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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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UZBEKISTAN: Devout Muslims or "Wahhabis"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Trials of Muslims – apparently for seriously practicing Islam – are under way in Uzbekistan, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They have been accused of "Wahhabism" - a term widely and loosely used by the authorities to imply a Muslim they dislike. Surat Ikramov, of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, has told Forum 18 that the cases are "a complete fabrication." Also, two of nine people deported from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan have been jailed for six years in a labour camp for links with exiled imam Obidkhon Nazarov, who is accused of being a Wahhabi leader. Nazarov told Forum 18 from exile that "my crime against President Karimov was only to take a stand against alcoholism and corruption and standing up for the rights of Muslim women." Shukhrat Ismailov of the state Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that "Nazarov openly criticised our President and inflicted great harm on Uzbekistan," but could not say what harm had been caused.

Trials of Muslims – apparently for being serious in the practice of Islam – are under way in both Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent and Namangan in the strongly Muslim Fergana [Farghona] Valley, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

On 19 April, the Tashkent Regional Court under Judge H. Shermuhamedov delivered guilty verdicts on eight residents of Yangiyul accused of being "Wahhabis," a term widely and loosely used by the authorities to imply a Muslim they dislike. Dilshod Madaliev received a two-year sentence under Articles 244-1 (participation in extremist religious organisations) and 216 (illegal establishment of social or religious organisations) of the Criminal Code, while the rest of the accused – Dilshod Maripaliev, Zoir Juraev, Mansur Holikov, Bakhtier Abduhalilov, Bahrom Misiraitov, Alisher Tulyaganov and Alisher Karjavov – were given suspended sentences of between two and three years under Article 216.

In Namangan Regional Court the trial under Judge Yahehojaev of six men also accused of being "Wahhabis," as well as membership of the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is proceeding, under many articles of the Criminal Code.

"In reality, the guilt of those on trial in Tashkent and Namangan consists only in being devout believers," Surat Ikramov, head of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 May. "The case against them is a complete fabrication," he claimed

Also in Tashkent, Ikramov noted that on 11 April Sharofiddin Latipov and Nozim Rakhmanov were sentenced to six years in a labour camp by Judge Jamshid Saidaliev at the Shaikhontakhur district court. All the accused were found guilty of belonging to a "Wahhabi" religious movement, and in the prosecution's indictment Latipov and Rakhmanov were accused under Article 244-2 ("setting up, leading, or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") of the Criminal Code.

Latipov and Rakhmanov are two of the nine people who were deported by Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan in November 2005. Tashkent accused all the deportees of having links with the former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque, Obidkhon Nazarov, who Tashkent claims is a Wahhabi leader (see F18News, 12 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=758). Ikramov thinks that the remaining deportees will also be put on trial shortly in Tashkent.

"It is true that I knew Sharfiddin Latipov and Nozim Rakhmanov very well. These people are not 'Wahhabis' – they are just devout Muslims. Nor am I a Wahhabi. My crime against President [Islam] Karimov was only to take a stand against alcoholism and corruption and standing up for the rights of Muslim women," Obidkhon Nazarov told Forum 18 on 10 May from exile in Europe. According to Nazarov, the Uzbek authorities have launched a campaign to track down his supporters and other devout Muslims. "It is just an excuse to deal with believers. Most of those arrested have nothing to do with me," he maintains.

The deputy head of the Uzbek government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shukhrat Ismailov, said that he had details of all the legal proceedings under way in Uzbekistan against "so-called believers". "I can tell you with authority that all these people are on trial not for their religious beliefs, but for their anti-constitutional activity," Ismailov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 May. "Obidkhon Nazarov openly criticised our President and inflicted great harm on Uzbekistan," he stated. However, Ismailov could not outline in what precise way Nazarov had harmed Uzbekistan. (END)

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For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths 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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

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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