

10 August 2021

TAJIKISTAN: Imam jailed for preaching his own sermon

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

The secret police arrested Imam Mahmadsodyk Sayidov for refusing to read the state-provided sermon all imams must read at Friday prayers, instead giving his own sermon. A Kulob court jailed him in June for five years for allegedly participating in a religious "extremist" organisation. Two mosque attendees were also jailed. A Judge could not explain what was "extremist" about the three men's alleged activity. On 18 June the UN Human Rights Committee again called for the 70-year-old seriously-ill Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov to be transferred to a "specialised medical institution". The Prison Governor claimed "We have everything for his treatment."

On 4 June, a court in Kulob jailed Imam Mahmadsodyk Sayidov, with Abdugafor Rajabov and Aslamkhon Karimov, for five years for allegedly participating in a religious "extremist" organisation. This is thought to be a reference to the now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), local Muslims told Forum 18. The 28-year-old Imam Sayidov was the state-appointed imam of the Nonvoyi Poyon [residential district] Mosque in Kulob, which the other two men attended.

National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers arrested Imam Sayidov immediately after he refused to preach a State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) provided sermon and preached his own sermon instead (see below).

The SCRA sermon used the 8 March International Woman's Day public holiday as an excuse to attack the families of IRP leaders and the exiled editor of media outlet isloh.net Muhammadiqboli Sadridin. Isloh publishes IRP material. The SCRA sermon also described 8 March as a "sacred holiday" and praised the regime. Imam Sayidov's own sermon asked why the SCRA described 8 March as a "sacred holiday" which Muslims must celebrate while the regime bans the carrying out of Islamic rites and ceremonies (see below).

From March the regime has intensified its campaign against women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). The police, the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and the Interior Ministry all refused to explain to Forum 18 why male police officers nationwide are not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing hijab (see below).

Judge Izzatullo Tabarzoda, Deputy Chair of the Regional Court, could not explain to Forum 18 what was "extremist" about the three men's alleged activity, replying "I cannot tell you" when asked. The Judge also claimed it was "beyond my competence" to explain why the regime dictates what sermons should be preached, and what Islamic ceremonies should and should not be followed (see below).

On 12 February, a Dushanbe court jailed Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (widely known as Mullo Sirojiddin) for five years and six months, along with an unknown number of others. One human rights defender suggested that "the main purpose of arresting Imam Abdurahmanov was to allow only state-appointed and approved imams to speak publicly. Most independent imams are now afraid to speak publicly." The Imam's family are hoping he will be freed under a late 2021 prisoner amnesty to mark the 30th anniversary of Tajikistan's independence from the Soviet Union (see below).

Prison authorities have repeatedly denied seriously-ill Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov the specialised medical treatment he needs. On 19 March and in a reminder dated 18 June, seen by Forum 18, the UN Human Rights Committee called on Tajikistan to "ensure, without delay, that Mr. Khakimov receives adequate medical treatment at a specialised medical institution in accordance with his health care requirements" (see below).

On 5 August Prisoner Governor Farukh Jalolov claimed to Forum 18 that prisoner of conscience Khakimov "has been kept in the medical unit of the prison for several months and is being treated there". Jalolov insisted: "Conditions there are no worse than in the city hospitals. We have everything for his treatment." Jalolov did not say that the regime would transfer prisoner of conscience Khakimov to the "specialised medical institution" that the UN Human Rights Committee stated should happen (see below).

On 8 May, Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience and conscientious objector Rustamjon Norov was transferred to Yavan Labour Camp in Khatlon Region. "His conditions are better than in the previous prison," Fariza Norova, Norov's mother, told Forum 18.

The family thinks that "it is not fair that our son is in prison", and hope that he will be amnestied in the 30th anniversary of independence amnesty (see below).

Imam arrested for preaching own sermon

In 2016, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) (SCRA) appointed Mahmadsodyk Domullovich Sayidov (born c. 1993) as Imam of the Nonvoyi Poyon [residential district] Mosque in Kulob. This is in the south-western Khatlon Region south east of Dushanbe.

Imams are only allowed to preach sermons the SCRA provides. The texts of such sermons are issued to imams each week, and often contain praise of the non-freely elected regime of President Emomali Rahmon. For example, in 2015 SCRA sermons called votes to be cast only for Rahmon's party, for Tajikistan to become a one-party state, and for the legal opposition Islamic Renaissance Party to be closed down (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625). The IRP was banned, and its leaders arrested and jailed as prisoners of conscience.

On Friday 5 March 2021, Imam Sayidov refused to preach the SCRA-prepared sermon. This used the 8 March International Woman's Day public holiday as an excuse to attack the families of IRP leaders and the exiled editor of media outlet isloh.net Muhammadiqboli Sadriddin. Isloh publishes IRP material. The SCRA sermon also described 8 March as a "sacred holiday" and praised the regime.

Imam Sayidov in his own 5 March sermon asked why the SCRA described 8 March as a "sacred holiday" which Muslims must celebrate while the regime bans the carrying out of Islamic rites and ceremonies (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625). Bans imposed under the Traditions Law include on meals for returning haj pilgrims and ceremonies mourning the dead.

From March the regime intensified its campaign against women wearing the hijab (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2676) (Islamic headscarf). Officials stop women in the street, question them, order them to take off their hijab, and ban women wearing the hijab from receiving medical treatment. "When they saw a woman in a hijab the male and female officials immediately encircled the woman" a human rights defender saw in early July, speaking "very rudely and harassing them if they refused to take off their hijab". The police, the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and the Interior Ministry all refused to explain to Forum 18 why male police officers nationwide are not stopped from deliberately and publicly bullying and harassing women wearing hijab.

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Imam Sayidov immediately after his Friday sermon in Kulob's Nonvoyi Poyon Mosque, local Muslims told Forum 18. Officials also accused Imam Sayidov of sharing the SCRA's sermon text with journalists outside Tajikistan.

"The authorities make imams lie from the pulpit"

"The NSC secret police were shocked and mad, and even questioned SCRA officials on who might have shared the text of the sermon with us," isloh.net's editor Sadriddin told Forum 18 on 5 August. "Many worshippers found out about the SCRA text and laughed at both it and imams who agreed to read it. The authorities make imams lie from the pulpit, and they have turned mosques into an arena for propaganda praising the government."

The duty officer (who refused to give his name) at the NSC secret police headquarters in Dushanbe would not on 5 August answer any of Forum 18's questions.

SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda and his secretary (who refused to give her name) also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 4 August. Neither Deputy Chair Farrukhullo Olimzoda nor spokesperson Avshin Mukim answered their phones on 4 or 5 August.

Imam and two mosque attendees jailed for five years

Prosecutors brought a criminal case against Imam Sayidov for allegedly participating in a religious "extremist" organisation. This is thought to be a reference to the now-banned opposition IRP, local Muslims told Forum 18 on 4 August.

Two other Muslim men from Kulob's Nonvoyi Poyon Mosque, Abdugafor Rajabov and Aslamkhon Karimov, were included in the same criminal case. It is unclear what Criminal Code charges were brought against the Imam and the two men, and why the two mosque goers were included in the same trial.

On 4 June, Judge Khasan Kodryzoda of the Kulob Division of Khatlon Regional Court jailed all three men for five years, Judge Izzatullo Tabarzoda, Deputy Chair of the Regional Court, told Forum 18 on 4 August. He claimed to Forum 18 that the three men were jailed because "they acted together and participated in an extremist religious organisation".

On 22 July Judge Tabarzoda told local state media that Imam Sayidov "made phone calls several times between 1 February and 4 March to the 'Isloh' Tajik internet news agency outside the country, and through Facebook messenger shared the texts of the sermons prepared by the SCRA".

Judge Tabarodza could not explain to Forum 18 what was "extremist" about the three men's alleged activity, replying "I cannot tell you" when asked. The Judge also claimed it was "beyond my competence" to explain why the regime dictates what sermons should be preached, and what Islamic ceremonies should and should not be followed.

A Khatlon Regional Court Chancellery official, who refused to give his name, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 4 August.

Imam Sayidov's family are not appealing against the verdict. "All agencies obey the state, so why and to whom should we even appeal?" relatives told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 22 July.

Family of jailed imam prisoner of conscience hoping for amnesty

On 12 February, a Dushanbe court jailed Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (widely known as Mullo Sirojiddin) for five years and six months (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2642), along with an unknown number of others. The arrests followed a November 2020 NSC secret police raid on Imam Abdurahmonov's Dushanbe flat when he was teaching a small group about Islam. The NSC also confiscated the Imam's religious books and computer.

Imam Abdurahmonov had in 2020 posted videos on the Sadoi Umed (Voice of Hope) YouTube channel, dealing with a wide variety of topics on how to live as a Muslim. Muslims and human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, unanimously stated that the imam is a moderate preacher who did not criticise the regime and in some respects supported its policies.

One human rights defender suggested (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2642) that "the main purpose of arresting Imam Abdurahmanov was to allow only state-appointed and approved imams to speak publicly. Most independent imams are now afraid to speak publicly. The regime is struggling for the hearts and minds of people". Neither the NSC nor the judge was prepared to explain to Forum 18 the reasons for prisoner of conscience Abdurahmanov's jailing, or say who else was jailed.

In July a working group was set up to prepare a late 2021 prisoner amnesty to mark the 30th anniversary of Tajikistan's independence from the Soviet Union. Imam Abdurahmanov's family are hoping he might be freed under this amnesty, Sadriddin of isloh.net and another human rights defender who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 5 August.

It is not known which labour camp Imam Abdurahmonov is imprisoned in.

No "adequate treatment at a specialised medical institution" for prisoner of conscience

On 10 September 2019, a court in Khujand gave Jehovah's Witness Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov (born 30 January 1951) a strict regime jail sentence of seven years, six months (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2506) for allegedly "inciting religious hatred". "I am guilty of nothing," he told the court.

The sentence was reduced in summer 2020 under amnesty (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2643) by two years, three months. On release in May 2024, aged 73, Khakimov would be banned from exercising his freedom of religion and belief until May 2027.

Prison authorities have repeatedly denied seriously ill prisoner of conscience Khakimov the specialised medical treatment he needs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2643). The 70-year-old has a bad leg "which smells like rotten meat" and has had coronavirus symptoms.

The UN Mandela Rules for prisoners' treatment say medical decisions must be made by doctors, and the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Committee against Torture have both called for Tajikistan to implement the Rules. Yet prison governor Farukh Jalolov told Forum 18 on 9 March 2021: "I do not know what the Mandela Rules are." A Supreme Court official similarly denied knowledge of the Mandela Rules.

Prison Governor Jalolov also told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2643) that prisoner of conscience Khakimov was not hospitalised when he had coronavirus symptoms as: "He just had a cold and that is all. The rest is lies."

On 19 March and in a reminder dated 18 June, seen by Forum 18, the UN Human Rights Committee stated that Tajikistan should "ensure, without delay, that Mr. Khakimov receives adequate medical treatment at a specialised medical institution in accordance with his health care requirements, and that an alternative to imprisonment is secured for Mr. Khakimov, while his case [communication 3905/2021] is under consideration by the Committee or until further notice".

On 5 August Prisoner Governor Jalolov insisted to Forum 18 that prisoner of conscience Khakimov's health is "fine". "He has been kept in the medical unit of the prison for several months and is being treated there," Jalolov claimed. "Conditions there are no worse than in the city hospitals. We have everything for his treatment."

Jalolov did not state that the regime would transfer prisoner of conscience Khakimov to the "specialised medical institution" that the UN Human Rights Committee stated should happen.

Jalolov also claimed to Forum 18 the prison doctors "decided not to vaccinate him against coronavirus since there is a risk of getting blood clots and he has chronic thrombosis. They also decided not to operate on his leg since administering him anaesthesia would also be risky because of his age."

Jalolov refused to state why prisoner of conscience Khakimov was not released from prison as the UN Human Rights Committee requested. The prison governor claimed: "We hope that he can be amnestied soon during the golden amnesty [30 years of independence] soon."

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov's prison address is:

Tajikistan

Viloyati Sugd

735700 Shahri Khujand

Muassisai islohii YaS 3/5

Khakimov Shamil Rasulovich

Conscientious objector to military service transferred to Yavan Labour Camp

Despite his offer to perform alternative civilian service, Khujand Military Court on 7 January 2021 jailed Rustamjon Batyrovich Norov (born 27 October 1998) for three and a half years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2629), the longest known sentence. The court claimed the 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector falsified his medical history to evade compulsory military service, charges he denies. While held in a military unit in October 2020, he was threatened with torture if he did not put on a military uniform

On 8 May 2021, the prison authorities transferred prisoner of conscience Norov to Yavan Labour Camp in Khatlon Region. "His conditions are better than in the previous prison," Fariza Norova, Norov's mother, told Forum 18 on 22 July. "We can call him up to three times a week for a couple of minutes. We are entitled to visit him once every 45 days for a two-hour visit," she stated, "and once every two months for a visit within the prison premises for up to three days."

"We visited him in May," Norova added, "and saw that he is respected by the other prisoners and the prison administration." The family thinks that "it is not fair that our son is in prison". They hope that he will be freed in the 30th anniversary of independence amnesty.

Prisoner of conscience Norov's prison address is:

Tajikistan

735310 Viloyati Xatlon

Shahri Yavan

kuchai Shamsov

Muassisai Islohii YaS 3/6

(END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625)

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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