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UZBEKISTAN: Prisoner of conscience facing extra third jail term?

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

A court jailed prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov for 11 years in 2020 for discussing Islam with others, and another court added an extra 10 years in 2023. Now the 30-year-old is on trial for a third time accused of distributing "religious extremist" material and leading a "religious extremist" organisation while in prison. Judge Bahodir Alikulov of Navoi City Court refused to say why Abduvokhidov is being prosecuted for the same "crimes" now in prison. "I cannot share the details of the trial with you based on our Procedural Code," he insisted.

A third criminal trial is underway of 30-year-old prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov. Prosecutors accuse him of distributing "religious extremist" material and leading a "religious extremist" organisation while in prison. Judge Bahodir Alikulov of Navoi City Court began hearing the case on 6 February, with further hearings on 13 and 17 February. He refused to tell Forum 18 when the next hearing is due.

A court handed Abduvokhidov an 11-year jail term in 2020, and another court handed him an extra 10-year jail term in 2023. Judge Alikulov refused to say why Abduvokhidov, who was earlier convicted on alleged extremism and terrorism charges, is being prosecuted for the same "crimes" now in prison. "I cannot share the details of the trial with you based on our Procedural Code," he insisted (see below).

In November 2024, Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department opened the new criminal case against prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov. Investigator Orif Buronov, who led the case, did not tell relatives what charges Abduvokhidov is facing. In January 2025, investigator Buronov suggested to Abduvokhidov's parents that they may never see him again if he receives a third long prison sentence, a human rights defender stated. Investigator Buronov has refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the case (see below).

Abdovokhidov's father and mother told Forum 18 on 21 February that they were not aware that their son was already on trial again. "The authorities did not even warn us about the hearings," they complained (see below).

In November 2020, Tashkent City Criminal Court jailed prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov along with six other prisoners of conscience for between 11 and four years. Their "crime" was to meet in Tashkent to discuss Islam. On 5 December 2023, Zangiota District Court in Tashkent Region added 10 years to Abduvokhidov's existing 11-year prison term. His "crime" was to be three minutes late for a prison roll call (see below).

From summer 2024, the regime has apparently implemented a policy of putting Muslim prisoners of conscience in a punishment cell for several days each to prevent them being eligible for early conditional release, or to make it easier to transfer them to a harsher-regime prison. Prisoners of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov and Alimardon Sulonov are among those who were given such spells in a punishment cell (see below).

In 2025, prison officials have once again – for the third time in a year - placed Sulonov in a punishment cell for five days between 8 and 13 January. The punishment came after an older man attacked Sulonov by punching him in the face, to which Sulonov did not retaliate. Yet very soon after this, prison officers arrived, asked Sulonov why he had a bruise on his face, and told him that a case will be opened against him for violating prison regulations (see below).

After officials released prisoner of conscience Sulonov from the punishment cell on 13 January, they took him to Tomdi District Criminal Court in Navoi Region for two hearings on 14 and 16 January. Judge Aziza Mirzayeva decided that Sulonov should be sent to a harsher prison, despite Bessapon Prison Governor Ulugbek Aliyev not being able to produce any evidence of Sulonov's alleged guilt (see below).

Prison Governor Aliyev was unable to explain to Forum 18 why he did not give the Court a video of the alleged incident which Sulonov asked to be shown, and why the prison administration had deleted the video when they were bringing a case based on the alleged incident (see below).

Officials at Akhangaran District Labour Camp No. 48 in Tashkent Region put Muslim prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov in a punishment cell in August 2024 for alleged violation of the prison regulations. This had the effect of increasing his prison term, which was the motivation for the punishment. His mother complained to the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments and the General Prosecutor's Office. Only the Chief Directorate replied, claiming that no violations by prison officials had occurred (see below).

Prison Governor Akhror Mirzakarimov claimed to Forum 18 on 31 January 2025 that Kobilov "had violated the prison regime". However, he refused to explain in what way he had done so, and then refused to discuss the issue further (see below).

Officials of Bukhara Region Prison No. 1 repeatedly tortured Muslim prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2959). Prison officer Davr Sottiyev severely beat him and pledged to "give Astanov an injection which will soon kill him", a local Muslim told Forum 18. Despite complaints, the regime has taken no action against the suspect torturers. In January 2025 the Prison Governor called relatives with an implied threat of punishment if they lodge complaints. The Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, General Prosecutor's Office, and Ombudsperson's Office refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

The regime tries to stop its Muslim prisoners from praying the namaz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), and frequently tortures those who do meet other Muslims for prayer. If prison authorities detect groups of Muslims praying together, they will be put in punishment cells for several days, Muslims who Forum 18 has talked to from October 2024 onwards have stated. Prison authorities may not detect or punish individual prisoners praying the namaz alone.

Prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov's two jail terms

In November 2020, Tashkent City Criminal Court jailed prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Bakhodir o'g'li Abduvokhidov (born 14 June 1994) along with six other prisoners of conscience for between 11 and four years. Their "crime" was to meet in Tashkent to discuss Islam. The court jailed Abduvokhidov for 11 years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2640). The court gave nine other men restricted freedom sentences.

In this and other cases of Muslims being jailed for meeting to discuss Islam, the regime has used false claims of alleged "terrorism", torture, and the use of agent provocateurs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2586).

The latest such known case was in December 2024, when Karshi Criminal Court jailed eight Muslim men (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2953) – four of whom were former prisoners of conscience – for between six and 10 years for meeting together to discuss Islam. Police threatened the men's families that if they appeal the jail terms will be increased.

On 5 December 2023, Judge Sunnatilla Avlakulov of Zangiota District Court in Tashkent Region added 10 years to the existing 11 year prison term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2933) of prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov. His "crime" was to be three minutes late for a prison roll call (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2933).

It appears that the regime selected prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov for special targeting. In October 2023, almost two months beforehand, his home mahalla of Uygonish in Tashkent's Mirzo Ulugbek District held a meeting (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2933) to discuss his original "crime" of meeting with others to pray and discuss Islam. The regime called the meeting "to provide the population with broad understanding and information on crime prevention".

At the mahalla meeting, officials made false claims that prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov had asked for a pardon for his "crime".

Throughout 2024, regime prison officials repeatedly pressured prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov to admit his "guilt" and write to Shavkat Mirziyoyev (who has never faced a free and fair election (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan>) to become President) asking for a pardon. Abduvokhidov refused to do this as he had not committed the crimes the regime had falsely accused him of (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2933), a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 3 February 2025.

Regime puts prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov on trial again

In November 2024, Navoi Regional Police Criminal Investigation Department opened a new criminal case against prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov. Investigator Orif Buronov, who led the case, did not tell relatives what charges Abduvokhidov is facing.

The latest case against Abduvokhidov was brought under:

- Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 2 ("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 distribution or demonstration of attributes or symbols of religious-extremist terrorist organisations").

- 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").

Investigator Buronov alleged to Abduvokhidov's mother in mid-January 2025 that Abduvokhidov had told fellow prisoners that the prison authorities "are not Muslims but infidels". Investigator Buronov stated that he learned this through "spies in the prison", as well as "recordings of conversations". (Prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov faced pressure in January 2025 to act as such a spy, but refused to do so - see below.)

The regime (which has never faced a free and fair election (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan>)) carries out intensive surveillance of the people it rules (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2736), including installing surveillance cameras inside and outside places of worship.

Investigator Buronov suggested to Abduvokhidov's parents that they may never see their son again if he receives a third long prison sentence, the human rights defender stated.

Investigator Buronov refused on 12 February to answer Forum 18's questions about the case, and then put the phone down.

Prosecutors handed the case against Abduvokhidov to Navoi City Court. Judge Bahodir Alikulov began hearing the case on 6 February, with further hearings on 13 and 17 February, according to court records. Judge Alikulov told Forum 18 on 21 February that the trial is continuing. He refused to give the date of the next hearing.

Judge Alikulov refused to say why Abduvokhidov, who was earlier convicted on alleged extremism and terrorism charges, is being prosecuted for the same "crimes" now in prison. "I cannot share the details of the trial with you based on our Procedural Code," he insisted.

Abduvokhidov's father and mother told Forum 18 on 21 February that they were not aware that their son was already on trial again. "The authorities did not even warn us about the hearings," they complained. Not knowing the dates of future hearings makes it difficult for them to travel from Tashkent where they live to Navoi where the trial is. "It is more than 500 kms away and we don't have the means to travel there and stay in a hotel indefinitely."

Asked why Abduvokhidov's parents were not notified of the dates of the trial hearings, Judge Alikulov replied: "We have the Court system website, where they can find the information, if they want to participate. Let his parents contact us."

Officials are currently holding prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov in Navoi Police Investigation Prison.

Prisoner of conscience Sulstonov sent to a stricter regime prison

On 27 May 2022, a court in Karakalpakstan jailed trauma surgeon Alimardon Islamovich Sulstonov (born 26 October 1983), a devout Muslim known for discussing Muslim freedom of religion and belief issues, for seven years in a labour camp (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2745) "for criticising President Mirziyoyev, state-appointed imams .." The regime used both torture and two regime-appointed "parliamentarians" (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan>) to try to get him to admit "guilt".

From summer 2024, the regime has apparently implemented a policy of putting Muslim prisoners of conscience in a punishment cell (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2930) for several days each to prevent them being eligible for early conditional release, or to make it easier to transfer them to a harsher-regime prison. Prisoners of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov (see below) and Sulstonov are among those who were given such spells in a punishment cell.

Three such prison punishments within one year can, according to prison regulations, result in a prisoner being sent to a stricter regime prison. "The authorities often fabricate these punishments, if they have decided that they want to harshen prisoners' punishments," a human rights defender told Forum 18 in February 2025.

Muslims have told Forum 18 that this fits into a wider pattern of the regime arbitrarily harshening the terms of its prisoners. For example, in one labour camp officials have since summer 2024 sent about 120 out of a prisoner population of about 300 to stricter regime prisons.

In 2025, the administration of Navoi Prison No. 36 in Bessapon placed Sulstonov once again – for the third time in a year (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2930) - in a punishment cell for five days between 8 and 13 January for allegedly fighting with an older prisoner. Officials claimed the alleged fight happened in late December 2024, when prisoner of conscience Sulstonov was ordered to clean the prison barracks. An older prisoner man put his shirt on the floor where Sulstonov was trying to

sweep it, and he asked the older man to pick his shirt up.

The older man then attacked Sulstonov by punching him in the face, but Sulstonov did not retaliate. "I decided that I will not get involved in this and let the man go," he commented. Very soon after this, prison officers arrived, asked Sulstonov why he had a bruise on his face, and told him that a case will be opened against him for violating prison regulations.

After officials released Sulstonov from the punishment cell on 13 January 2025, they took him to Navoi Region's Tomdi District Criminal Court for two hearings on 14 and 16 January. Sulstonov on 14 January asked the Court to view video records the prison had of the incident. Judge Aziza Mirzayeva rejected this request, claiming that prison video recordings are deleted every 16 days and so no longer exist.

Bessapon Prison Governor Ulugbek Aliyev could not explain to Forum 18 on 14 February why he did not give the Court the video, and why the prison administration had deleted the video when they were bringing a case based on the alleged incident. "That is not true. Where do you get that information?", he replied when Forum 18 questioned him.

Prison Governor Aliyev refused again to answer questions about the video, and then claimed: "Sulstonov had other violations too. There was enough in his case to punish him." However, Aliyev could not explain what these "other violations" were. He then refused to talk further.

Judge Mirzayeva decided on 16 January that prisoner of conscience Sulstonov should be sent to a stricter regime prison. Against the law, the Court has not provided Sulstonov or his family with a copy of the verdict.

Various Tomdi District Criminal Court officials, who refused to give their names, between 5 and 10 February refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Mirzayeva or answer questions about why prisoner of conscience Sulstonov was prosecuted and punished.

Prisoner of conscience Sulstonov was transferred to Navoi General Regime Prison No. 4 on 30 January. His prison address is:

Navoi viloyati

Navoi Shakhri

Jayoni Ijro Etish Departamenti

Beshinchi mintakaviy hudud

4-sonli jazoni ijro etish koloniyasi

Uzbekistan

Prisoner of conscience Kobilov pressured to spy on fellow prisoners

Muslim prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Vosiljon ugli Kobilov (born 21 November 1997) was a student at Andijan State University at the time of his March 2022 arrest. Markhamat District Criminal Court of Andijan Region sentenced him to a five-year jail term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2930) for attending one shared meal with five other Muslims where religious themes were discussed.

Between 8 and 9 August 2024, the prison administration placed prisoner of conscience Kobilov in a punishment cell (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2930) in Akhangaran District Labour Camp No. 48, in Tashkent Region, for alleged violation of the prison regulations. This had the effect of increasing his prison term, which was the motivation for the punishment.

Prison Governor Akhror Mirzakarimov claimed to Forum 18 on 31 January 2025 that Kobilov "had violated the prison regime". However, he refused to explain in what way there had been violation, and then refused to discuss the issue further.

Zilolakhon Akhmedova, Kobilov's mother, complained in October 2024 to the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments and the General Prosecutor's Office.

On 6 November 2024, Kh. Abduniyazov, Deputy Head of the Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, wrote to Akhmedova claiming that it had investigated Kobilov's case and found there had been no violation of laws or regulations by prison officers. The one page letter, which Forum 18 has seen, gives no explanation for this claim. Abduniyazov also stated that he had sent a copy of Akhmedova's complaint to Tashkent City Special Prosecutor's Office, which oversees the cases of convicts, for them to investigate the case also.

Akhmedova received no reply from either the General Prosecutor's Office or the Special Prosecutor's Office.

Kobilov asked to work as a spy in the prison

In January 2025, prison officials pressured prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov to work for the regime as a spy, including acting as an agent provocateur with other prisoners and reporting what they say. He refused, a Muslim familiar with the case told Forum 18 in February.

Prison officials allow Kobilov to pray the namaz on his own, but – as appears to be normal in the regime's prisons (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) - have banned him from having a Koran to read.

Prison Governor Mirzakarimov claimed to Forum 18 that prisoner of conscience Kobilov "can fully exercise his human rights". But he refused to explain why prison officials do not allow Kobilov to have a Koran, or pressured him to work for the regime as a spy.

Kobilov's address in Akhangaran District Labour Camp No. 48 is:

Toshkent viloyati

Oxangaron tumani

Gala kuduk kurgonchasi

48-sonli manzillik koloniyasi

Kobilov Faryozbek Vosiljon ugli

Appeal hearing of eight Muslim prisoners of conscience postponed

On 18 December 2024, Karshi Criminal Court jailed eight Muslim men – four of whom were former prisoners of conscience – for between six and 10 years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2953) for meeting together to discuss Islam. Police threatened the men's families that if they appeal the jail terms will be increased.

The men did appeal. However, on 11 February 2025 Judge Hamid Boboqulov of Kashkadarya Regional Court (who is thought to have been involved in previous cases jailing Muslims for their faith) postponed the hearing to 20 February, according to court records. The postponement was because prisoners of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov and Gaybullo Jalilov did not have a lawyer.

Both current prisoners of conscience are also former prisoners of conscience (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2953), and therefore "do not trust state-provided lawyers", a Muslim familiar with the case told Forum 18. They cannot afford to hire a lawyer privately.

On 20 February, Kashkadarya Regional Court postponed the hearing until 3 March, according to court records. Judge Boboqulov told family members of the eight men that the further postponement was because "the judges are busy with official meetings". When they asked what the meetings are and whether they are consulting on this case, he would say only: "I will see you on 3 March."

Judge Boboqulov refused to speak to Forum 18 on 12 and 13 February. He was not available on 20 February.

Relatives have only been allowed to see the eight prisoners of conscience once since they were arrested in June 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2953). On that one occasion, they were given "30 minutes to talk in the presence of prison officers through a phone and see each other through a thick glass", the Muslim told Forum 18.

Relatives also think that letters written to them by the prisoners of conscience have not been given to them, and are afraid of reprisals against the prisoners if they ask whether they are allowed to pray or read the Koran.

The eight Muslim 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

(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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