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UZBEKISTAN: Raids, torture "to discredit us in front of our neighbours"

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

Three former prisoners of conscience were among Muslims in the southern Kashkadarya Region raided and questioned by police in November 2021. "I think they targeted us during the November campaign specifically to discredit us in front of our neighbours and the general public," Gaybullo Jalilov told Forum 18. "They see that time in prison did not break our determination to continue practising our faith. We still attend Mosque regularly, we still wear beards, and we are still respected by our community as examples of good Muslims." Police tortured another of those detained and questioned, Khayrullo Tursunov. Police refused to tell Forum 18 why his torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture as legally-binding human rights obligations require.

Police in the southern Kashkadarya Region detained and questioned many Muslim men, including three former prisoners of conscience, between 25 and 26 November 2021, human rights defender Gaybullo Jalilov told Forum 18.

"I think they targeted us during the November campaign specifically to discredit us in front of our neighbours and the general public," Jalilov, a Muslim from the region and former prisoner of conscience told Forum 18. "They see that time in prison did not break our determination to continue practising our faith. We still attend Mosque regularly, we still wear beards, and we are still respected by our community as examples of good Muslims." He noted that neighbours would also come to ask his advice on the Koran (see below).

Among those detained were Khayrullo Tursunov and Laziz Vokhidov – two other former prisoners of conscience. "Tursunov, Vokhidov, and I in particular were targeted by the authorities as former prisoners of conscience who actively defend the rights of Muslims," Jalilov told Forum 18 (see below).

Former prisoner of conscience Vokhidov commented that the raids are "done to form a terrible image of me in front of my neighbours, and so they are afraid to talk to me".

"Three persons in black masks were pounding on our door with their boots," Tursunov told Forum 18 of the raid on his home. "When I opened the door they burst in saying that they will search the flat. They told me to sign a paper that I consent to the search, which I did not."

Tursunov told Forum 18 that police tortured him at his home with neighbours as witnesses, as well as at Beshkent Police Station. At Beshkent Police Station, "masked officers continued beating me while Officer Begzod questioned me. Then I lost consciousness, and they had to call an ambulance." After the ambulance arrived and Tursunov was treated, the police released him (see below).

Begzod Ergashev, Assistant to Kashkadarya Region Chief of Police Colonel Shukhratjon Satvoldiyev, refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 1 March as to why Tursunov was tortured, and why his torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture as legally-binding human rights obligations require (see below).

Before releasing him, police warned Tursunov that "I must not meet with my former Muslim friends for discussion of Islam or any other religious activity", he told Forum 18 (see below).

Kashkadarya Regional Police Captain Nurullo Norkulov questioned human rights defender Jalilov, Tursunov, and Vokhidov several times between then and January 2022 about another local Muslim Khasan Abdirakhimov. Police arrested Abdirakhimov on 22 November 2021, a court changed his restricted freedom sentence to a jail term, and prosecutors launched a new criminal investigation against him. Prosecutors have not yet handed the new case to court (see below).

In mid-February 2022, Tashkent Police with other unidentified agencies raided the homes of Muslim men and a young Muslim woman, and four women were fined for teaching Islam without state permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2727).

In November-December 2021, the regime carried out a large campaign against Muslims wearing the hijab or beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2712), including harassing an 18-year-old Muslim from Tashkent who wears the hijab. The family complained to the President and others without success and have themselves been targeted by the regime for complaining. Police told neighbours that the regime does not like her and warned them not to associate with her. "Muslims are indignant that the state is attacking their beards and hijab, which is a very private matter for each individual," one Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Many Muslim men from Karshi District – where former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov lives - were detained and questioned in November 2021. "I saw many other detained Muslim men at Beshkent Police Station on 25 November whom I did not know personally but some of whom also attended our Mosque regularly," he told Forum 18.

Among those detained in Kashkadarya Region were Khayrullo Tursunov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) and Laziz Vokhidov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=444) – two other former prisoners of conscience. "Tursunov, Vokhidov, and I in particular were targeted by the authorities as former prisoners of conscience," Jalilov told Forum 18.

"I think they targeted us during the November campaign specifically to discredit us in front of our neighbours and the general public," Jalilov added. "They see that time in prison did not break our determination to continue practising our faith. We still attend Mosque regularly, we still wear beards and we are still respected by our community as examples of good Muslims."

"My neighbours respect me and often come to visit me or ask for advice on understanding the Koran, Islamic teachings and generally on life issues," Jalilov told Forum 18. "But now, after that incident, they are afraid even to talk to me."

The assistant (who refused to give his name) to Mirjamol Miralimov, Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" refused on 1 March to talk about the raids, and claimed that Miralimov is "busy at the moment". This Department's role includes suppressing freedom of religion and belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). The assistant asked Forum 18 to call back two hours later, when neither Miralimov's nor his assistant's phone were answered.

Raids, detentions

On 25 November 2021, Kashkadarya Regional Police raided the homes of a number of local Muslims.

"When the masked Kashkadarya Police officers in special combat uniforms came to my home on 25 November early in the morning, they banged at the gates of my house, to the sound of which my neighbours woke up and came out to watch," Jalilov recounted.

Former prisoner of conscience Vokhidov said that the police raid on his home in Karshi was similar. "They came masked and in ninja style uniforms, as if they were going to arrest the most dangerous criminal," he told Forum 18 on 25 February 2022. "This is done to form a terrible image of me in front of my neighbours, and so they are afraid to talk to me."

Kashkadarya Police raided former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov's flat in Karshi District at 6.30 am on 25 November 2021. "They came very early while I was at home, and I heard noise from outside the house," he told Forum 18 on 7 February 2022.

"Three persons in black masks were pounding on our door with their boots," Tursunov added. "When I opened the door they burst in saying that they will search the flat. They told me to sign a paper that I consent to the search, which I did not."

The officers did "not show their identification documents, and did not give their names", Tursunov complained. "After the search was finished in the flat they forcibly pushed me into the police car."

After the raids, police took Tursunov and Vokhidov to Beshkent Police Station for questioning, releasing them later the same day. "But the police questioned me in my flat since I had broken my leg in an accident around that time," Jalilov said.

The officer who questioned Tursunov at Beshkent Police Station was called Begzod, and he refused to give Tursunov his last name. Tursunov told Forum 18 that he thinks his detention and questioning was ordered by Ortik Hamdamov of Kashkadarya CID.

Torture

Tursunov told Forum 18 that "I was tortured by Kashkadarya Police officers, both in my home and in Beshkent Police Station."

The masked officers, who had taken two of Tursunov's neighbours as witnesses, began to search his flat. "When I objected that they should not search until I bring my own witnesses, the officers twisted my arms and gave me slaps in my face and blows in my chest

with their boots," Tursunov told Forum 18. "They were not shy about doing this in front of my neighbours. I felt the pain and humiliation."

After police brought Tursunov to Beshkent Police Station, the torture continued. "Masked officers continued beating me while Officer Begzod questioned me. Then I lost consciousness, and they had to call an ambulance." The police released Tursunov after an ambulance arrived.

Tursunov called Kashkadarya Police immediately after he was released from Beshkent Police Station to inform the Regional Police of the torture. "I was told over the phone that they will investigate it," he told Forum 18 in February 2022. "But until now no one told me if the guilty officers were punished."

Against Uzbekistan's legally-binding international human rights obligations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) under the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no official suspected of involvement in this torture has been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture. The regime routinely ignores this obligation.

For example, jailed Muslim prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev was repeatedly tortured, including after his defence lawyer Sergey Mayorov lodged formal complaints about the torture (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2716). The judge ignored his torture. "The torturers continue with impunity," Mayorov observed.

Begzod Ergashev, Assistant to Kashkadarya Region Chief of Police Colonel Shukhratjon Satvoldiyev, refused to answer Forum 18's questions on 1 March as to why Tursunov was tortured and why his torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture.

Captain Norkulov and other officers of Kashkadarya Regional Police and the CID many times between 17 February and 1 March to answer Forum 18's questions why Tursunov was tortured and why his torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture.

"We need to control Muslims so we do not get another Syria here"

Vokhidov told Forum 18 that "I saw many others I recognised from the Mosque I attend. Some of them told me that the police had told them: 'We need to control the situation constantly and control the Muslims so that we do not get another Syria here'."

Captain Norkulov and other officers of Kashkadarya Regional Police and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) many times between 17 February and 1 March refused to answer Forum 18's questions why the police arrested many Muslims, why Khasan Abdirakhimov was arrested again (see below), and why Tursunov, Vokhidov and Jalilov were detained and questioned.

However Begzod Ergashev, Assistant to Kashkadarya Regional Police Chief Colonel Shukhratjon Satvoldiyev, told Forum 18 on 1 March: "My advice to you is not to believe what you're told by these individuals. Uzbekistan's authorities are not afraid of it becoming another Syria."

"We do not know what may happen in future"

"For now the police have left us [the three former prisoners of conscience] in peace, but we do not what may happen in future," Vokhidov told Forum 18.

Before releasing him, police warned Tursunov that "I must not meet with my former Muslim friends for discussion of Islam or any other religious activity", he told Forum 18.

Jalilov thought that the regime might try to link him, Vokhidov, and Tursunov to the second criminal case against Khasan Abdirakhimov, who is serving one jail term while awaiting a new trial (see below).

Arrest, jailing, new trial

On 12 January 2021, Karshi City Criminal Court handed Khasan Doniyorovich Abdirakhimov (born 18 October 1981) a four year restricted freedom sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719) for listening to and sharing Islamic sermons. On 22 November 2021, he was taken into police custody, and on 25 November a court changed his sentence to a four year prison sentence.

In late January 2022, Kashkadarya Regional Police opened a new criminal case against Abdirakhimov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719) under Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 3, Point (d) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ("Production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order" "using the mass media or telecommunication networks, as well as the world wide web").

Police completed the criminal investigation on 16 February (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719) and a trial is expected soon.

Prisoner of conscience Abdirakhimov is known to Jalilov, Tursunov and Vokhidov. After their initial questioning on 25 November 2021, between then and January 2022 Kashkadarya Regional Police Captain Norkulov repeatedly questioned the three about Abdirakhimov. Norkulov is leading the case against Abdirakhimov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719).

Abdirakhimov's family told Forum 18 on 1 March that prosecutors have not yet handed the criminal case against him to court.

Begzod Ergashev, Assistant to Kashkadarya Region Chief of Police Colonel Shukhratjon Satvoldiyev, refused on 1 March to discuss the new criminal case against Abdirakhimov with Forum 18, or state when the case will be referred to court.

Earlier jailings as prisoners of conscience

Gaybullo Jalilov, Khayrullo Tursunov and Laziz Vokhidov have all been jailed as prisoners of conscience.

Vokhidov along with Imam Rustam Klichev and 15 other mosque congregation members were given long prison sentences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=444) in 2004 for discussing Islam in a mosque, and apparently for the influence Imam Klichev had among Muslims. Vokhidov was released in 2020.

Tursunov was freed from prison on 16 June 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673). In March 2013 he had been illegally extradited from Kazakhstan by Uzbekistan, against a direct statement of the UN Committee Against Torture (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1829). In June 2013 he was sentenced to 16 years in jail for meeting privately with other Muslims without state permission to study the Koran and pray (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1851). Later in 2013, he was apparently deliberately exposed by the regime to the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1893).

In 2016 prisoner of conscience Tursunov was apparently tortured again (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2149), and in April 2019 he was tortured once more (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2447) to extract statements against a distant relative. Before his 16 June 2021 release he was earlier in 2021 still not allowed to read the Koran or pray the namaz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2635).

Jalilov served eight and half years in prison between 2009 and 2018, after he was jailed under Criminal Code Article 159 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ("Attempts to change the Constitutional order"), Article 244-1 ("Preparation or distribution of materials threatening public security and public order"), and Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations").

These charges were brought "simply for practicing our faith and defending our rights," Jalilov told Forum 18. (END)

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

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)

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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