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UZBEKISTAN: Koran translation banned, New Testaments destroyed, planted evidence and witness, large fines

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

Uzbekistan has banned a poetic translation of the Koran into Uzbek by a poet, Jamol Kamol, who has translated William Shakespeare's works. Forum 18 News Service has learned. The country has also continued to fine people for meeting to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, recently fining 15 Protestants and a non-Christian flat owner who rented her flat to Christians. The fines imposed varied between 10 and 55 times the minimum monthly salary, and books and other religious material were ordered to be confiscated. In one case resulting in a fine of 55 times the minimum monthly salary it appears that police planted "evidence" and a witness. Judge Sherzod Yuldashev fell silent when asked by Forum 18 why he ordered the destruction of Christian holy scriptures. When Forum 18 repeated the question he replied "I cannot explain these things to you over the phone" and then put the phone down. He also fined Durdona Abdullayeva and Ulugbek Kenzhayev, whose personal New Testaments they were, 30 times the minimum monthly salary.

Uzbekistan has banned a poetic translation of the Koran into Uzbek by a well-known poet, Jamol Kamol, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The country has also continued to fine people for meeting to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, recently fining 15 Protestants and a non-Christian flat owner who rented her flat to Christians. The fines imposed varied between 10 and 55 times the minimum monthly salary, and books and other religious material were ordered to be confiscated and either destroyed or given to the Russian Orthodox Church. In one case resulting in a fine of 55 times the minimum monthly salary it appears that police planted "evidence" and a witness.

Why should government ban a Koran translation?

The Religious Affairs Committee has banned the publication of a poetic translation of Koran into Uzbek by Jamol Kamol, a poet who has also translated plays by William Shakespeare into Uzbek. In September the Committee wrote to the translation's sponsors, the Mufti Bobohonov Patron of the Arts Society, refusing to authorise publication, its Director Anvar Khusainov told Forum 18 on 19 November.

The Committee claimed that the Koran "was never translated into Uzbek in poetic form, and that Imam-hatyps from various regions of Uzbekistan gave a negative opinion of it". However, Khusainov told Forum 18 that the Muslim Board, the Mufti and Deputy Chief Mufti, Abdulaziz Mansurov had given their approval along with that of a number of other religious scholars in Uzbekistan.

All exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission is forbidden. Via the Muslim Board and other state agencies the government imposes total control of every aspect of the Muslim community's life (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansurov refused to explain why the Muslim Board should be able to stop a translation, and why it first approved the book and then collected negative opinions from its Imams. "Why do you want to know this?" he replied to Forum 18 on 20 November. "It is Uzbekistan's internal matter." He claimed to Forum 18 that the book "may still be published in future" because "it is being studied".

In early November the Religious Affairs Committee was asked to authorise a limited print-run of up to 1,000 copies, for distribution among Muslim leaders, professionals, experts, scholars and others to gain backing for the verse translation. The Committee refused this request, telling Khusainov in a meeting that they "fear that the book may divide society and cause public tension". Khusainov hopes that "one day we will be able to publish it".

Religious Affairs Committee Chair Artykbek Yusupov's Assistant (who would not give his name) claimed to Forum 18 on 21 November that Yusupov is busy. He would not give reasons for why the Committee should be able to ban a Koran translation and why people exercising freedom of religion or belief are punished for owning officially-permitted religious literature.

Zulhaydar Sultanov, Head of the Committee's International Relations Department also would not answer these questions on 21

November. Sobytjon Sharipov, Head of the "Expert Analysis" Department refused to talk to Forum 18. Begzod Kadyrov, Head of the Department for Work with Religious Communities, did not answer his telephone on 21 November.

Uzbekistan, against its international human rights obligations, imposes strict censorship on all religious publications and all aspects of their distribution (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Planted evidence and witness, real fines

On the evening of 5 September police in Syrdarya in the centre of the country raided and searched Denis Absattarov's home. He is a member of the local Full Gospel Church. The police stated they launched the raid following information from the chair of the local mahalla [local district] committee the Pakhtakor-4 district.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's apparatus of repression (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Police claimed in the subsequent court hearing (see below) that they found Absattarov, Kurbanay Abdiyeva, Arina Kim and Vladimir Mehseriyakov holding a religious meeting without state permission. All four (all of whom are Christian) deny this, insisting that they were meeting as friends to drink tea together. Absattarov told Syrdarya District Criminal Court on 2 October that the authorities "broke in when they were about to pray together".

Absattarov also told the Court that a Bible in Uzbek, personal diary, and a video-cassette tape the police claimed to have found did not belong to him or his fellow-Christians, and did not know how they appeared in his home. A local Protestant who knows the Full Gospel Church, and who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 November that they think that the police planted those books.

An Uzbek legal expert, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 22 November that they know of other cases where the police plant religious literature in the homes of people as "evidence". The planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed by people targeted for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Kholmurod Yakhyayev told the Court that he works for the Narvuz-3 mahalla committee in Syrdarya, and was asked by Syrdarya Police to participate in the raid as a witness. Yakhyayev stated that police officers "did not act rudely or violate rights while apprehending the violators". He asked the Court to "stop and punish the illegal activity of the violators".

Yakhyayev, a local Protestant told Forum 18 on 21 November, "has collaborated with Syrdarya Police as a witness, and is often used in cases against religious communities". One such case they knew of was on 4 June when Judge Zafar Nazarov of Syrdarya District Criminal Court fined nine Baptists for the "offence" of meeting together. The court decision in that case, seen by Forum 18, records Yakhyayev's participation as a witness (see F18News 24 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1980).

Judge Nazarov fined the four defendants on 2 October, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. Absattarov was fined 55 times the minimum monthly salary or 5,919,925 Soms (about 17,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,950 Euros, or 2,450 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate) under the Code of Administrative Offences' Articles 240 Part 1 and 241 Part 1. Each of the others was fined 10 times the minimum monthly salary under Article 240 Part 1.

Article 240 Part 1 bans: "Carrying out of unauthorised religious activity, evasion by leaders of religious organisations of registration of the charter of the organisation, and the organisation and conduct of special children's and youth meetings, as well as vocational, literature and other study groups not relating to worship". Article 241 Part 1 bans: "Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately".

Confiscated and destroyed

Judge Nazarov also ordered two Bibles – one each in Uzbek and Russian - a Children's Bible, and another Christian book, and two Christian songbooks to be given to the Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent. He also ordered that a personal diary, one video-cassette tape and 26 DVD discs be destroyed. Judge Nazarov's Assistant (who would not give his name) on 25 November told Forum 18 that he "cannot comment on the case".

Religious literature seized from individuals – whether Muslims, Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses or of other faiths – is frequently ordered destroyed by the courts (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Oybek Turdikulov, Syrdarya District officer of Syrdarya Regional Anti-Terrorism Police, claimed to Forum 18 on 24 November that he did not participate in the 5 September raid. He also claimed that others from the Anti-Terrorism Police were on the raid. He

refused to give reasons for the raid and who had ordered it.

Within Uzbekistan's police apparatus it is often the Anti-Terrorism Police who investigate cases involving people of all beliefs exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Judge Ulugbek Jumayev of Syrdarya Regional Criminal Court on 28 October upheld the fines. The Judge did not answer his telephones on 25 November.

Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses?

On 24 October the private home of mother and son Durdona Abdullayeva and Ulugbek Kenzhayev was raided. Both belong to the Full Gospel Church and on 11 November Judge Sherzod Yuldashev of Tashkent's Sergeli District Criminal Court fined each of them 30 times the minimum monthly salary or 3,229,050 Soms (about 9,000 Norwegian Kroner, 1,060 Euros, or 1,330 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons").

The prosecution claimed the two are Jehovah's Witnesses, although both testified that they are not. A local Protestant, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 21 November that the authorities may have deliberately misidentified the two as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Judge also ordered the destruction of 30 Christian books, including three New Testaments (one in Russian and two in Uzbek), two booklets, one notebook with personal notes and 14 leaflets, as well as 125 video cassette tapes of films which have been shown on Uzbek television.

Judge Yuldashev on 11 November refused to explain to Forum 18 why he ordered the destruction of Abdullayeva's and Kenzhayev's personal books and imposed such large fines. He also refused to explain why the two were identified as Jehovah's Witnesses. "They can complain to higher authorities if they want", he replied.

When asked why he ordered the destruction of the Christian holy scriptures, Judge Yuldashev fell silent. When Forum 18 repeated the question he replied "I cannot explain these things to you over the phone" and then put the phone down.

More fines and confiscations

On the evening of 22 October Bektemir District Police in Tashkent raided a meeting of Protestants in Lutifiya Rahimova's home. She is not a Christian but had rented out her home. Judge Davron Narbayev of Bektemir District Court on 10 November fined nine members of the local Protestant Church of Jesus Christ Church under Administrative Code Article 184-2. he also fined the owner of the flat who rented it out.

Stanislav Ovsyannikov was fined 25 times the minimum monthly salary or 2,690,875 Soms (about 7,575 Norwegian Kroner, 890 Euros, or 1,120 US Dollars).

Lutifiya Rahimova (the homeowner), Madina Marajapova, Rustam Saksanbayev, Dmitriy Khramov, Sergey Shlufman, Ravshan Rahmanov, Yuriy Aleksandrov, Aleksandr Kyulminov and Dmitry Grebenkin were all each fined 20 times the minimum monthly salary or 2,152,700 Soms (about 6,060 Norwegian Kroner, 710 Euros, or 890 US Dollars).

Judge Narbayev ordered the handover of Christian books and magazines confiscated from the defendants, including eight Bibles and nine New Testaments, to the Russian Orthodox Church's Tashkent and Central Asian Diocese. He also ordered the destruction of confiscated notebooks, DVD and CD discs, a laptop computer and computer memory.

Diocesan spokesperson Fr Sergi Alakhtayev told Forum 18 on 25 November that he is not aware of the Court's order to give the confiscated books and magazine to the Diocese, describing it as "the first such decision". Asked what he thinks of the decision, he stated that "I do not know why the court decided this" He also stated that he did not know what the Diocese would do with the books, adding that "we will have to ask the Bishop as nothing like this has happened to us before".

Other recent fines

Among other known recent fines, on 27 October Judge Sanjar Dusmanov of Tashkent Regional Criminal Court fined: Nurman Shelmatov and Dilmurod Rakhmatullayev 80 times the minimum monthly salary each; Gulshad Ermanova 60 times the minimum monthly salary; Lana Abushayeva, Zulaykho Rakhmatullayeva, Khadija Tilepova, Buaysha Muminova, Balkhiya Baytasheva, Shakhnoza Usmanova, Ibrahim Usmanov, Aliya Sek, Flora Li, Snezhana Li, Zaniya Kisenbayeva, and Kaldigul Kulshinbayeva 20 times the minimum monthly salary each; and Khidoyat Chinibekova, Albina Umarova and Gulbahor Shelmatova received five times the minimum monthly salary each.

The fines were imposed on appeal following initial fines imposed on 22 August, after a raid on Protestants from the Full Gospel Church meeting without state permission.

Judge Bekzod Ergashev of Samarkand City Criminal Court on 12 September fined Seventh-day Adventist Aleksei Meshkov 20 times the minimum monthly salary and ordered the confiscation of Christian materials, a laptop computer, and a tablet device. The punishments followed a 5 August raid on Meshkov's home. Local Protestants told Forum 18 that the raid was a reprisal for the Adventists' application to the local authorities for state registration (see F18News 18 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1998).

Judge Rovshankhan Lutfullayev of Tashkent Region's Yangiyul District Court on 5 September fined Vladislav Potrapelyuk of the Full Gospel Church and Arkadiy Belik, Pavel Peychev, Sergey Zakharov three times the minimum monthly salary each; Gulnara Khokhlova was fined twice the minimum monthly salary. Books and other Christian materials were ordered to be destroyed. The punishments followed a 30 July raid on a Baptist summer camp being used by the Full Gospel Church (see F18News 5 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1993). (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=1862.

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.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY