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UZBEKISTAN: Meals and under-18s in mosques banned

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

Uzbekistan this Ramadan banned shared public Muslim iftar meals in Tashkent. Human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov commented "the main reason .. is because this is a public expression of their [Muslims'] faith". The authorities also continued nationwide to ban people under 18 attending mosques.

Uzbekistan banned shared Muslim iftar (breaking of fast) meals in public in the capital Tashkent during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Forum 18 has learned. The authorities also continued to ban people under 18 from attending mosques.

In Tashkent schoolteachers and police were placed at the entrances of mosques to stop people under 18 entering, and in Andijan [Andijon] Region the local Education Department instructed parents to sign letters that they would not (among other things) allow their children to attend mosque prayers throughout the summer. One Andijan mosque placed a sign outside it banning children and mentally-ill children from entering. A local education official told Forum 18 that the reason for the ban was that "children can be misled in mosques", but would not answer when asked if this was an official opinion or why she thought state-controlled imams would mislead people (see below).

Muslim Board officials in Andijan, Samarkand [Samarqand], Bukhara [Bukhoro], Navoi [Navoiy], Namangan and several other regions either refused to answer questions on the issues, or did not answer their phones on 4 and 5 July. The Religious Affairs Committee also refused to discuss the issues with Forum 18 on 5 July.

The bans also appear to have covered the three-day Ramazon hayit (Eid al-fitr) festival, which marks the end of the month of Ramadan. The festival started this year in Uzbekistan from the evening of 5 July, and is marked with prayers and meals. Muslims are forbidden to fast during the festival, making meals particularly important for religious reasons.

Uzbekistan normally imposes even stricter than usual controls on Islamic communities during Ramadan, for example bans on prayers by groups in private homes and people eating the daily Iftar meals at the end of each fast in restaurants. (Restaurant iftar meals normally only take place in Tashkent.) Surveillance of people attending mosques is also stricter than usual (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Jail sentences confirmed

Uzbekistan also marked the end of Ramadan by Tashkent Regional Court on 5 July confirming five-year prison sentences given to two Muslim prisoners of conscience, jailed for exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

The two cousins, Jonibek Turdiboyev and Mansurkhon Akhmedov, were jailed on 29 May for allegedly possessing an Islamic sermon on a music CD, and a third Muslim was jailed for seven years after Russian extradition for social media sermons. They were tortured and tried unfairly, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police helping choose one lawyer (see F18News 24 June http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2191).

"No matter how much evidence of their innocence, or of the authorities' violation of criminal procedures, we gave to the Court, the Judge did not pay attention," human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov, who was part of the legal defence team, complained to Forum 18 on 8 July. "We felt as though we were beating the air. The hearing was a farce."

Rustamov told Forum 18 that "we will make a cassation appeal to the Regional Court as soon as we get the copy of the appeal verdict."

Tashkent bans public iftar meals

Tashkent City Administration banned the holding of public iftar meals in the capital's mosques and restaurants. Deputy Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur of the state-controlled Muslim Board told Forum 18 on 4 July that "this was done on the initiative of the Muslim Board because mosques and restaurants are not a place for it". He added that "the breaking of fast should not become a feast but it

should be done modestly in homes with one's own family."

Tashkent is normally the only place in which restaurant iftar meals have been allowed in some years (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Muslims from Tashkent told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) on 14 June that mosques they visited did not offer public iftar meals. One Muslim commented though that "free water, dates, samsa [an Uzbek meat pie snack], and other light dishes were offered."

Asked by Forum 18 why Muslims cannot have public iftar meals in mosques or restaurants, Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur did not answer.

Agzom Abrorov, who works for Shukhrat Turdikulov (Deputy Head of Tashkent Administration overseeing religious issues), said he cannot answer, when Forum 18 asked on 5 July why iftar meals were banned in mosques and restaurants. Abrorov later said that "no one can answer and Turdikulov is not available."

Human rights defender Rustamov commented that "the main reason the authorities do not want Muslims to gather in restaurants for shared meals is because this is a public expression of their faith".

People under 18 banned from mosques

Uzbekistan also continued its ban on people under 18 attending mosques, even during Ramadan and the summer holidays. The country routinely pressures belief communities, parents and guardians not to allow children or young people to attend meetings for worship and other activities – even though this is not illegal, and even for belief communities which have state permission to exist.

It is illegal for people to exercise freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Human rights defender Rustamov told Forum 18 that "throughout Ramadan in Tashkent placed police and teachers from various schools at the entrances of mosques, to make sure that no schoolchildren attended mosques." He complained that "this is a violation of the rights of Muslims, especially as children from the age of 12 must begin receiving religious education according to Muslim tradition."

Teachers and doctors have previously been used to help police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers" (see eg. F18News 5 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1993).

The no under-18s in mosques ban was also enforced outside Tashkent. Parents in mid-May shared with RFE/RL a letter from the Andijan Regional Administration's Education Department which obliged parents to "watch their children so that they do not join religious movements, nor attend mosques for prayers during the summer holidays." The letter also stated that parents must not let their children attend internet clubs or go out after 6 pm without adult supervision.

Parents were ordered to sign and return the letter, which warned that if the demands are not followed parents will be "punished according to the law".

RFE/RL also published a photograph of a sign on one Andijan mosque banning children and mentally ill persons from attending it.

The authorities have previously bullied and harassed (including in schools) school-age pupils who attend places of worship, including mosques and Christian churches (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

Deputy Grand Mufti Mansur, asked why people under 18 cannot attend mosques, replied that "you need to ask the state authorities". He also said that "the Muslim Board is not against children attending mosque but the ban comes from the state, which is secular. Children can receive a good upbringing by attending mosques."

Mansur said that the sign outside an Andijan mosque "was the initiative of the local Imam not the Muslim Board."

"Children can be misled in mosques"

Asked by Forum 18 on 5 July why people under 18 were banned from attending mosques, Lyudmila (who would not give her last name) of Andijan Regional Education Department replied: "You must be aware of what is going on around the world with the jihadists. Children can be misled in mosques."

Asked if this was the official opinion of the Education Department, and why she thought imams in the state-controlled mosques might mislead children, she would not answer. She then declined to talk more to Forum 18.

Gulhayo Omonova, Chief of the Education Department's Section on ethics and education issues, similarly could not explain the ban. "I don't know," she told Forum 18 on 5 July. Told that a colleague of hers from the Department told Forum 18 that "children can be misled in mosques", and asked if this was the Department's official opinion, she repeated "I don't know". She then declined to talk more to Forum 18.

When Forum 18 asked Saidali Yusupov, Advisor to the national Education Minister on religious issues, why his Andijan Education Department sent letters to parents, he first introduced himself as Yusupov, but then denied he was Yusupov who he claimed was "not available". He then put the phone down.

Under-18s from non-Muslim communities

During Ramadan the authorities do not appear to have concentrated their usual hostile attention on people under 18 attending non-Muslim communities.

"There are no problems with children attending worship services or being taught in the Church," Archpriest Sergey Statsenko of the Education Department of the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 8 July. Statsenko has previously defended the government on state television while attacking "sects" (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=890).

"Children come to mass without any problems, and we teach them throughout the whole year," Roman Catholic Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 8 July. Similarly, a Baptist from the registered Baptist Union, who asked to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 8 July that "Baptists have not had problems with having children in their worship services recently."

Council of Churches Baptists have also not recently in 2016 had problems specifically because of people under 18 being at meetings for worship. (These churches do not seek state registration in the countries they exist in.) "The authorities on occasion ask us during raids why people under 18 are being taught religion, but they mainly punish us because we are not state registered," they told Forum 18 on 8 July.

After one such raid, when police detained those present, police tortured nursing infant children by denying them food to force their parents to write statements (see F18News 26 November 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2125).

Pressures against children and young people

Uzbekistan already pressures belief communities, parents and guardians not to allow children or young people to attend meetings for worship and other activities – even though this is not illegal, and even for belief communities which have state permission to exist. It is illegal for people to exercise freedom of religion and belief with others without state permission. Physical torture has also been inflicted by police on children (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Such pressure against children and young people includes:

- forcing teachers and doctors to help police identify school-age boys attending worship in mosques "and to prevent them from participating in prayers, especially Friday prayers", the use of Anti-Terrorism Police in raids on Protestant and Jehovah's Witness meetings for worship when children are present, and state-sponsored media attacks on children being present for worship meetings (see eg. F18News 5 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1993);

- the authorities bullying and harassing (including in schools) school-age pupils who attend places of worship including mosques and Christian churches (see F18News 12 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1239).

In cities such as Angren the authorities have held meetings of local religious communities to warn them not to be involved in unspecified "proselytism" and "missionary activity", or to allow children and young people to take part in meetings for worship. Communities were also ordered to give the authorities lists of their members (see F18News 8 December 2011 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1645).

Two weeks before that meeting, police raided the local Baptist church's Sunday morning meeting for worship. Two teenage schoolgirls present were later called to a police station and pressured to write statements against the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Gavrilov, and to stop attending the Church (see F18News 5 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1643).

Criminal Code harshened

The Criminal Code has recently been harshened to increase these pressures against children and young people, as well as their

parents or guardians. Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") has been harshened to increase this pressure against children and young people exercising freedom of religion or belief.

The previous Article 244-2 punishment was between 5 and 15 years in jail. But from 26 April 2016 a new Part 2 (b) punishes individuals with imprisonment for between 15 and 20 years, if they are found to have involved people under the age of 16 in "illegal" religious organisations (see F18News 15 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2189).

Article 244-2 is normally only used against Muslims exercising their freedom of religion and belief (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862). (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 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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