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UZBEKISTAN: "Police watch us like we are in the palm of their hands"

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

From 2018 mosques have had to pay for surveillance cameras controlled by the regime to be installed inside and outside mosques. In early 2022, the Interior Ministry also ordered non-Muslim communities to install the cameras. Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities and followers have told Forum 18 that some people have stopped attending meetings for worship, for fear of being identified and then facing state reprisals. A Muslim commented that "we want to concentrate on our meetings for worship, and not be afraid".

People of different faiths feel under pressure from Internet Protocol (IP) surveillance cameras the Interior Ministry has ordered them to install inside and outside places of worship. Mosques – all of which are state-controlled – were ordered to install surveillance cameras in 2018. In early 2022, the Interior Ministry also ordered state-registered non-Muslim religious communities of a wide variety of beliefs to install them.

Human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that from 2018 the State Security Service (SSS) secret police controlled surveillance cameras outside mosques, but from 2022 the Interior Ministry has assumed overall control of these cameras. It is suspected that the SSS secret police can still use these cameras (see below).

Council of Churches Baptists – who exercise their freedom of religion and belief without seeking state permission – have not been ordered to install surveillance cameras. However, surveillance cameras are either fixed pointing directly at Baptist building doors or gates, or can be and are remotely moved to cover everywhere around buildings used as Baptist churches (see below).

Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities and followers have told Forum 18 that some people had stopped attending meetings for worship, for fear of being identified and then facing state reprisals. Police have specified that "they should be able 24 hours a day to watch what is going on inside our building, and who is entering and leaving the building," one religious community stated (see below).

"The police watch us like we are in the palm of their hands," Muslims told Forum 18. "This is disturbing because we are conscious that we are being watched while we are praying or speaking with others before or after praying." They added that "we want to concentrate on our meetings for worship, and not be afraid" (see below).

A member of another religious community told Forum 18 that "the police can see who leads prayers, who preaches sermons, who is present at our meetings for worship, whether any under-18-year-olds and their parents are present." They commented that "this makes us very vulnerable, as police will be able to identify any of those people and punish them if they decide so." Another community also noted that the police were particularly interested in whether under-18-year-olds participate in its meetings for worship. "The surveillance cameras make it easy to find the parents and to punish them," they said.

A member of another community told Forum 18 that the local police claimed to them that they will not watch them online. However, the police also stated that they must be able to remotely access and control the surveillance cameras and recordings. Another community commented that "the police want to identify everyone who attends our place of worship, so that if they want to punish particular people who attend our meetings for worship they can" (see below).

Community members explained that the police can identify: preachers; under-18-year-olds; people who discuss their faith with others; those who may be suspected by police as belonging to another faith; those who may have religious literature; and others. "The police can use this as 'evidence' to punish people associated with religious communities" (see below).

Muslims throughout the country have told Forum 18 that surveillance cameras placed inside and outside larger mosques are remotely used by police to rotate direction and zoom in on people and places in and around mosques. Smaller mosques have fixed cameras, "but there are enough surveillance cameras to cover all the areas in and around these mosques". Muslims commented that the cameras are placed so that "there are no blind spots that cannot be seen" (see below).

"Muslims are being watched like criminals," one Muslim told Forum 18. "Now, during Ramadan, as well as the surveillance cameras, up to eight police officers are stationed around the mosque I attend to watch attendees." The Muslim explained that "this makes Muslims who attend mosques feel like criminals, as police watch real criminals in the same way" (see below).

Outside the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Muslims throughout Uzbekistan state that at least two police officers are posted at the entrance to mosques during evening prayers on all days, as well as during Friday afternoon prayers. During Islamic festivals there are – particularly for larger mosques – normally between five and 10 police officers outside mosques, as there are many more attendees (see below).

Non-Muslim religious communities have told Forum 18 that they do not appear to face such intensive and obvious surveillance by uniformed police officers (see below).

"Some Muslims I know do not attend prayers in the mosque anymore because of the surveillance, and now only pray at home privately," a human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18.

Another Muslim explained that "Muslims try not to gather around the mosque for a friendly chat before or after prayers as they used to." Muslims at mosques "are afraid that by doing so they could potentially become criminal suspects if a person they talked to was charged under the Criminal Code." The Muslim explained that this makes the Muslims "isolated from one another" (see below).

Religious communities have been forced to buy the surveillance cameras. One Muslim stated that "it is ridiculous to ask community members to buy surveillance cameras, so that the police can watch them with these cameras" (see below).

Police, the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims, and the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" have all refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the surveillance cameras and police being placed outside mosques (see below).

"Police watch us like we are in the palm of their hands"

Religious communities and their followers of various beliefs have objected to Internet Protocol (IP) surveillance cameras the Interior Ministry has ordered them to install inside and outside places of worship. Mosques – all of which are state-controlled – were ordered to install surveillance cameras in 2018. In early 2022, the Interior Ministry also ordered state-registered non-Muslim religious communities of a wide variety of beliefs to install them.

Human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that from 2018 the State Security Service (SSS) secret police controlled surveillance cameras outside mosques, but from 2022 the Interior Ministry has assumed overall control of these cameras. It is suspected that the SSS secret police can still use these cameras.

Council of Churches Baptists – who exercise their freedom of religion and belief without seeking state permission – told Forum 18 on 22 April that the police have not ordered them to install surveillance cameras. "However, the entrances to all our church buildings across the country are watched from surveillance cameras installed nearby on buildings or on posts." Baptists know that they are specifically targeted because the surveillance cameras are either fixed pointing directly at Baptist building doors or gates, or can be and are remotely moved to cover everywhere around buildings used as Baptist churches.

Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities and followers have told Forum 18 that some people had stopped attending meetings for worship, for fear of being identified and then facing state reprisals.

"We want to concentrate on our worship and not be afraid"

One religious community, which asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that, on the instructions of the Interior Ministry, the local police and the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ordered them to install surveillance cameras.

"We were told that the surveillance will be online, and that enough surveillance cameras should be installed so that every part of our building could be seen." The police specified that "they should be able 24 hours a day to watch what is going on inside our building, and who is entering and leaving the building."

Muslims stated that "the police watch us like we are in the palm of their hands. This is disturbing because we are conscious that we are being watched while we are praying or speaking with others before or after praying." They added that "we want to concentrate on our meetings for worship, and not be afraid."

The use of internet surveillance cameras is an extension of previous regime actions. Members of a variety of religious communities have told Forum 18 of hidden microphones in places of worship, the presence of State Security Service (SSS) secret police agents

during meetings for worship, the recruitment of spies (including religious leaders) within communities, and open surveillance of people attending places of worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). The SSS has refused to tell Forum 18 why it spies on religious communities.

A member of a state-registered non-Muslim religious community told Forum 18 that "we installed one camera just over the entrance door and two inside our place of worship, after police told us we had to do this in early 2022." Police told the community that next time they visit the community they will state whether more surveillance cameras should be installed.

A member of another religious community told Forum 18 that "the police can see who leads prayers, who preaches sermons, who is present at our meetings for worship, whether any under-18-year-olds (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) and their parents are present." They commented that "this makes us very vulnerable, as police will be able to identify any of those people and punish them if they decide so." Another community also noted that the police were particularly interested in whether under-18-year-olds (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) participate in our meetings for worship. "The surveillance cameras make it easy to find the parents and to punish them (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2660)," they said.

A member of another community told Forum 18 that the local police claimed to them that they will not watch them online. However, the police also stated that they must be able to remotely access and control the surveillance cameras and recordings. Another community commented that "the police want to identify everyone who attends our place of worship, so that if they want to punish particular people who attend our meetings for worship they can."

"For our security"?

Members of another religious community told Forum 18 that the police claimed that "the surveillance cameras are for our security." But people in the community think that the regime just wants to gather "evidence" of violating the Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). "Now we are more fearful of possible future punishments than before," they stated. "We can now be punished for any exercise of our freedom of religion and belief, even though we have nothing to hide."

Community members explained that the police can identify: preachers; under-18-year-olds; people who discuss their faith with others; who may be suspected by police as belonging to another faith; who may have religious literature; and others. "The police can use this as 'evidence' to punish people associated with religious communities," they told Forum 18.

Mirjamol Miralimov, First Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), refused on 22 April to answer Forum 18's questions, including:

- Why has there been an increase in 2022 in orders to install surveillance cameras?
- Why have surveillance cameras been installed outside places of worship?
- Why the regime orders surveillance cameras to be installed inside places of worship as well?
- In what concrete ways do the surveillance cameras "increase security" of communities?

Similarly, police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials, including in Tashkent City, and Bukhara, Fergana, Kashkadarya, Namangan, Samarkand, Syrdarya, and Karakalpakstan regions, all refused on 29 April to discuss their use of surveillance cameras with Forum 18.

Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials, including Chair Sodik Toshboyev and his Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, did not answer their phones on 22 April and on 25 April.

"There are no blind spots that cannot be seen"

In 2018 all mosques – all of which are state-controlled – were ordered by local police and local officials of the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims (the Muftiate) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) to buy and install IP surveillance cameras. A Muftiate official, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 21 April that the orders to install the surveillance cameras came from the Interior Ministry.

Muslims across the country have told Forum 18 that surveillance cameras placed inside and outside larger mosques are used by police remotely to rotate direction and zoom in on people and places in and around mosques. Smaller mosques have fixed cameras, "but there are enough surveillance cameras to cover all the areas in and around these mosques". Muslims commented that the cameras are placed so that "there are no blind spots that cannot be seen".

A Tashkent Muslim told Forum 18 that the police "watches everybody in and outside mosques 24 hours a day. As if this is not

enough," they continued, "every mosque has at least two police officers or police agents in plain clothes constantly present at the mosque doors, to gather information on Muslims who attend."

"Muslims who attend mosques are being watched like criminals"

"Muslims are being watched like criminals," one Muslim complained to Forum 18. "Now, during Ramadan, as well as the surveillance cameras up to eight police officers are stationed around the mosque I attend to watch attendees." The Muslim explained that "this makes Muslims who attend mosques feel like criminals, as police watch real criminals in the same way."

The regime has long particularly targeted Muslims attending mosques in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). (Ramadan in Uzbekistan in 2022 started on the evening of 1 April and ended with the festival of Uraza Bayram or Id al-Fitr from the evening of 2 May.)

Outside Ramadan, Muslims throughout Uzbekistan state that at least two police officers are posted at the entrance to mosques during evening prayers on all days, as well as during Friday afternoon prayers. During Islamic festivals there are – particularly for larger mosques – normally between five and 10 police officers outside mosques as there are many more attendees.

One Muslim told Forum 18 that, at large mosques they have visited, there are usually five or six officers with a police car during Islamic festivals. "Two officers are inside the car and four at the gates." The Muslim noted that "the police say that they protect us, but they are really present to find out who comes to mosques most frequently so they can put them on the Preventative Register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) [of Muslims to be targeted by "preventative measures"]."

Non-Muslim religious communities have told Forum 18 that they do not appear to face such intensive and obvious surveillance by uniformed police officers.

Why?

Muftiate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials at its headquarters in Tashkent, who refused to give their names, also refused on 25 April to discuss the surveillance cameras or the presence of police offices outside mosques.

First Deputy Head Miralimov of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), refused to explain to Forum 18:

- Why police officers are stationed outside mosques;
- Why police numbers are increased outside mosques in Ramadan and other Islamic festivals.

Similarly, police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials, including in Tashkent City, and Bukhara, Fergana, Kashkadarya, Namangan, Samarkand, Syrdarya, and Karakalpakstan regions, also all refused to answer these questions.

"We are afraid to associate with other Muslims around mosques"

A human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 14 April that "the surveillance cameras are a gross violation of the freedom of religion and belief as they put pressure on Muslims". They explained that "when Muslims at mosques see that they are being watched by cameras, they will try to only pray and leave immediately afterwards to avoid socialising with Muslims."

The human rights defender added: "Some Muslims I know do not attend prayers in the mosque anymore because of the surveillance, and now only pray at home privately."

Another Muslim explained that "Muslims try not to gather around the mosque for a friendly chat before or after prayers as they used to." Muslims at mosques "are afraid that by doing so they could potentially become criminal suspects if a person they talked to was charged under the Criminal Code." The Muslim explained that this makes the Muslims "isolated from one another". They explained that "we feel uncomfortable in mosques as we know we are being constantly watched by police on the surveillance cameras."

The regime frequently brings criminal charges against Muslims whose only "crime" is for example, to go to a mosque regularly (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), or to go to a teahouse to pray and discuss Islam (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2730).

The Muslim went on to comment that "we are afraid to associate with other Muslims around mosques, as we do not want to be accused of being part of an 'extremist' group (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2727)."

The Muslim also noted that police have used surveillance cameras or filming by police agents to identify people who have talked to Muslim former prisoners of

conscience (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2723).

"Ridiculous to ask community members to buy the surveillance cameras"

The Muftiate official, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that "mosques were told to buy their own surveillance cameras, and they did this using money collected from mosque attendees".

Members of one mosque told Forum 18 that they paid more than 45 million Soms, the equivalent of just over three years' average wages, for all their surveillance cameras. "We had to install surveillance cameras at the gates, the alley leading to the mosque building, at the entrance of the mosque, and inside. The surveillance cameras cover absolutely every part of the mosque."

One Muslim observed that "it is ridiculous to ask community members to buy surveillance cameras, so that the police can watch them with these cameras".

An employee of a company selling IP surveillance cameras, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 19 April that prices of the IP surveillance equipment can vary between roughly 450,000 Soms (around two weeks' average wages) and 6,400,000 Soms (around 5 months' average wages). Their company had sold such surveillance cameras to religious communities, the employee added, but declined to give more details for fear of state reprisals against both the religious communities and the employee. (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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