8 April jailed for 15 days after criticising Uzbekistan's lack of freedom of religion and belief. They were arrested the same day they had a meeting with the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate.

At the 8 April meeting at the administrative building of the Muftiate, Astanov and Karimov had asked Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur why the hijab (Muslim head covering for women) is banned, why imams have to be appointed by the state and preach sermons prepared for them by the state, why licensing of halal food products does not exist, and why the Muftiate does not help Muslims when their freedom of religion and belief is violated.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur accused Astanov and Karimov of "raising their voices in his office as hooligans", and being disrespectful to the alleged "spiritual leadership" of the state-controlled Muftiate and state-appointed imams. The police arrested both men on the same day after the meeting, and they were then jailed.

After their 15-day jail terms expired, both Astanov and Karimov now face criminal charges being brought by the State Security Service (SSS) secret police. Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, one day after the jail sentences expired.

However, Karimov remains in SSS secret police custody, relatives told Forum 18.

Muslims raided, fined, jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues

Karimov had earlier sought asylum in Poland. But the Polish authorities rejected his application and earlier in 2019 had deported

Karimov back to Uzbekistan, Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service noted on 11 April.

This is not the first time Astanov has been jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues. In an attempt to stop public discussion of freedom of religion and belief issues, ordinary police and State Security Service (SSS) secret police officers between late August and early September 2018 raided without warrants the homes of at least 10 bloggers. The bloggers, including Astanov, had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls for women to be allowed to wear hijabs (headscarves), men to have beards, and children to be allowed to pray in mosques. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416)

While in jail in 2018, Astanov had his beard forcibly shaved off, a relative told Forum 18 on 25 April 2019. He was also verbally warned not to use Facebook to criticise the regime.

The raids took place in at least five regions of Uzbekistan. Courts then fined many of the bloggers with jail terms of up to two weeks, Forum 18 notes. The authorities "wanted to showcase the jailings to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms", a relative of one of the bloggers told Forum 18.

Following the raids, fines and short-term jailings, Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev protested about this and publicly himself also raised freedom of religion and belief issues. He was fired from his post, and the Muftiate, ordinary police and SSS secret police subjected him to questioning. Officials also intimidated his relatives. He then fled Uzbekistan "for my safety" in December 2018 after appealing to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev "as Muslims .. cannot have full freedom of religion and belief". (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2451)

Muslims are in 2019 being blacklisted for memorising the Koran for a state-run competition, and imams are rotated to stop them influencing congregations.

Muftiate "spiritual leadership"?

Following their 8 April visit to the Muftiate, Astanov and Karimov published several videos of their meeting on Facebook, seen by Forum 18. But later the same day, Tashkent Police arrested them and published their own Facebook video, also seen by Forum 18, of the meeting with Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur where he accused Astanov and Karimov of "raising their voices in his office as hooligans", and being disrespectful to the alleged "spiritual leadership" of the state-controlled Muftiate and state-appointed imams.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur on 16 April refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 16 April, twice picking up his phone but then putting it down when Forum 18 introduced itself.

Akmalkhan Shakirov, Head of the Muftiate's International Relations Department, on 16 April refused to answer when asked what is wrong with the questions the two bloggers raised, and why why Mansur accused the two bloggers of "hooliganism". Shakirov claimed that "you need to come to our door and show your identification documents for us to answer you", before refusing to talk more to Forum 18.

Jailed for 15 days

Tashkent's Almazar District Court on the same day as the Muftiate meeting and subsequent arrests imposed 15-day jail terms on both Astanov and Karimov. They were jailed under Administrative Code Article 183 ("Hooliganism") and Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order").

Colonel Rustam Sayfulov, Chief of Staff of Tashkent Police, on 16 April refused to explain to Forum 18 why Astanov and Karimov were arrested. "The Court has given them jail terms. You need to ask the Court," he claimed before putting the phone down.

Ilham Tokhirov, Chief of the Chancellery of Almazar District Court also refused to answer Forum 18's question on 16 April, referring Forum 18 to an official who refused to give his name and claimed to be Assistant of the Chair of the Court. "They can appeal against our decision if they decide to do so," the Assistant told Forum 18, but refused to comment on the short-term jailings. "You can send your questions to us only through the Supreme Court", he claimed when Forum 18 asked why the bloggers were jailed for raising freedom of religion and belief issues and criticising the state-controlled Muftiate.

Public protest

Yelena Uralyeva, an independent human rights defender from Tashkent who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, held a public protest with Mukhayyo Astanova (Astanov's wife) in central Tashkent on 11 April, demanding that Astanov and Karimov be freed.

Appeals rejected

On 16 April Judge Iroda Mirzayeva of Tashkent Administrative Court rejected an appeal by the men and upheld the short term jailings. A Court official who refused to give her name on 25 April refused to tell Forum 18 why Judge Mirzayeva upheld the

jailings. Other Court officials did not answer calls.

New detention after short-term jailing, criminal charges brought

On 23 April, when their short-term jail sentences expired, state-controlled media stated that Astanov and Karimov were then put into SSS secret police custody. The SSS opened criminal cases under Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 1 "after Tashkent Police referred the case to them for legal evaluation". The SSS "discovered materials on their mobile phones of banned extremist organisations, which propagate ideas of religious dogmatism", state media claimed.

Criminal Code Article 244-1 punishes the "production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order", Part 1 punishing "production and storage". In April 2016, Article 244-1's possible punishments were increased to imprisonment of between 5 and 8 years, instead of the previous up to 5 years' jail or a fine of between 300 and 400 times the minimum monthly wage. It is normally used only against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Since 2013 the regime had increasingly used this Criminal Code article to prosecute and jail Muslims carrying the Koran and Islamic sermons on mobile phones. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Astanov was released late at night on 24 April, but Karimov is still in SSS secret police custody relatives told Forum 18. Astanov has also been warned that he will face further questioning.

Irina Sayfuddinova, Head of Tashkent Police Press Service, refused to tell Forum 18 on 24 April why Karimov and Astanov were not immediately released at the end of their jail terms, and why they now face criminal charges.

Relatives not told where Karimov and Astanov were jailed

Human rights defender Urayeva told Forum 18 on 15 April that it is not clear where Astanov and Karimov were held. Tashkent Police refused to tell Astanov's wife where he was held, and Tashkent Central Detention Centre (where short-term jail terms are usually served) told her that he was not there. Urayeva suspects that "Astanov and Karimov were being held in secret police custody right from the beginning". (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan
(<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/classroom-resources/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>)

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