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UZBEKISTAN: Long sentences for five Tashkent Muslims

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Five Muslim men in their twenties and thirties have been sentenced in Tashkent to long periods of imprisonment on charges relating to what the authorities allege was their membership of the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, which aims to establish an Islamic state in Central Asia. The men maintained they were simply ordinary Muslims seeking to study their faith. "The accused did indeed know members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but they themselves were not engaged in political activity," Ismail Adylov of the Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 News Service. "They were simply trying to gain a more profound knowledge of Islam." Thousands of Muslims are serving sentences in Uzbekistan on charges of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir or distributing its leaflets.

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The five men - Adyljon Ziyayev (born 1966), Davron Rashidov (born 1978), Rustam Nigmatov (born 1974), Bakhodir Khashimov (born 1979) and Shoakbar Azimov - went on trial at the Shaikhantur district court of Tashkent on 3 February. On 10 February the judge, Mirgani Mizakhidov, pronounced all five guilty under several articles of Uzbekistan's criminal code: Article 159 (attempting to undermine the constitutional system); Article 244-1 (preparation or distribution of documents containing a threat to social security and social order); and Article 244-2 (the creation of, leadership of and participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organisations).

All the accused were sentenced to long periods of imprisonment. Ziyayev was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, Rashidov received nine years, Nigmatov and Khashimov each received eight years, while Azimov received seven years.

However, human rights activists believe there are serious doubts about the justice of the sentencing. All the accused declared that they had no wish to be involved in politics but simply, as believers, wanted to study Islam. They admitted that they had attended illegal classes to deepen their knowledge of their faith, but claimed that as soon as they realised their lecturers included members of Hizb ut-Tahrir they immediately stopped attending. The accused also claimed that during the investigation they were subjected to systematic beatings, including being whipped.

"Essentially, up to 90 per cent of this court case could have been fabricated," Adylov maintains. "Unfortunately for them, there happened to be members of Hizb ut-Tahrir among their new acquaintances."

Thousands of Muslims are serving sentences in Uzbekistan on charges of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir or distributing its leaflets. Some are genuine supporters of the movement, which claims to reject violence, while others are simply devout Muslims who have Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets planted on them. Although Islam is the dominant faith in Uzbekistan, the government keeps very tight control over all Muslim activity and many Muslims are too afraid to attend mosques frequently for fear of being branded a Hizb ut-Tahrir activist.

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