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UZBEKISTAN: Eight Muslim prisoners of conscience tortured, handed long jail sentences

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

A judge in Karshi jailed 8 Muslim men for between 6 and 10 years for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Four are former prisoners of conscience. The regime has used all the Criminal Code articles used in this case to jail – with as in this case the use of an informer - groups of Muslim men who met informally to pray and discuss their faith. Torture has also been used in such cases. Police threatened the men's families that if they appeal the jail terms will be increased.

On 18 December 2024, Judge Bekzod Umirov of Karshi Criminal Court, in the southern Kashkadarya Region, handed down long jail terms to eight Muslim men for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Four of the eight have already served jail terms to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Police have threatened the families that if the men appeal or speak publicly about the cases, their sentences will be increased.

The four former prisoners of conscience among the eight now-current prisoners of conscience:

- 47-year-old Laziz Vokhidov, 10 years in a strict regime prison;
- 43-year-old Khasan Abdirakhimov, 8 years and 3 months in a labour camp;
- 50-year-old Gaybullo Jalilov, 8 years in a strict regime prison; and
- 49-year-old Khayrullo Tursunov, 8 years in a strict regime prison.

The four other Muslim prisoners of conscience are:

- 52-year-old Anvar Abdullayev, 8 years in a strict regime prison;
- 38-year-old Sardor Jurayev, 8 years in a labour camp;
- Khasan Abdirakhimov's 41-year-old brother Jamshid Abdirakhimov, 7 years in a labour camp; and
- 37-year-old Umar Khalimov, 6 years in a labour camp.

The sentences will be counted as beginning on 19 June 2023, one day after the eight prisoners of conscience were arrested (see below).

All the Criminal Code articles used have been used to jail – with as in this case the use of an informer - groups of Muslim men who met informally to pray and discuss their faith. Torture has also been used in such cases (see below).

Police visited the prisoner of consciences' families on 15 January, and threatened that, if the families appeal against the sentences or complain to the media, the jail sentences will be increased. Some of the men have already lodged appeals. Police told the wives of the eight men that they must not talk to each other as they are on the Preventative Register "as potential criminals", Muslims who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 (see below).

The regime has a long record of targeting devout Muslims who exercise their freedom of religion or belief outside of regime-controlled structures. This is demonstrated in previous cases brought against the four former (and now current) prisoners of conscience, and in related cases (see below).

After prisoner of conscience Khasan Abdirakhimov was released early from prison on 5 June 2024, he was arrested again on 18 June 2024 along with former prisoner of conscience Tursunov and about 100 other Muslim men in Kashkadarya Region (see below).

The eight Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed on 18 December 2024 were all invited to an 18 June meal at the home of Dilshod Nabiyeu. He has worked for the regime in Shakhrisabz and Kitob Districts of Kashkadarya Region, local Muslims who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They state that he has arranged meals for Muslims at which he acts as an agent provocateur. He apparently encourages Muslims to make illegal statements recorded by hidden cameras and microphones installed by the regime (see below).

The regime has in other cases used informers and agent provocateurs to jail groups of Muslim men who met informally to pray and discuss their faith. These cases have also involved – like this case - torture of the accused and false charges of terrorism (see below).

Police arrested all eight Muslim prisoners of conscience on 18 June 2024 in their homes immediately after Nabiyeu's meal. Police officers - some armed with machine guns - were dressed in military camouflage and used violence, human rights defender Yelena Uralyeva, who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, told Forum 18 (see below).

Kashkadarya Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) opened criminal cases against all eight Muslims on the same day as the meal and raids, 18 June, by. It accused the men of creating an allegedly "extremist and terrorist" organisation and of planning to travel to the United States and other western countries to carry out terrorist attacks (see below).

Relatives of the defendants, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, and human rights defender Uralyeva, are adamant that the case is a fabrication. "These are devout Muslim men. They are still respected and followed in the society. The authorities could not break their spirit with previous arrests and torture, and they decided once again to put them in prison to neutralise them," Uralyeva commented (see below).

A relative of one of the defendants asked Forum 18: "Is this our destiny that we have to suffer for praying the namaz, following Islam, and just being a good person? Why must our relative waste his life in a prison just for being faithful to his religion?" (see below).

The arrested Muslims were tortured. Investigator Bekzod Ungboyev told the defendants that they must write 'I agree' and sign the statements, as well as in court when the Judge asks them say that they agree with the accusations. If they did this, human rights defender Uralyeva told Forum 18, they were told that they will receive no more than five years of jail time. If they did not do this they were told that they would be given 15 years, Uralyeva said (see below).

Investigator Ungboyev refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. However, he denied that he tortured Tursunov and other defendants. "I have not done anything like that," he claimed. He then put the phone down and did not answer further calls (see below).

Human rights defender Uralyeva told Forum 18 that close relatives of the defendants told her that the "Judge Umirov, police Investigator Bekzod Ungboyev and other officials were laughing loudly when the defendants told the Court that they do not know what is written in the indictment as they were tortured by Investigator Ungboyev and other officers. Without a chance to read the statements prepared by the police, they only wrote 'I agree' and signed them."

Judge Umirov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18, including why he did not investigate the torture of the defendants (see below).

The Court did not within the legal timescale give the families copies of the verdict to prepare an appeal. Tursunov's family – unlike other families – received a part-copy of the verdict, but only 20 days after the trial, and only after paying 500,000 Soms. "It is almost half the average monthly salary," human rights defender Uralyeva noted (see below).

When Forum 18 asked Judge Umirov why the court's chancellery sold the verdict to relatives, he replied: "The defendants and their family should receive copies of court verdicts free of charge, but third parties can buy it for a small fee." He would not explain what, if any, legal basis there is for the "small fee" and refused to talk more (see below).

Eight Muslim prisoners of conscience tortured, jailed with long sentences

On 18 December 2024, Judge Bekzod Umirov of Karshi Criminal Court, in the southern Kashkadarya Region, handed down long jail terms to eight Muslim men for exercising their freedom of religion or belief.

Four former prisoners of conscience were among the eight now-current prisoners of conscience:

- Laziz Vokhidov (born 30 May 1977), 10 years in a strict regime prison;
- Khasan Abdirakhimov (born 18 October 1981), 8 years and 3 months in a labour camp;

- Gaybullo Jalilov (born 24 August 1964), 8 years in a strict regime prison; and
- Khayrullo Tursunov (born 4 April 1975), 8 years in a strict regime prison.

The four other Muslim prisoners of conscience are:

- Anvar Abdullayev (born 25 February 1972), 8 years in a strict regime prison;
- Sardor Jurayev (born 2 February 1986), 8 years in a labour camp;
- Khasan Abdirakhimov's brother Jamshid Abdirakhimov (born 4 July 1983), 7 years in a labour camp; and
- Umar Khalimov (born 11 October 1977), 6 years in a labour camp.

The sentences will be counted as beginning on 19 June 2023, one day after the eight prisoners of conscience were arrested (see below).

The eight prisoners of conscience were convicted on charges brought by Karshi Regional Prosecutor's Office, represented in the trial by Karshi District Deputy Chief Prosecutor Ulugbek Erkinov. All the Criminal Code articles used have from March 2020 been used (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) to jail – with as in this case the use of an informer - groups of Muslim men who met informally to pray and discuss their faith.

Prisoner of conscience Vokhidov was convicted under:

- Criminal Code Article 159 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ("Attempts to change the constitutional order"), Part 3 ("committed repeatedly or by a dangerous recidivist");
- Criminal Code Article 244-1 ("Production or storage with the purpose of distribution of materials that contain ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent expulsion of citizens, or aimed at creating a panic among the population, as well as production, storage with the purpose of distribution or demonstration of attributes or symbols of religious-extremist terrorist organisations"), Part 3, Point (d) ("using the mass media or telecommunication networks, as well as the world wide web"); and
- Criminal Code Article 244-2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), Part 1 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations").

Prisoner of conscience Jurayev was convicted under Criminal Code Article 159 Part 3, and Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1.

The other six prisoners of conscience were all convicted under Criminal Code Article 244-2, Part 1.

Families ordered not to appeal or talk to each other, put on Preventative Register

Police visited the prisoner of consciences' families on 15 January 2025, Muslims who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The police threatened that, if the families appeal against the sentences or complain to the media, the jail sentences will be increased. Some of those convicted have already lodged appeals.

Police told the wives of the eight men that they must not talk to each other as they are on the Preventative Register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) "as potential criminals", Muslims who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Being on the Preventative Register results in being subjected to a wide range of repressive "preventative measures".

The eight prisoners of conscience are still being held in Investigation Prison No. 5 in Karshi, known locally as Shaykhali prison after the village where it is located. The address is:

Uzbekistan

Kashkadarya viloyati

Karshi tumani

Shayxali qurqoni

IIB JIEB 5-sonli tergov xibisxonasi

Forum 18 spoke on 16 January to an official of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments responsible for prisons in Kashkadarya. He gave his first name as Jasur but would not give his last name. After Forum 18 asked him questions about the cases he put the phone down. He did not answer further calls.

Targeting devout Muslims

The regime has a long record of targeting devout Muslims (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) who exercise their freedom of religion or belief outside of regime-controlled structures. This is demonstrated in previous cases brought against the four former (and now current) prisoners of conscience, and in related cases.

Former prisoners of conscience Vokhidov (now jailed again for 10 years – previously jailed in 2004 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=444)), Jalilov (now jailed again for 8 years – previously jailed in 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2723)), and Tursunov (now jailed again for 8 years) were among Muslims in Kashkadarya Region raided and questioned by police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2723) 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," 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."

The raids were part of a nationwide campaign against Muslims wearing the hijab or beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2712). From early 2022, Tashkent Police targeted Muslims (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2727) with raids, house searches, detentions, arrests, administrative punishments (for allowing prayers to take place on business premises, and for teaching religion without state permission), and criminal investigations.

Such targeting of Muslims continues. From March 2024 onwards, Muslim men wearing long beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2938) nationwide have been arrested, had their beards forcibly shaved, and been fined. The fines imposed range between about one month's to just over a week's average wages for those in work. Some Muslim men have told Forum 18 that since March 2024 they have kept their beards "trimmed and very thin" to avoid such punishments. Police have claimed shaving beards stops young men being "radicalised".

Police tortured Tursunov while questioning him in November 2021. They refused to tell Forum 18 why his torturers have not been arrested (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2723) and put on criminal trial for torture as legally-binding human rights obligations require.

Kazakhstan in March 2013 illegally extradited prisoner of conscience Tursunov to Uzbekistan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1829), against a direct statement of the United Nations Committee Against Torture. In June 2013 a court sentenced him to 16 years in jail (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1851) for meeting privately with other Muslims without state permission to study the Koran and pray. Later in 2013, the regime apparently deliberately exposed him 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) he was earlier in 2021 still not allowed to read the Koran (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2635) or pray the namaz.

On 25 March 2022, a court fined former prisoners of conscience Jalilov and Vokhidov for having allegedly "illegal" religious materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2729) found on phones confiscated during November 2021 raids on them and other Muslims. The 11 March 2022 charges were illegal, Vokhidov told Forum 18, as Administrative Code charges can only be brought within two months of the date of the start of the actions which led to the charge.

During the November 2021 questioning of these three prisoners of conscience, the regime was keen to link them with Khasan Abdirakhimov (now jailed again for 8 years and 3 months). On 22 November 2021, police took him into custody, and three days later a January 2021 restricted freedom sentence, where he lived at home under a curfew, was changed to a prison term. Police claimed he had violated his curfew restrictions.

On 26 January 2021, a court sentenced Abdirakhimov to four years' restricted freedom (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719) under Criminal Code Article 244-2 ("Creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations") for listening to and sharing with others the sermons of banned imams.

Such claims of listening to sermons were used to jail in March 2020 four young men who were interested in Islam

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2575). Also, a police agent provocateur tried to get the four men to support terrorism. After this failed, Tashkent City Criminal Court jailed three of the men for between five and six years. Despite telling the Court that their "confessions" were extorted by torture, "this was totally ignored".

In late January 2022, Kashkadarya Regional Police opened a new criminal case (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2719) against prisoner of conscience Abdirakhimov. His wife Iroda Nekboyeva told Forum 18 in February 2022 that he did not appeal against the November 2021 court verdict that sent him to prison as police said he would be released soon if he did not "make a noise". "But apparently we were all deceived and now they opened a new case and want to give him a long sentence."

After Abdirakhimov's 28 April 2022 four-year jail sentence, the family said that they will not appeal against the new sentence. "We are afraid that if we appeal the authorities could extend his prison term," they told Forum 18 in May 2022. Judge Orzimurod Shukurov through the defence lawyer warned the family not to file an appeal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2740), a Muslim who knows the case and the family, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in May 2022. Judge Shukurov adamantly denied this, telling Forum 18 that "they can still appeal during the next 20 days, however I cannot guarantee what a higher court will decide."

After prisoner of conscience Khasan Abdirakhimov was released early from prison on 5 June 2024, he was arrested again on 18 June 2024 along with former prisoner of conscience Tursunov and about 100 other Muslim men in Kashkadarya Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2933).

Use of informer to collect "evidence"

The eight Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed on 18 December 2024 were all invited to an 18 June 2024 meal at the home of Dilshod Nabiyeu. He has worked for the regime in Shakhrisabz and Kitob Districts of Kashkadarya Region, local Muslims who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. They state that he has arranged meals for Muslims at which he acts as an agent provocateur. He apparently encourages Muslims to make illegal statements recorded by hidden cameras and microphones installed by the regime.

The regime has in other cases used informers and agent provocateurs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) to jail groups of Muslim men who met informally to pray and discuss their faith. These cases have also involved – like this case - torture of the accused (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2586) and false charges of terrorism.

The State Security Service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) (SSS) secret police is known to carry out both covert and open surveillance of all religious communities. This includes surveillance cameras controlled by the regime installed inside and outside places of worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2736). 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. "We want to concentrate on our meetings for worship, and not be afraid," one Muslim commented.

Nabiyeu provided evidence to the court hearings that regime agencies had placed hidden cameras in his home before the 18 June 2024 meal. However, Judge Umirov did not show any of these alleged films to and hearing between the start of the trials in October and its conclusion on 18 December. "So it is not known what exactly was filmed," a Muslim who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in January 2025.

When the defendants asked for Nabiyeu to be brought to the trial to be questioned, the Judge claimed that Nabiyeu was in Germany. "However, we all knew that he had not left Karshi," Forum 18 was told.

Judge Umirov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 16 January. "I am not allowed to discuss with you over the phone," he answered when asked why cameras were installed in Nabiyeu's home.

"Apparently the police did not have any evidence that these men acted as a criminal group or organisation. So they used Nabiyeu," a Muslim who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in January 2025.

Two of the eight Muslim prisoners of conscience – Tursunov and Abdullayev – did not accept Nabiyeu's invitation. So before the 18 June 2024 meal he visited them to record conversations about Islam, Forum 18 was told.

Violent raids, arrests immediately after meal

All eight Muslim prisoners of conscience were arrested on 18 June 2024 in their homes immediately after Nabiyeu's meal. "Seven officers in military camouflage and black masks, some armed with machine guns, climbed over the fence of Tursunov's house," human rights defender Yelena Uralyeva, who chairs the Human Rights Alliance, told Forum 18 on 8 January 2025. "They banged very hard on the house door, and forced their way in when it was opened."

"Three of the officers twisted Tursunov's arms behind his back and detained him. The other officers searched the house and confiscated three mobile phones and Muslim religious books. They then took Tursunov to the Karshi police detention centre," human rights defender Urayeva added.

Masked and armed police officers also used violence during their raids on the homes of the other seven prisoners of conscience. While raiding Khasan Abdirakhimov's home, "officers pushed and hit teenagers," a Muslim familiar with the case who wished to be anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

False allegations

Kashkadarya Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) opened criminal cases against all eight Muslims on the same day as the meal and raids, 18 June. It accused the men of creating an allegedly "extremist and terrorist" organisation and of planning to travel to the United States and other western countries to carry out terrorist attacks. Other allegations included Vokhidov and Jurayev allegedly creating a Telegram group chat to share messages about this alleged plan, and Vokhidov allegedly planned to forcibly change the regime and Constitution.

The regime has used similar allegations, including allegedly planning to travel (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2575) to other countries to commit terrorism, to jail groups of devout Muslims (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2586) who informally met to discuss their faith.

Relatives of the defendants, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, and human rights defender Urayeva, are adamant that the case is a fabrication. "These are devout Muslim men. They are still respected and followed in the society. The authorities could not break their spirit with previous arrests and torture, and they decided once again to put them in prison to neutralise them," Urayeva commented.

A relative of one of the defendants asked Forum 18: "Is this our destiny that we have to suffer for praying the namaz, following Islam, and just being a good person? Why must our relative waste his life in a prison just for being faithful to his religion?"

Torture

"Khayrullo [Tursunov] and other defendants were cruelly beaten by Investigator Ungboyev and other officers during questioning," human rights defender Yelena Urayeva told Forum 18. "Khayrullo's eardrums were torn, he cannot hear properly now, and his internal organs were damaged."

Investigator Bekzod Ungboyev told Tursunov, "you were given and nine and a half years of prison time and now you will get 10 years," she said.

Investigator Ungboyev told the defendants that they must write 'I agree' and sign the statements, as well as in court when the Judge asks them say that they agree with the accusations. If they did this, human rights defender Urayeva told Forum 18, they were told that they will receive no more than five years of jail time. If they did not do this they were told that they would be given 15 years, Urayeva said.

Investigator Ungboyev refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 14 January. However, he denied that he tortured Tursunov and other defendants. "I have not done anything like that," he claimed. He then put the phone down and did not answer further calls.

Against Uzbekistan's legally-binding international human rights obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the regime routinely ignores its obligations to prevent torture (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) and put officials suspected of involvement in torture on criminal trial for torture.

One such example was prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev's case (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2773), when the judge, Zakhiddin Nuriddinov, ignored Arifkhojayev's torture (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2716).

"As of today, unfortunately, there have been no answers or indication from any of the authorities that the torturers have been put on trial or punished. The torturers continue with impunity," defence lawyer Sergey Mayorov told Forum 18 in February 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2716).

Human rights defender Urayeva told Forum 18 that close relatives of the defendants told her that "Judge Umirov, police Investigator Bekzod Ungboyev and other officials were laughing loudly when the defendants told the Court that they do not know what is written in the indictment as they were tortured by Investigator Ungboyev and other officers. Without a chance to read the statements prepared by the police, they only wrote 'I agree' and signed them."

Judge Umirov refused to discuss the case with Forum 18, including why he did not investigate the torture of the defendants.

Tashkent protest

Human rights defender Yelena Uralyeva held a public protest in front of the Interior Ministry in the capital Tashkent on 7 January 2025, protesting against the torture of Tursunov and others and demanding their release. On that day, Deputy Interior Minister and Head of the Investigation Department Ramozon Ashrapov told her "he will investigate the facts of the torture".

Deputy Minister Ashrapov's assistant Sakhbijon Yuldashev on 15 January promised that within 20 minutes he would answer Forum 18's questions about when Investigator Bekzod Ungboyev and others will be put on criminal trial for torture. When Forum 18 called back 20 minutes later, as well as several times later the same day, no-one answered the phone.

Corruption?

Criminal Procedure Code Article 475 ("Providing copies of a verdict to a convicted or acquitted person") states: A copy of the verdict shall be handed to a convicted or acquitted person within three days after it is given, or where the verdict is long – not later than 10 days. Other parties may request a copy of or an extract from the verdict to be received under the same terms.

However, the Court did not within the legal timescale give the families copies of the verdict to prepare an appeal. Tursunov's family – unlike other families – received a part-copy of the verdict, but only 20 days after the trial, and only after paying 500,000 Soms.

"It is almost half the average monthly salary," human rights defender Uralyeva noted.

When Forum 18 asked Judge Bekzod Umirov why the court's chancellery sold the verdict to relatives, he replied: "The defendants and their family should receive copies of court verdicts free of charge, but third parties can buy it for a small fee." He would not explain what, if any, legal basis there is for the "small fee" and refused to talk more.

Corruption has long been endemic (<https://www.uzbekforum.org/category/our-programs/corruption/>) in Uzbekistan, including in relation to freedom of religion or belief violations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). Many are reluctant to discuss corruption as a factor in the human rights violations they experience, yet there appears to be a strong connection between human rights violations and corruption (<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Defying%20Exclusion%202021.pdf>). (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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