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UZBEKISTAN: Haj pilgrims face state control, bribery, exit ban lists

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on haj pilgrims, including using exit ban lists to bar devout Muslims, arbitrarily restricting who can go on the pilgrimage. Controls are complex and multilayered, involving the SSS secret police, the Muftiate, and the government's Religious Affairs Committee. The system's complexity facilitates corruption.

Uzbekistan continues to restrict severely the ability of Muslims to go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca their faith requires, Forum 18 notes. Every able-bodied healthy adult Muslim who can afford to do so is obliged to make a haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime.

Yet Uzbekistan imposes severe restrictions on the numbers of pilgrims, severely restricts who can get onto the long pilgrimage waiting lists including using exit ban lists to bar devout Muslims, arbitrarily alters who can go on the pilgrimage and when they can go, and imposes a large financial cost for going on the pilgrimage (see below).

The haj is controlled and organised by three separate and interlocking state structures: the Haj Committee, the Haj Board, and the Haj Council, all of which involve the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the Muftiate, and the Religious Affairs Committee (see below).

Many Muslims have also observed that the complexity of the process and the many officials involved provides opportunities for bribery. "Believers are afraid because of the obstacles at so many levels that they will not be put on the waiting lists, or be removed from the lists arbitrarily," one told Forum 18. "So they are willing to pay up to the officials." They said that people do not wish to discuss such cases "fearing for their safety", and added that "this is found in all spheres of life, that officials create obstacles and big queues so people have to pay bribes to get things done" (see below).

The Haj Committee removed from the list young women from Fergana Region who were due to go on the 2019 haj because they were below the state's unwritten age limit, a human rights defender told Forum 18 (see below).

One pilgrim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated that "the authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates does not follow Islam."

In 2019, the haj took place between 9 and 14 August. All the state-approved haj pilgrims flew from Uzbekistan to Saudi Arabia on the state-run Uzbekistan Airways.

Restricted pilgrim numbers, long waiting lists

Uzbekistan routinely imposes severe restrictions on how many pilgrims could take part in the annual haj pilgrimage (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314), with just over 5,000 a year having been allowed in the past. This led to long waiting times to be allowed by the regime to go on the haj, with some would-be pilgrims being told that they "will be able to go in 20 or 30 years" or even longer. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2102)

Saudi Arabia sets the quotas allowed per country, based on a quota of 1,000 pilgrims per million Muslim residents. Uzbekistan's population is over 32 million people, at least 90 per cent of whom are seen as being from a Muslim background, giving a possible haj quota of about 28,000 pilgrims a year. Since 2017 Uzbekistan has only allowed 7,200 haj pilgrims a year, roughly one quarter of the number of pilgrims the regime could allow.

According to Muslims Forum 18 has spoken to, waiting times are thought to vary significantly between the region around the capital Tashkent and elsewhere in the country. After the 2017 increase in the numbers the regime allows, current estimates of the time pilgrims can expect to wait – which are not officially published – vary between five to eight years for people from around Tashkent to between five and 20 years elsewhere.

"There always is a big gap between Tashkent and the regions," one Muslim familiar with haj waiting times told Forum 18 on 4 November.

"If you bribe the authorities you will have no waiting problem," another Muslim commented to Forum 18 in November. "If you don't, you may wait for years and years, because they will keep putting your name at the bottom of the list all the time."

Muslims think that various factors have led to the apparent decrease in waiting times after 2017. Adkham Olimov, a Muslim activist from Tashkent, told Forum 18 on 5 November that he thought these factors included: "the quota going up from 5,000 to 7,200, some on waiting lists dying of old age, some not being able to afford to go on the haj when their turn comes up, and some people secretly using private companies in third countries".

Interlocking, multilayered state control, bribery

The haj is controlled and organised by three separate and interlocking state structures: the Haj Committee, the Haj Board, and the Haj Council, all of which involve the SSS secret police, the Muftiate, and the Religious Affairs Committee.

Haj pilgrims who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals have noted that the complexity of the process and the many officials involved provides opportunities for bribery.

"Believers are afraid because of the obstacles at so many levels that they will not be put on the waiting lists, or be removed from the lists arbitrarily," one told Forum 18. "So they are willing to pay up to the officials." They said that people do not wish to discuss such cases "fearing for their safety", and added that "this is found in all spheres of life, that officials create obstacles and big queues so people have to pay bribes to get things done."

Individuals submit in writing an application to go on the haj, with a copy of their passport (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). According to a 2017 decree, the authorities then have one year to decide whether or not to allow an applicant onto the waiting list. Local administrations, along with the SSS secret police, the Muftiate and the state Religious Affairs Committee check and interview each applicant, after which the views of mahalla officials and residents on the applicant are sought. Alleged "consultation" by mahallas with their officials and residents has been manipulated to deny freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2515). After this process is complete about whether or not to endorse or reject the application, and each mahalla committee submits to the local administration its list of potential pilgrims.

The central mahalla of a district then compiles a waiting list of applicants, and the Haj Committee then puts the names of the potential pilgrims onto a central register. The Haj Committee notifies pilgrims when their turn to go on the haj has arrived.

Pilgrims are then invited to the local district administration and instructed to collect more documents, including photographs, certificates of their place of residence, their health, and a reference letter from their local mahalla committee. The letter gives information about their personal qualities and "charitable works".

Haj pilgrims who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals have identified the "charitable works" requirement as a focus for extortion and bribery, at both the district authority and local mahalla committee level. Officials ask pilgrims to make donations for the repair or upgrading of roads, laying electricity lines, to help poor families, or for the unspecified welfare of the mahalla. Such donations are commonly made in cash, for example to mahalla committee chairs, and there is no transparency or accountability for how such money is spent or by who.

Similarly, it is thought that at least some – possibly 20 per cent or more - of medical certificates are obtained through bribery. These bribes can add between roughly 10 per cent and 30 per cent to the cost of the haj, depending on whether the potential pilgrim is genuinely healthy or not. The more unhealthy a would-be pilgrim is, the higher the potential for bribery.

"Officials do not openly ask for bribes, but in reality bribery is what happens," one Muslim commented to Forum 18.

The mahalla reference letter and the documents are submitted to the Haj Committee, which sends them for inspection to the Haj Board. The official Haj Board then inspects the documents of pilgrims, and approves the names of potential pilgrims in a given year, sending its list to the Haj Council.

The Haj Council collects travel expenses, arranges travel visas, organises additional medical examinations and vaccination of the pilgrims. It also organises the pilgrims into groups, appointing one group leader for every 50 pilgrims. Group leaders are thought by many pilgrims to be SSS secret police informers or officers. The Haj Council also distributes the pilgrims onto flights run by the state-controlled Uzbekistan Airways.

Before the pilgrimage the Haj Council arranges pre-departure training for pilgrims, given by officials of the Muftiate, Religious

Affairs Committee, and SSS secret police. Officials give special instructions to successful haj applicants on how to behave on pilgrimage, including not to talk to foreigners. Pilgrims are "strongly recommend not to have contacts with foreigners, and if invited for a meal or other meetings are told to inform group leaders and get their permission," a 2019 haj pilgrim, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, stated.

Officials typically give these instructions at meetings for all approved pilgrims. As well as group leaders, other SSS secret police informers or officers are thought to accompany the haj pilgrims.

Akmalkhan Shakirov, Head of the Muftiate's International Relations Department, who also oversees Haj organisational issues, refused to comment on why so many obstacles are put in the way of Muslims making the haj their faith requires them to make if they can. "I cannot talk to you over the phone about this," he told Forum 18 on 10 October.

Asked why the SSS secret police blocks Muslims from going on the haj, the duty officer in its headquarters in the capital Tashkent, claimed to Forum 18 on 6 November that "these are just rumours." Asked why the SSS is involved at every level of haj organisation, he claimed that "I am not supposed to talk to you over the phone."

Authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates "does not follow Islam"

One pilgrim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated that "the authorities' control of pilgrimage candidates does not follow Islam." They pointed out that Islam does not require an age limit to go on the haj, "but officials require this." Similarly, there is no requirement in Islam for "pilgrims to be subjected to questioning by government officials about 'What is your reason for going on the Haj', 'Do you know such and such subjects in Islam', etc." The pilgrim asked, "Why do they have to ask about religious knowledge or beliefs, or ask about the reason for going on the Haj?"

The pilgrim also observed that Islam makes "no demands for pilgrims to give financial and other support to poor families living in the same mahalla. It should be voluntary not a law." They explained that "pilgrimage candidates are afraid that they can be removed from the list, because there have been examples of this, and so they pay certain sums to the mahalla committees to avoid this."

Arbitrary age limit

An "unwritten instruction" bans would-be pilgrims under the age of 45 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 on 1 November that the Haj Committee removed from the list young women from Fergana Region who were due to go on the 2019 haj. Officials told them that they are under the required age limit, even though there is no formal legal age limit. "This is only a matter of manipulation by officials to extort money from people, or put their own favoured people onto the lists," Tashanov suggested.

Human rights defender Bahodiyr Eliboyev and other Muslims who did not wish to be named also knew of such 2019 cases, when applicants who had previously been refused because of the unwritten age limit were allowed to go on the haj when they were older than the age limit.

Dilshodkhon Bobojonov, Head of the International Relations Department of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself to talk about the age limit.

High costs

Only haj and umra (non-compulsory pilgrimage to Mecca at any time of the year) pilgrimages organised by the regime and allowed by the state-controlled Muftiate are permitted.

"Private individuals in Bukhara in 2018 tried to establish a company for private umra tours," human rights defender Shukhrat Ganiyev from Bukhara told Forum 18 on 5 November. "But the state-controlled Muftiate from Tashkent immediately blocked it through the regional authorities."

Another Muslim, who wished to be anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that "it is possible to go on the umra privately but it must be done without making it public. I personally know some people who have done this from third countries, but this can lead to problems with the authorities."

Neither Zakirjon Khidoyatov, who is responsible in Bukhara Regional Administration for restricting freedom of religion and belief, nor spokesperson Umid Kushayev wanted to speak to Forum 18 on 6 November.

Ulugbek Jurayev, Assistant to Religious Affairs Committee Chair SSS secret police Colonel Abdugafur Akhmedov, claimed to Forum 18 on 14 October that "private companies can arrange haj visits, and people use their services."

However, on 28 August the SSS secret police detained 35 Muslims returning from the haj at Tashkent Airport, Radio Free Europe reported. The pilgrims, who were on a pilgrimage organised by a company in the United Arab Emirates, were held for seven hours of questioning. Officers asked them "who organised the pilgrimage, who led the group, how much they paid for the trip, and who they met during their stay abroad". The SSS secret police told the detainees that their passports can be collected from their local police station, where they will face further questioning.

Jurayev of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed to Forum 18 that "those pilgrims were not questioned about the Haj, but because their travel documents were not in order." He would not explain what was wrong with their documents.

Haj pilgrimages can be very expensive at the prices the regime charges, costing around one and a half times the average annual salary of around 24 million Soms. Although some foreign private firms charge more than the state price, others charge less than the state price – in some cases around half the price the state charges.

Referring to the state price, Abdurakhmon Tashanov of the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights organisation told Forum 18 that the price "is already very high, and it is very hard for an average Uzbek Muslim to accomplish the Haj." He added that "the cost of the Haj is one the main reasons why I have not been able to accomplish it yet."

Human rights defender Bahodir Eliboyev, from Fergana in eastern Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 4 November that "an average Uzbek cannot afford such [state] prices, and usually those who go on the Haj are either well-to-do or save money for years." He explained that "I for instance cannot cut food, health and other costs from my family budget, which is why I and many others cannot go on the Haj."

However, Muslims Forum 18 spoke to thought that past problems with obtaining foreign currency for the haj (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314) have been resolved, in both Tashkent and the regions. This is because citizens are now allowed to every quarter withdraw from banks amounts up to the equivalent of 2,000 USD Dollars.

Exit ban lists

Even successful completion of the haj application process does not guarantee a haj pilgrimage, as the SSS secret police maintains an exit ban list of people – for example human rights defenders – who are not allowed to travel abroad. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

"Muslims on exit ban lists .. are periodically summoned to police stations and mahalla committees for talks and warnings," one human rights defender told Forum 18 in April 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2471). 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. Imams have also told Forum 18 that some of the competition winners were fined, but declined to give details for fear of state reprisals.

"On the recommendation of the SSS secret police, people can still be eliminated from the waiting lists," human rights defender Ganiyev told Forum 18. "Usually it is people the authorities do not trust or like." This causes some to decide not go on the haj.

"I have been told by officials that I am on an exit ban list because I am devout," one Muslim who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 1 November. "So I have not applied to go on the haj because I think if I ask for this I will be blocked by the authorities." (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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