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UZBEKISTAN: Sports journalist arrested for religious activity

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

A Muslim journalist who was a sports commentator has been arrested by Uzbekistan for his religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Hairulla Hamidov is under detention and faces charges under the Criminal Code's article 216 ("Illegal establishment of Public Associations or Religious Organisations"). He had in the past founded a popular weekly religious radio programme and a popular Islamic-inspired periodical, Odamlar Orasida (Among People), which was banned in 2007. Dilnoza Hamidova, his wife, told Forum 18 that police searched their home for religious literature but "found nothing illegal." The NSS secret police declined to comment: "No comments on that case," an NSS officer who did not give his name told Forum 18. Hamidova told Forum 18 that she has seen her husband only once since his 21 January arrest, for a short moment at the beginning of February when they were not allowed to talk. She said that no one else from Hamidov's family has seen him since his arrest. It is unknown when he may be brought to trial, and his website has been closed down by the state.

A thirty four-year old Muslim journalist who was a sports commentator, as well as the Assistant Editor of Uzbekistan's sports newspaper Champion, was arrested on 21 January and is being held at the Tashkent regional police detention centre. Hairulla Hamidov was apparently arrested for his religious activity and is charged with violating the Criminal Code's article 216 ("Illegal establishment of Public Associations or Religious Organisations"), Forum 18 has learned.

Hamidov, according to his closed-down website hamidov.uz, in 2004 founded a popular weekly religious radio programme called Kholislik Sari (towards Truth / Fairness) on Navruz radio. Before joining Champion, Hamidov founded in February 2007 a popular Islamic-inspired periodical, Odamlar Orasida (Among People), which was banned by the State Agency of Press and Information in July 2007.

Uzbek human rights organisation Ezgulik (Goodness) noted in February 2009 that there were parallels between the closure of Odamlar Orasida and more recent state actions – including harsh jail sentences – against those associated with Islamic-inspired periodicals closed down in 2009 (see F18News 27 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1262).

Hamidov's arrest is part of Uzbekistan's ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief, in which the country has, for example: deported a Baha'i and a Protestant for their religious activity and continued a media campaign against religious minorities (see F18News 16 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1409); apparently planted drugs on and beaten up Protestants (see F18News 9 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1406); and repressed Muslims engaging in peaceful religious activity, recently arresting 57 on unknown charges (see F18News 27 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1399).

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, expressed concern about the arrest of Hamidov and several other journalists. "As recent developments show, arrests of journalists and other forms of harassment are still taking place in violation of OSCE media freedom commitments," he noted in a 1 February letter to Uzbek Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov. Haraszti said he would continue to monitor the fate of Hamidov and other recently detained journalists.

Why was Hamidov arrested?

Dilnoza Hamidova, the journalist's wife, told Forum 18 on 15 February that Hamidov is being detained for his religious activity, and that police on 21 January made a search for religious literature in their home while arresting Hamidov but "found nothing illegal". Babur Hamidov, head of Chilanar Police's Investigation Department (no relation to the journalist), declined to talk about the case on 12 February. "It is not us who investigates this case," he told Forum 18 and hung up the phone.

The National Security Service (NSS) secret police's headquarters in Tashkent also declined to comment about the journalist's arrest on 12 February. "No comments on that case," an NSS officer who did not give his name told Forum 18. He then put the phone down.

Audio and video recordings Hamidov made on Islam are widely distributed on the internet and were posted on islom.uz, a site run by Uzbekistan's former Chief Mufti Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf. In 2007 Hamidov was several times summoned to Tashkent Regional Police and NSS secret police, and strongly recommended not to speak on religious topics, Voice of Freedom

stated on 27 January 2010.

Hamidov at times discussed "critical and unusual issues" in the radio show Kholislik Sari, such as the reasonableness of wearing the hijab (religious head-cover for women), Uznews reported on 10 February. He also allowed religious leaders who "later became enemies of the regime in Uzbekistan" to speak on his radio show.

Central Asian independent news agencies such as Uznews and Voice of Freedom have also reported that charges under Criminal Code Article 216 have been brought against Hamidov. Hamidov is being detained at Tashkent's Regional Detention Centre No.1, where he was transferred from the "cellar" of Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry, Uznews reported.

Family members banned from meeting Hamidov

Hamidova told Forum 18 that she has seen her husband only once since his 21 January arrest, for a short moment at the beginning of February when they were not allowed to talk. This was at Chilanzar Police Station, when she went there to find out why he was being detained. She said that no one else from Hamidov's family has seen him since his arrest.

"When I was in the premises [of Chilanzar Police], I saw him passing by accompanied by police officers," she explained. Hamidova said that they were not allowed to talk to each other. "I am not sure since I saw him for a short moment," Hamidova responded when asked whether she saw any signs of physical violence against Hamidov. "He just smiled at me and gave a nod trying to tell that he was fine, I guess."

Hamidova said that she was going to petition the authorities to be allowed to see and talk with her husband.

Hamidov's defence lawyer Alisher Zaynutdinov said that Hamidov's treatment in the detention was "bearable," Uznews reported on 10 February. Hamidov does not complain that he is being tortured or harassed, Zaynutdinov was reported as saying.

When will Hamidov be tried?

Both Hamidova and Lawyer Zaynutdinov told Forum 18 that they do not know when Hamidov will be tried. Zaynutdinov said that "no one knows that," when asked by Forum 18 on 12 February if it was known when Hamidov will be tried. He declined to answer further questions.

Hamidov's journalism

Before starting the Kholislik Sari radio programme in 2004, Hamidov, a graduate of Uzbekistan State University's Journalism School, began his journalistic activity in 1995 at the newspaper Turkiston. Between 1996 and 1999 he wrote on sports at two different newspapers, Sports and Uzbekistan Football. Hamidov co-hosted a football show at Halkaro TV channel of the National Television and Radio Company in 1998. He also hosted several other football shows on TV until 2006.

Why was Hamidov's website closed?

Hamidov's closed website hamidov.uz was run by Uzbekistan's Arsenal D web-hosting company. Davron Abdullayev, Head of Arsenal D, told Forum 18 on 17 February that they only registered Hamidov's website, and are not responsible for its closure. He referred Forum 18 to Uzinfocom, which is "technically responsible" for administering domain names in Uzbekistan.

Uzinfocom on 17 February referred Forum 18 back to Arsenal D. Evgeny Lapatin of Uzinfocom said that "if Arsenal D registered them then you need to ask them" why the site was shut down.

Another manager from Arsenal D – he did not give his name, when Forum 18 called the company the second time on 17 February, said, "It is a confidential information, and we cannot tell you why." He further refused to talk.

Blocking of websites is done at the instigation of the NSS secret police. Internet service providers blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uznet insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uznet employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country (see F18News 10 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=941).

Will Hamidov be released?

Former Chief Mufti Muhammad Yusuf was reported by Uznews as having written a petition for the release of Hamidov. Both Lawyer Zaynutdinov and family members of Hamidov have expressed the hope that Hamidov will be released as he is innocent, and has done nothing illegal.

More arrests related to Hamidov's arrest

Zaynutdinov stated that a few days after Hamidov's arrest six more persons were also arrested and charged under Criminal Code article 216 in Tashkent Region. The authorities had apparently watched these people since their presence at a ceremony for the birth of a child, at which Hamidov spoke. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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