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UZBEKISTAN: Former chief mufti calls for lifting of restrictions on Islam

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Uzbekistan's former chief mufti, Muhammad Yusuf, has called for restrictions on Islam in the country to be lifted. He is widely regarded as one of the most authoritative Muslim theologians of Central Asia, and has a freedom unique in Uzbekistan to publish his views in books, on a website, and via a private radio station. Such media outlets are tightly controlled in Uzbekistan, so such freedom is highly unusual, especially as Muhammad Yusuf is seen as being distant from the authorities. Speaking of the state of religious freedom, he told Forum 18 News Service that "Unfortunately, I can't say the situation is satisfactory." Muhammad Yusuf was in exile from 1993 to late in 2000, but told Forum 18 that "Uzbek theologians began to persuade Islam Karimov that, without my help, it would be hard for him to ensure stability in the republic." He is critical of the authorities' approach to radical Islamic movements, but did not discuss the tight restrictions imposed on the ethnic Iranian Shia Muslim minority, or the lack of religious freedom for non-Muslims.

Uzbekistan's former chief mufti has called for restrictions on the Islamic education of both children and adults to be lifted, pointing out that only those training to be imams in officially-approved educational establishments can study their faith (see F18News 11 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318). "Currently one can only receive religious education in a medresseh," Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent on 20 October. "Schoolchildren and adults who work in secular professions are not allowed a religious education." Asked about how he regarded the state of religious freedom in Uzbekistan, he responded: "Unfortunately, I can't say the situation is satisfactory."

Regarded as one of the most authoritative and influential Muslim theologians of Central Asia, and a key figure in Uzbekistan's religious life since the country's independence in 1991, Muhammad Yusuf has enjoyed a unique position ever since his return to his homeland in 2000. He is currently the only Muslim theologian in Uzbekistan who, while at a distance from the state authorities, is not prevented by the authorities from making his views known to other Muslims. Such freedom to publish is exceptional for any religious figure in today's Uzbekistan, and is more remarkable as Muhammad Yusuf no longer has any state function nor any official position in the Muslim Board (see F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58).

He writes many books on theology and all are published in Uzbekistan without prior approval from the muftiate or the government's committee for religious affairs. He has his own private radio station Navruz and a site on the Internet (www.islam.uz), while his sermons are distributed on compact disc. That his website is hosted by the Uzbek Scientific & Education Network, a local internet company, is a further sign that the authorities do at least allow him a certain public profile to spread his views.

Religious literature is tightly controlled in Uzbekistan. The religious affairs committee maintains a list of such literature permitted for distribution in the country. Books not on the list are considered banned. Many foreign religious websites which criticise the government's religious policy are blocked to webusers in Uzbekistan (see F18News 19 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=86).

Born in Uzbekistan in 1952, Muhammad Yusuf studied at the Mir Arab medresseh in Bukhara, the Islamic Institute in Tashkent and the Islamic Institute in Tripoli (Libya). Back in Tashkent he was employed first as pro-rector and then as rector of the Islamic Institute. In 1989 he was elected mufti for Central Asia at a Muslim kurultai (congress). In 1993, Uzbek president Islam Karimov launched a campaign against him and he was forced to flee the country for fear of arrest. He lived in Saudi Arabia until his return to Uzbekistan at the end of 2000.

In the early 1990s, the authorities allowed believers of different faiths almost total freedom to practice their religion. By 1992, Uzbekistan had 4,000 mosques, compared with just 80 in the later Soviet period. However, after the civil war erupted in neighbouring Tajikistan in 1992, President Karimov sharply changed the direction of his religious policy. The authorities began bringing religious life under state control, particularly trying to obstruct the activity of Muslims rejecting ties with the state. Muhammad Yusuf fell victim to this new policy as a well-known and influential figure who did not suit the president.

Speaking of his enforced departure as chief mufti, Muhammad Yusuf complained that he was subjected to numerous accusations,

including that he sold donated Korans. "All the accusations against me were unsubstantiated," he insisted to Forum 18. "But I decided not to tempt fate and wrote a statement resigning my position as mufti 'due to deteriorating health' and left for Saudi Arabia." He downplayed suggestions that it was President Karimov who had caused problems for him. "I don't know precisely with whom I had the disagreement. I have had and continue to have great respect for our president."

Muhamad Yusuf said that it was after bombings in Tashkent in early 1999, blamed by the government on Islamic terrorists, that moves began to allow him to return to his homeland. "Uzbek theologians began to persuade Islam Karimov that, without my help, it would be hard for him to ensure stability in the republic," he told Forum 18. "The president sent me a fax inviting me to return to Uzbekistan and guaranteeing my safety." He admitted that at first people were cautious about having contact with him. "People were simply frightened to meet me. However, everything has become easier now."

Muhamad Yusuf claims that life is easing for Muslims whose piety is displayed by their appearance, admitting that men with beards or women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) did face problems in the past. "Today you can go around wearing a beard without any problems," he told Forum 18. He added that after the terrorist attacks in March and April 2003 reports circulated that directors of schools and universities were forbidding students from wearing the hijab. "I looked into these cases and it turned out that these were independent initiatives on the part of the school directors, who were trying to safeguard themselves in case of future punishments." (See F18News 4 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334).

Muhamad Yusuf's assessment of attitudes towards Muslim beards and headscarves accords with Forum 18's current research in Uzbekistan. A campaign against men with beards and women with hijabs was indeed launched after the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent. Police routinely stopped such individuals on the street and female students wearing headscarves were expelled from universities. However, from about 2001 this campaign died down. After renewed terrorist attacks earlier this year, Forum 18 learnt of pressure on women wearing headscarves in the Fergana valley and in Tashkent, as well as in one district of Karshi [Qarshi] in southern Uzbekistan. However, Forum 18 has found that each of these cases was a personal initiative of low-level officials, and if the women refused to submit to the pressure such officials were unable to take further action against them (see F18News 8 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=427).

Under Article 14 of Uzbekistan's religion law, the wearing of religious clothing is forbidden in public. Both Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees have suffered under this restriction (see F18News 30 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=402 and 16 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105).

Muhamad Yusuf also criticised the current mufti for telling journalists that Muslim prisoners do not have the right to observe the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which began on 15 October, because they are "not in a state of freedom". "But that is simply incorrect! Neither the Koran nor the hadiths [sayings of the Muslim prophet Mohammed] say anything of the kind." Muhamad Yusuf told Forum 18 that "fortunately" the head of the government's committee for religious affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, "saved the situation" by declaring: "If prisoners observe Ramadan, that can only be good news, as it means that they have started out on the road to reform." Muhamad Yusuf described the mufti as "a very good reader of the Koran, but not a very well-qualified theologian".

Admitting that prisoners were not allowed to conduct religious rituals in the past, he claimed that the situation had improved thanks to his personal intervention. "I personally took up this problem and achieved a positive result from the authorities," Muhammad Yusuf told Forum 18. There have been frequent reports of Muslim and other religious prisoners being mistreated and being prevented from practicing their faith (see for example F18News 2 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=45 , 26 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=93 and 11 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=211).

Muhamad Yusuf's claims are disputed. A human rights activist, Akhmajon Madmarov from Margelan, told Forum 18 on 27 October that in the prison camp in the town of Navoi in western Uzbekistan where his son is serving a sentence, prisoners are currently not being allowed to observe the Ramadan fast. He added that the mother of a man being held in the prison in the city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] reported to him that prisoners there are not allowed to observe the fast either. Forum 18 has heard similar complaints from relatives of prisoners in the past.

However, Shoazim Minovarov, head of the government committee for religious affairs, categorically denied that prisoners are being prevented from observing religious rituals. "This right is envisaged in the law on religion," he insisted to Forum 18 on 27 October. "It seems to me that as usual such complaints are simply speculation, aimed at harming the image of Uzbekistan to the outside world. For some reason prisoners' relatives appeal not to us but to foreign journalists. If only they appealed to us we could investigate and take appropriate measures."

Muhamad Yusuf noted that two radical Islamic movements exist in the country, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahir, but dismissed suggestions that there were any real Wahhabis, followers of the brand of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia who call for a return to the Islam of Prophet Mohammed's era. "Quite often there is talk of so-called 'Wahhabis'. But I believe there are no real Salafiya followers in Uzbekistan. This term is also used, both by the authorities and by simple Muslims, as 'slang' for a believer whom they find unsatisfactory in some way." It is also used by officials to refer to Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 8 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=358).

Muhamad Yusuf was indirectly critical of the harsh measures the government has adopted to root out Hizb ut-Tahrir, imprisoning individuals for up to ten years merely for possessing a leaflet from the banned party. "I believe we need to combat Hizb ut-Tahrir primarily not through repression, but by persuasion," he told Forum 18. "We need to explain to people how mistaken this organisation's views are, and this will be much more effective than punitive acts." (See F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 for an outline of Hizb ut-Tahir's aims and F18News 10 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338 for a personal commentary from another Muslim scholar, supporting this approach.)

He also admitted that not all those sentenced for being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in reality have anything to do with the organisation, claiming that at times their only "crime" is being devout Muslim believers. "Such cases certainly do occur," he noted, "but I cannot give even an approximate estimate of how many Muslims have ended up in prison simply for their faith." There are frequent reports of Muslims being imprisoned for being devout, and of such prisoners being falsely accused of Hizb ut-Tahir membership (see for example F18News 29 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=379 and 10 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=391).

Muhamad Yusuf reports that since Uzbekistan achieved independence, Sufism has developed rapidly. The centre of Sufism in Uzbekistan is the town of Kokand [Qūqon] in the Fergana [Farghona] valley, home to Sheikh Ibragim, who has more than 3,000 murids (disciples). Every year during Ramadan, Ibragim sends messages via his disciples to the villages of the Fergana valley. Sufi believers gather for the fast in Shakhimardan, an Uzbek exclave in the Fergana valley surrounded by Kyrgyz territory. Muhamad Yusuf puts the number of people who meet here at 5,000. He says the main problem for Sufism is the poor level of education of its followers, stressing that no Sufi adepts in Uzbekistan have specialist religious education.

Muhamad Yusuf admitted that several years ago Karimov gave Sufism active support, possibly regarding it as an alternative to fundamentalist Islam (religious customs, often with pagan roots, have become well embedded in Sufism). Several times Karimov received with great ceremony visits from Sheikh Hisham Kabbani, President of the Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA), which represents followers of the Naqshbandi order in the United States. ISCA leaders visited Uzbekistan and met President Karimov, while the Uzbek government invited ISCA representatives to act as observers at the presidential elections in 2000 and the constitutional referendum in 2002. However, Muhamad Yusuf said that contact between Karimov and Kabbani ceased some three years ago (see F18News 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=319).

In its investigation of the Sufi movement in Bukhara, Forum 18 found that despite the desire of members of the Sufi Naqshbandi order, the authorities had refused to allow the establishment of a khanaka, a centre rather like a monastery where wandering Sufis can stay. Without this, Sufis are forced to meet in private flats. Naqshbandi followers who wished not to be named told Forum 18 that the police sometimes raid such meetings and warn those present that religious meetings in private homes are not allowed.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police is particularly suspicious of the Sufi system of "myuridism" (from the Arabic word for pupil), regarding it as a potential base for creating terrorist organisations. After the terrorist attacks earlier this year, the secret police summoned many sheikhs and pirs (Sufi teachers) for interrogation. At the same time, it should be noted that the authorities regard the Sufi adepts as far more loyal than fundamentalist Islamic groups.

Muhammad Yusuf did not discuss the tight restrictions imposed on the ethnic Iranian Shia Muslim minority (see F18News 27 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=307), or the lack of religious freedom for non-Muslims in Uzbekistan.

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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