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UZBEKISTAN: Parents told not to teach Islam to their children

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

In late April the Deputy Headteacher of a Bukhara school rang Muslim parents to say that the ordinary police and the SSS secret police had visited to ask "how religiously devout families and children are". Parents were warned of unspecified consequences if they teach Islam to their children, or any of their children wear the hijab. Human rights defenders have heard unconfirmed accounts that the ordinary police and SSS secret police are making similar visits to schools in other parts of the country to ask similar questions.

In late April the Deputy Headteacher of one state school in the southern city of Bukhara rang Muslim parents of at least 20 pupils at two state schools, Schools No. 14 and No. 33, stating that earlier in the month the ordinary police and the State Security Service (SSS) secret police had visited both schools. The police and SSS had asked teachers "how religiously devout families and children are, and if parents influence the children to wear religious clothes or pray the namaz [Islamic daily prayers]".

The Deputy Headteacher warned the parents of unspecified consequences if they teach Islam to their children, or any of their children wear the hijab. The parents were also told not to talk about the calls with anyone else, as "schools are only trying to help families". Parents interpreted the calls not as "help" but as state pressure against them not to teach their faith to their children (see below).

It is unclear if the police and secret police visits to the Bukhara schools and the heightened scrutiny of pupils' and their families' religious adherence was related to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began in Uzbekistan on 13 April (and ended with the festival of Id al-Fitr, Uraza Bayram, on 13 May). One human rights defender told Forum 18 they did not believe the timing was related to Ramadan.

Matlyuba Jurayeva, Headteacher of School No. 33, denied to Forum 18 that the police or SSS secret police have visited schools. She refused to say why parents cannot teach Islam to their children. Dilfuza Mustafayeva, Head of Bukhara Regional Public Education Department, similarly denied that such visits had happened. Police and secret police officers refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18 (see below).

Human rights defenders, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, noted that there are unconfirmed accounts that the ordinary police and SSS secret police are making similar visits to schools in other parts of the country to ask similar questions. One human rights defender suggested that this is part of attempts to increase state control of society before delayed presidential elections now due in December 2021 (see below).

On 3 May, Syrdarya Regional Police and the SSS secret police raided a home in the eastern town of Guliston where two women were "giving illegal religious education to school pupils without an official licence". This is one of the "crimes" which remains in the proposed new Criminal Code that – if adopted – is planned to come into force on 1 January 2022, as well as in the latest known text of the draft Religion Law (see below).

Colonel Farrukh Giyasov, Deputy Chief of Syrdarya Regional Police, told Forum 18 that the women cannot teach under-18-year-olds how to read the Koran and how to pray "because they do not have licences from the authorities". Asked why the state decides how parents can have their children instructed in their own faith, the Colonel claimed: "We do not know what these women teach. Maybe they teach Wahhabism or some other extremist views" (see below)

Parents told not to teach Islam to their children

In late April the Deputy Headteacher of one state school in the southern city of Bukhara rang Muslim parents of at least 20 pupils at two state schools, Schools No. 14 and No. 33, stating that earlier in the month the ordinary police and the State Security Service (SSS) secret police had visited both schools. The police and SSS had asked teachers "how religiously devout families and children are, and if parents influence the children to wear religious clothes or pray the namaz [Islamic daily prayers]".

Matlyuba Jurayeva, Headteacher of School No. 33, denied to Forum 18 on 11 May that the police or SSS secret police have visited

schools. An officer (who refused to give his name) of the section dealing with freedom of religion and belief in the SSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent on 12 May claimed that it was a "wrong number" when asked why schools were visited, and why parents cannot teach their faith to their children.

The Assistant (who refused to give their name) to Colonel Shukhrat Aliyev, Head of Bukhara Regional Police, on 12 May claimed that he was "in a meeting", and asked Forum 18 to call back. When Forum 18 called back to ask the Colonel why police visited schools to make enquiries about Muslim families, the phone was switched to a fax machine.

On 12 May, Dilfuza Mustafayeva, Head of Bukhara Regional Public Education Department, similarly denied that such visits had happened. She stated however: "I warned headteachers of all schools not to put pressure on parents, but talk with them and explain that children must come to school in school uniform."

No hijabs or "longer skirts" allowed

Headteacher Jurayeva stated that the school has warned girls not to come to school in a hijab "or wearing longer skirts" as this is not official school uniform. "Some girls told us to speak to their parents, and so we called them." After this, some girls stopped wearing the hijab. When Forum 18 asked why parents cannot teach Islam to their children, and why girls cannot wear hijabs or "longer skirts", Jurayeva replied: "You should put that question to the higher authorities, not to me."

The regime has banned the wearing of the hijab, which has caused protests from Muslims including Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev who had to flee the country (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2451), and jailed human rights defender Tulkun Astanov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2631). Ending the ban is one of the changes people in Uzbekistan want in a new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2609), but the latest publicly known text continues to legitimise violations of human rights.

The Headteacher of School No. 14, who refused to give her name, denied that the school had warned the parents of pupils not to teach them Islam. "It is a lie. Who told you this? We did not call any parents," she insisted to Forum 18 on 12 May. Asked whether her Deputy Headteacher had talks with pupils or parents about teaching Islam or wearing the hijab, she replied: "You should talk to the Ministry of Public Education," before refusing to talk more.

Numerous phone calls on 12 May to the Public Education Ministry in Tashkent went unanswered.

"Schools are only trying to help families"?

The Deputy Headteacher warned the parents of unspecified consequences if they teach Islam to their children, or any of their children wear the hijab. Headteacher Jurayeva refused to explain to Forum 18 what such consequences might be. Mustafayeva of Bukhara Regional Public Education Department said she cannot say what the consequences for parents may be, but then added: "We will keep talking with the parents."

The parents were also told not to talk about the calls with anyone else, as "schools are only trying to help families". Parents interpreted the calls not as "help" but as state pressure against them not to teach their faith to their children.

Human rights defenders, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, noted that similar incidents had taken place in the past (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). Human rights defenders have heard unconfirmed accounts that the ordinary police and SSS secret police are making similar visits to schools in other parts of the country to ask similar questions.

One human rights defender suggested that the school visits and other freedom of religion and belief violations targeting Muslims (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>) are attempts to increase state control of society before delayed presidential elections now due in December 2021.

Police raid on home where two women taught Islam to children

On 3 May Syrdarya Regional Police and the SSS secret police raided a home in the eastern town of Guliston where two women were "giving illegal religious education to school pupils without an official licence", the regional police Press Service noted the same day on its Telegram channel.

This is one of the "crimes" which remains in the draft new Criminal Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2644) that – if adopted – is planned to come into force on 1 January 2022, as well as in the latest known text of the draft Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2609).

The police Press Service claimed that the under-18-year-olds were attending religion classes instead of school classes. "Religious sermons of unknown persons" were found on the mobile phone of one of the female teachers, and these were sent for "expert analysis" by the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314) in Tashkent.

In summer 2020, a court jailed a Muslim for 10 days after police found a lecture from a state Islamic institution on his mobile phone (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2649).

Colonel Farrukh Giyasov, Deputy Chief of Syrdarya Regional Police, told Forum 18 on 12 May that the women cannot teach under-18-year-olds how to read the Koran and how to pray "because they do not have licences from the authorities." Asked why the state decides how parents can have their children instructed in their own faith, the Colonel claimed: "We do not know what these women teach. Maybe they teach Wahhabism or some other extremist views."

Colonel Giyasov claimed that no punishments will be given to the parents or teachers of the under-18-year-olds. "We just want to warn them." (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://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 (https://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