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UZBEKISTAN: Imam forced to flee after freedom appeal

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev fled Uzbekistan "for my safety" after appealing to President Mirziyoyev "as Muslims .. cannot have full freedom of religion and belief". Muslims are placed on watch lists for memorising the Koran for a state-run competition, and imams are rotated to stop them influencing congregations.

A 33-year-old Tashkent Imam, Fazliddin Parpiyev, had to flee Uzbekistan in December 2018, two months after he appealed to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev over violations of freedom of religion or belief for the country's Muslims. Religious Affairs Committee, State Security Service (SSS) secret police, ordinary police, Prosecutor's Office and Muftiate officials immediately pressured and threatened him and his father after he issued his video appeal.

Imam Parpiyev on 7 September 2018 published a video appeal to President Mirziyoyev "as Muslims still suffer injustice and cannot have full freedom of religion and belief". The same day eight Religious Affairs Committee and SSS secret police officials visited him. The same day Imam Parpiyev repeated his appeal at Friday prayers in his Tashkent mosque, and the same evening he was visited and threatened by Religious Affairs Committee officials.

The following day Imam Parpiyev's father was summoned to Tashkent from eastern Uzbekistan and pressured by Religious Affairs Committee and Muftiate officials. Imam Parpiyev refused to make a video withdrawing his original appeal, but his father was then forced to record a video appeal against his son. The same day, on 8 September, the Chief Mufti fired Imam Parpiyev from his post as Imam of a Tashkent mosque.

On 12 September, Tashkent Prosecutor's Office and police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officials summoned Imam Parpiyev and banned him from speaking about freedom of religion and belief issues. Imam Parpiyev refused, pointing out: "I only expressed people's dissatisfaction," he pointed out. "Do you not see that people hate it when the authorities forcefully take off their head coverings? That is when they were provoked, not because I spoke."

On 17 September state-run television broadcast a programme attacking Imam Parpiyev, featuring among others Religious Affairs Committee and Muftiate officials. Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that the television programme influenced people against him.

On 18 December Tashkent Prosecutor's Office again summoned Imam Parpiyev for another warning and "made threats against me demanding that I must not make further public statements or talk to independent media or human rights defenders about freedom of religion and belief" Imam Parpiyev stated. "I had to leave the country [on 19 December 2018] because I was afraid for my safety", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

Ordinary Muslims and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime has started adding Muslims who regularly attend mosque and who are thought to be influential to the Preventative Register. "Muslims on watch lists, including those who were on these lists in the past, are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings," one human rights defender told Forum 18.

One source used to identify Muslims for surveillance and warnings has been state-run competitions to find Koran Hafizes, who have memorised the Koran. The SSS secret police then questioned winners, a practice that Imam Parpiyev strongly criticised. Other Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined recently, but declined to give details for fear of state reprisals.

One Muslim, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 February that "the authorities monitor video cameras in mosques, identify persons who are active and regularly attend mosques, and put their names in those lists."

Human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the regime has also begun rotating Imams, to break their influence over their mosque communities.

A human rights defender from outside Tashkent told Forum 18 on 30 January that this began around late August 2018. "Regional

religious affairs officials and Imams say this was a Religious Affairs Committee decision to stop Imams becoming influential". The Religious Affairs Committee has also decided that Tashkent Imams will also travel to regions to conduct Friday prayers periodically.

Appeal for freedom of religion and belief attacked

Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev was on 11 August 2018 appointed as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque, in the capital Tashkent's Yunusabad District. On 7 September on his Facebook page, Imam Parpiyev made a video appeal to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416) "I was asking for help as Muslims still suffer injustice and cannot have full freedom of religion and belief," he told Forum 18 on 30 January 2019.

Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that immediately after he made his appeal, Muzaffar Kamolov of the regime's Religious Affairs Committee with seven State Security Service (SSS) secret police officers visited him in the morning. One of the SSS secret police officers gave his name as Farhod (he would not give his last name), but none of his SSS colleagues identified themselves with documents, Parpiyev told Forum 18.

"Why did you write that human rights are violated, the officials asked me," Parpiyev stated. When the Imam told them about violations of freedom of religion and belief, they asked him: "If you wanted to appeal to the President, why did you have to do it through Facebook, why didn't you send your appeal through the [state-controlled] Muftiate?" Imam Parpiyev answered them: "It is my right to complain to the President. Every citizen has this right."

That same day, 7 September, after Friday prayers in the mosque, Imam Parpiyev repeated his appeal verbally to his mosque community. He also asked attendees to also raise freedom of religion and belief with President Mirziyoyev. The same evening Kamolov, Erdon Esanov, Ayubkhon Kamolov, Rakhmatillo Sayfuddinov and other Religious Affairs Committee officials visited the Imam. "They demanded that I deactivate my Facebook account," the Imam told Forum 18. "I did so."

Islam, because it has the largest number of followers, is the community the regime is most interested in controlling. This control is mainly exercised through the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, or Muftiate. In addition, all exercise of freedom of religion and belief by anyone – including in print and online - is under tight state control. The import, production and possession of literature – including the Koran and the Bible – and other material including electronic material is strictly controlled with compulsory prior censorship by the regime's Religious Affairs Committee. Punishments for those who violate these restrictions can be severe, including imprisonment. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Father detained

Regime officials summoned Imam Parpiyev's father Shakhobiddin to Tashkent from his home in Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan. When he arrived at Tashkent Airport on the morning of 8 September, regime officials detained him and ordered Imam Parpiyev to come to the Muftiate offices.

"Repent, ask for forgiveness"

Imam Parpiyev arrived at 10 am and was met by Esonov, Kamolov and lawyer Ikrom Mardonov from the Religious Affairs Committee. The Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department, Khomid Ishmatbekov, was also present, Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18. "Kamolov led the meeting and stated that the meeting was arranged to convince me to make a video appeal to President Mirziyoyev that I made a mistake, had repented, and asked for forgiveness."

The lawyer Mardonov claimed to Imam Parpiyev: "You violated the Constitution. You cannot make complaints to the President from a pulpit." However, Imam Parpiyev asked: "How is it possible then to thank the President from a pulpit and pray for him?" He also asked the officials to show him what law prohibits complaints to the President.

Lawyer Mardonov then changed his argument and claimed that "it is not acceptable to complain to the President from a pulpit". Parpiyev responded: "I deemed that the pulpit is a holy and high place from which to address the President, who has a high status."

The officials "argued with me for a long time to make the video appeal but I refused to do so, because I did not do anything illegal", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

Pressure on father to make dictated video appeal

The officials then "pressured my father and recorded a video appeal where he stated that 'my son made a mistake and please forgive him'." Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that he saw his father sitting in the office of Deputy Chief Mufti Dilshod Khoshimov. "He held papers in his hands and was memorising the text of a video appeal written for him. He was under such pressure." When the Imam tried to convince him not to make the appeal, his father answered: "I have to make this appeal, I have no choice."

The regime frequently uses extreme and repeated pressure against people of all faiths exercising their freedom of religion and belief.

This for example includes ordering the mother-in-law of a Protestant Christian to physically attack her and evict her from her home (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2445), and the use of other forms of torture (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Imam fired

The same day, on 8 September, the Chief Mufti dismissed Imam Parpiyev from his post as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416)

This was part of the regime's nationwide crackdown on people arguing for freedom of religion and belief. From late August 2018, the regime arrested at least 10 bloggers across the country for expressing their opinions on freedom of religion or belief issues, such as the freedom of Muslim women to wear the hijab (headscarf), men to grow beards, and children to be allowed to attend mosques. At least eight were given short-term jail sentences of up to 15 days. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2416)

Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur refused to tell Forum 18 why Imam Parpiyev was fired. "Why are you asking me? Journalists twist my words," he claimed on 7 February 2019. "And so I will not answer your questions."

Imam summoned to Prosecutor's office

Imam Parpiyev told Radio Free Europe what had happened and after their report the regime did not publish his father's appeal. However, on 12 September 2018, Shokir and Sherzod (who refused to give their last names or show identity documents) of Tashkent's Uchteppa District Police visited Imam Parpiyev's home. "They demanded that I go with them to Tashkent Prosecutor's Office." When the Imam asked if he could invite his lawyer, they told him: "It is not necessary, because the Prosecutor just wants to talk to you."

At the Prosecutor's Office, the Imam was met by Tashkent City Prosecutor Sherzod Oblokulov, the Head of Tashkent police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department Lieutenant Colonel Abduvokhid Shukurov, and an official named Ravshan who refused to give his last name or show identity documents.

"We warn you and prohibit you from making such public statements"

Prosecutor Oblokulov asked Imam Parpiyev why he had made public statements on freedom of religion and belief. The Imam told him that Muslims are dissatisfied with the regime, for example with its forcing girls in schools and female students in higher education institutions to take off head coverings. Oblokulov claimed in reply that "your statements provoke people against the authorities".

Officials give contradictory answers when asked about the issues Imam Parpiyev identified. For example, Bakhrom Mamadiyev, Vice Rector of Tashkent's state-controlled International Islamic Academy, told Forum 18 on 7 February 2019 that as a secular education institution the Higher Education Ministry only allows the Academy's students to wear secular dress. Yet that same day Otabek Bazarov, Head of the Higher Education Ministry's Ethical Issues Department, claimed to Forum 18 that there is "no ban on head cover from the Ministry". Asked if women are allowed to wear head coverings if any education institution allows it, Bazarov emphatically replied "Yes".

When Imam Parpiyev pointed out to Prosecutor Oblokulov that "I only expressed people's dissatisfaction. Do you not see that people hate it when the authorities forcefully take off their head coverings? That is when they were provoked, not because I spoke", Prosecutor Oblokulov replied: "We warn you and prohibit you from making such public statements."

The officials then made Imam Parpiyev sign a statement that he had been warned. Shokirov of the police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department also warned him not to speak on social media or give interviews to journalists.

Tashkent Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officers on 7 February 2019 refused to answer Forum 18's questions. They repeatedly claimed that Lieutenant Colonel Shokirov was "not available to talk".

Numerous calls to Tashkent City Prosecutor's office on 7 February went unanswered.

State-run media attack Imam

On 17 September 2018 state-run television broadcast a programme attacking Imam Parpiyev. Among the participants was a Religious Affairs Committee "expert" Sobitkhon Sharipov, Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur, the Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department Homidjon Ishmatbekov, the Muftiate's official responsible for work with mosques Rahimberdi Rahmonov, Tashkent imam Odilkhon Yunuskhon, and Saidafzal Saidjalolov from state-controlled International Islamic Academy.

Television programme participants attacked Imam Parpiyev for his public complaints about the regime's violations of Muslims'

freedom of religion and belief. The Head of the Muftiate's Fatwa Department Ishmatbekov claimed that Imam Parpiyev "divided our society into two parts and sowed confusion among the people. He is a liar, and he provoked people". Saidjalolov from the Islamic Academy claimed that "instead of appealing to the President and thanking him for his reforms and pardoning of 16,000 prisoners, he [Imam Parpiyev] made a negative video appeal, abused the teachings of our Imam al-Bukhari and our other Imams, and insulted them by speaking in their name. Were this a different country, he [Imam Parpiyev] would have been dealt with more seriously." Tashkent Imam Yunuskhon said that Imam Parpiyev "abused the pulpit, which is a holy place. It cannot be used for preaching inappropriate, negative, divisive, words."

Sharipov of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed: "Freedom of conscience means that every citizen can freely choose to believe or not to believe in religion. Everyone, without regard to their beliefs, is equal before the law and citizens cannot be forced to believe in religion. Freedom of conscience is not expressed in wearing beards or convincing others to wear beards." He did not address the denials of Imam Parpiyev's freedom of religion and belief.

Feruz Olimova, who was described as a psychologist, compared receiving religious information from the internet – such as Imam Parpiyev's appeal - to looking at immoral photographs on the internet. "This kind of religious information can cripple young people's psychology," she claimed.

Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18 that the television programme influenced people against him. "My relatives and friends asked me 'what have you done?'. Even people I don't know criticised me on the street." He said that the television programme's goal "was to influence public opinion against me".

Saidjalolov from the state-controlled International Islamic Academy refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the programme on 7 February 2019. "I am not ready to answer this sensitive question, you just called spontaneously. I need to think about it first." He then claimed: "I talked [on the programme] to my own people of Uzbekistan, I am not going to ask your permission for that." When Forum 18 asked again about the programme, Saidjalolov replied: "I am not going to answer your questions. Please talk to higher authorities."

Deputy Chief Mufti Abdulaziz Mansur also refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the programme on 7 February 2019.

Sharipov of the Religious Affairs Committee's telephone went unanswered on 7 February 2019, and other Religious Affairs Committee officials refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Prosecutor's Office again warns Imam Parpiyev

On 18 December 2018 Tashkent Prosecutor's Office summoned Imam Parpiyev for another warning. Ikrom Narimov, First Deputy Prosecutor of Tashkent, in his office "made threats against me demanding that I must not make further public statements or talk to independent media or human rights defenders about freedom of religion and belief," Imam Parpiyev stated.

Imam leaves country "because I was afraid for my safety"

"I had to leave the country [on 19 December 2018] because I was afraid for my safety", Imam Parpiyev told Forum 18.

Imam Parpiyev is 33 years old and has a wife and two children. He is a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, and of Tashkent's Islamic Institute named after Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari.

Secret lists of Muslims on Preventative Register

Ordinary Muslims and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime has started adding Muslims who regularly attend mosque and who are thought to be influential to the Preventative Register. This is used to target "prevention measures" against individuals, including: prophylactic talks; official warnings; "social rehabilitation"; referral for compulsory treatment; and administrative supervision. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

One human rights defender told Forum 18 on 6 February 2019 that "Muslims on watch lists, including those who were on these lists in the past, are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings."

One source used to identify Muslims for surveillance and warnings has been state-run competitions to find Koran Hafizes, who have memorised the Koran. The SSS secret police then questioned winners, a practice that Imam Parpiyev strongly criticised. A different imam, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 1 February that "After the regime identified who hafizes are, they put their names on the secret lists."

One imam told Forum 18 that the SSS secret police asked competition winners why they memorised the Koran, who supported them in this, who financed them, etc." Asked why he thinks the regime did this, one imam stated "because they might be influential in future." Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined recently, but declined to give details for

fear of state reprisals.

Deputy Chief Mufti Mansur refused to answer Forum 18's questions on why the regime questioned hafiz competition winners.

A Muslim from Tashkent, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 February that "the authorities monitor video cameras in mosques, identify persons who are active and regularly attend mosques, and put their names in those lists".

Two human rights defenders who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, as well as human rights defender Shukhrat Rustamov, agreed with this assessment. "President Mirziyoyev recently restored these lists. The purpose is keep Muslims under pressure and the population in fear so they do not become so active in mosques," Rustamov told Forum 18 on 1 February.

Surveillance and targeting of anyone attending places of worship of any faith is normal in Uzbekistan.

(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Rotating Imams to deny influence

Human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that the regime has begun rotating Imams, to break their influence over their mosque communities.

A human rights defender from outside Tashkent notes that this began around late August 2018. "Regional religious affairs officials and Imams say this was a Religious Affairs Committee decision to stop Imams becoming influential," the human rights defender told Forum 18 on 30 January. The Religious Affairs Committee has also decided that Tashkent Imams will also travel to regions to conduct Friday prayers periodically.

Various human rights defenders have noted that this policy has begun to be implemented. For example, Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 on 1 February that he knew several Imams in Tashkent who have been sent to other mosques. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan

(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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