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UZBEKISTAN: Can authorities "separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>), and Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

University lecturer Ikrom Merajov is among nine men from Bukhara being held in the National Security Service (NSS) secret police isolation cells in the city under criminal investigation for membership in a "religious extremist" organisation and spreading "religious extremism". The Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 News Service the secret police is leading the investigation, but the NSS refused to discuss the case. The nine were seized last December when police and secret police raided the Merajov family home without a warrant and found them studying the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, local Muslims told Forum 18. Merajov's brother Ilhom says Ikrom Merajov has been caught up on extremism charges which are not properly defined in law and he urges the Uzbek government to "separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity". The authorities have arrested dozens of followers of Said Nursi across Uzbekistan since summer 2008 and a number have been imprisoned. Merajov was shown in a hostile television programme attacking the Nurcular movement in February.

Nine men arrested last December in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] for studying together the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi are being investigated as the authorities crack down on what they maintain are members of the organised Nurcular movement, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. One of those under arrest – university lecturer Ikrom Merajov – was featured in a television programme critical of the movement, which claimed the authorities "uncovered some crimes of a group of people who were engaged in secretly promoting the sect's ideas". It said he led the group. The broadcast also reported long terms of imprisonment handed down to other Nursi followers in the capital Tashkent.

Muslim sources told Forum 18 that the movement is not organised and is a voluntary group of Muslims seeking to know more about their faith. They insist that those arrested in Bukhara have nothing to do with politics.

Refusing to discuss Merajov's case or the wider crackdown on Nursi followers is the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. An official who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 10 March that they do not give interviews over the phone. Asked whether it is allowed to read and discuss the Koran in private flats, he hung up the phone.

Speaking up on behalf of his brother is Ilhom Merajov, a university lecturer who now lives in Russia. "A young teacher must be developed all round, including knowing his own faith," he told Forum 18. "This requires a deep knowledge and understanding of religious literature. In effect, my brother has become a victim of his profession as a lecturer." He laments that his brother has been caught up on extremism charges which are not properly defined in law and he urges the Uzbek government to "separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity".

Ilhom Merajov also questions the use of his brother – who has not been found guilty - in a critical and tendentious television film which he argues is designed to persuade the public that "extremists" are present in society. "Such methods are not used in a law-governed state," Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18.

Zavkidin Merajov, Ikrom's father, has written enquiries about his son's detention to the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson Sayora Rashidova, but has received no response. Dilnoza Muradova of the Ombudsperson's office told Forum 18 on 10 March that neither Rashidova nor any of her deputies were available to speak on the case since "they are all visiting regions". An official in the Complaints Department, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 they have not received any complaints on Merajov. Asked why people are not allowed to read and discuss the Koran in private flats, the official responded: "Let them complain to us."

Zavkidin Merajov has also written to the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Forum 18 has learnt.

Ikrom Merajov, who will be 37 next month and is married with two children, studied at Novosibirsk State University in Russia in the 1990s before returning to Uzbekistan to teach at Bukhara State University.

On the evening of 22 December 2008, police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police burst into the Merajov family home in Bukhara where he and eight other men had gathered, Muslim sources told Forum 18. "They were peacefully sitting and talking

and were not violating social order." The police and secret police conducted a search which the family insists was illegal. "They had no warrant, the required witnesses were not present during the search and no record of items taken away for analysis was drawn up."

Taken away were 79 religious books (twenty of them by Said Nursi), 19 computer print-outs (which the authorities describe as "leaflets"), three computers, 139 compact discs, 26 exercise books, 16 audio-cassettes and two notepads.

Ikrom Merajov and his eight guests were all arrested: Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Shuhrat Karimov. Late that evening they were taken to the city police station. "We'll lock them up for 15 days for meeting together and reading religious books," police told Merajov's parents, "there's no way we can put up with them any longer."

At a closed court hearing on 30 December, a Bukhara City Criminal Court ordered their continued detention in the NSS secret police investigation isolation cells and a criminal investigation of the nine began.

Ibadullo Nurov, Bukhara's Deputy Regional Prosecutor, was unavailable to speak on the case to Forum 18. However, the Prosecutor's office told Forum 18 on 10 March that "the city criminal court approved the arrests, and the Bukhara Department of the NSS is leading the case".

A judge of the Bukhara City Criminal Court, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 10 March that "the court is not going to give any information on the case over the phone." Asked whether it is illegal to read and discuss the Koran in a private flat, he said, "Look I am in the midst of a court process," and hung up the phone.

Forum 18 tried without success to reach Farhodjon Oltiev, Bukhara's Chief NSS Investigator who has been involved in the case. The NSS Regional Department asked Forum 18 several times on 10 March to call back later. Finally Forum 18 was told it was a "wrong number".

The nine men are accused of violating Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 2, which punishes "distribution in any form of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism or fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or the violent expulsion of citizens or directed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion with the aim of breaking civic accord, the distribution of slanderous fabrications destabilising the situation and the carrying out of other actions directed against the established rules of conduct in society and social security". They are also accused of violating Article 244-2 Part 1, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations". Both Articles carry heavy penalties.

Investigators accused Merajov of participating in the activity of the "illegal religious extremist organisation Nurcular". They said he was teaching from the works of Said Nursi without the special permission required from the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Local Muslims told Forum 18 that between ten and fifteen friends of the nine were detained for up to 15 days as part of the investigation.

Although the nine were arrested in the evening of 22 December and the literature taken away for analysis, the following day Bukhara City Hokimat (administration) had already provided a written "expert assessment" that the aim of the "illegal" Nurcular movement was to seize power. It said that although the literature contained no open calls to overthrow the constitutional authorities, it aimed to create the basis for "separatism and religious fundamentalism". It also said the movement aimed to import and distribute their books which it claimed had been banned by the Religious Affairs Committee.

Bobir Karimov, aide to the Regional Hokim (head of the administration) on religious issues, was also unavailable to speak to Forum 18 on 10 March. One of Karimov's colleagues, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 he was "not ready to speak on the case to just anyone over the phone".

However, local Muslims insist the nine men are innocent of any wrongdoing. They say there was no illegal organisation and that the nine had merely gathered to learn more about their own faith, studying together the works of Said Nursi. They point out that his books were legally published in Uzbekistan by the state-backed Muslim Board and a publishing house of the Education Ministry and were read out on state radio. "There is no incitement to extremism in any of his works," they told Forum 18. They pointed to a declaration by Russia's Council of Muftis from 2004 that Nursi's works are "far from inciting any form of discord or enmity".

Local Muslims told Forum 18 that the nine men's families were able to visit them on 24 February two months after they were arrested, the first such visit.

The intensity of the government's campaign against what they perceive as organised groups of Nurcular followers was seen by the 16 February television broadcast on Uzbekistan's First Channel entitled "Light leading to darkness". According to BBC Monitoring, the programme claimed that the Nurcular "sect" entered Uzbekistan to pursue its "malicious intentions" shortly after the country gained independence. It said it had set up Turkish schools as a way to inculcate its ideas but the government had closed these in 1999. However, it claimed the movement had resumed its activities in Uzbekistan in 2006 "using new tactics".

The programme said Tashkent City Criminal Court recently found eight "former members of the Nurcular sect" guilty of "preparing and distributing materials that pose threat to public security and order; setting up, leading and being involved in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organisations". The eight - Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiev, Olimjon Musaev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov and Baht Abdugafforov – were given sentences of between six and a half and eight years' imprisonment.

The 16 February programme also featured Bakhrom Ibrahimov, one of five writers for the Islamic-inspired periodical Irmoq (Spring) sentenced to imprisonment of between 8 and 12 years by a Tashkent court on 26 February. They were also accused of being Nurcular followers (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262).

The programme also reported that police had seized books, compact discs and videotapes from a private home in the town of Asaka in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region close to the border with Kyrgyzstan. It said a women's group there "were engaged in promoting the sect's ideas".

The programme warned viewers to be vigilant against "the attacks of various movements and evil forces which are attempting to undermine our peace, freedom, and lead us astray from our chosen path".

Uzbekistan's state-run media often publish or broadcast material defaming religious communities in what observers have told Forum 18 is an attempt to stir up society against such communities. Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses – who are also frequent victims of raids, arrests and confiscations of religious literature – were attacked in a television programme broadcast nationally in May and June 2008 (see F18News 13 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1143). (END)

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=1170.

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 survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY