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UZBEKISTAN: Parents face punishment for their children's religious education

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On 21 February, a new law came into force introducing fines of over one month's average wages or up to 15 days in jail for parents who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18. Existing laws target those who teach religion to under-18s, not parents. Many Muslims expressed concern about the law before it was adopted. An official at the regime-appointed Ombudsperson's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to her, adding: "unfortunately we cannot give any information since it is all confidential".

On 20 February, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a law allegedly "aimed at further strengthening the protection of the rights of the child". The Law bans and introduces punishments for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18. The Law came into force the following day on its official publication.

Existing laws target those who teach religion to under-18s, not the parents or guardians targeted by the new Law. However, parents and guardians who facilitate their children's religious education have long been targeted by regime oppression (see below).

The new Law comes as the police again target children who attend night prayers at mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2966) during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began at the end of February.

The new amendments to existing laws impose fines of over one month's average wages or jail terms of up to 15 days on parents or guardians who allow or arrange "illegal" religious education for their under-18-year-olds. The fines specified in the adopted version of the Law had been reduced from those proposed in the draft version in 2024 (see below).

Asked why Uzbekistan adopted Laws prohibiting children from practice of their religion or punishing parents for arranging religious education for their children unauthorised by the State, Abdurahim Kadyrov, Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee, declined to comment. "You need to talk to the Oliy Majlis [Parliament] about it, and not to us" (see below).

Muzaffar Khusanov of the General Section of the Presidential Administration refused to answer questions on the new law and punishments. "We are not specialists in religious issues. You should call the Muslim Board," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Senator Malika Kodyrhanova from the Committee on Youth and Women refused to explain why Parliament had adopted the new law and punishments. "I think you should talk to other Senators who were responsible for this Law," she told Forum 18 (see below).

An official at the office of the regime-appointed Ombudsperson Feruza Eshmatova refused to put Forum 18 through to her, adding: "unfortunately we cannot give any information since it is all confidential" (see below).

On 14 August 2024, the Legislative Chamber (lower chamber) of the non-freely-elected parliament, the Oliy Majlis, adopted the then draft law. The Senate (upper chamber) approved the law on 16 August 2024 (see below).

The Interior Ministry claimed earlier that the draft Law would prevent children from falling under the influence of terrorist groups. The regime has often made allegations of alleged "terrorism" (typically against devout Muslims) without any credible evidence. Interior Ministry officials refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the planned amendments (see below).

Many of the people the regime rules without ever being elected freely and fairly do not agree with the regime. For example, when the regime introduced more repressive measures in its 2021 Religion Law, individuals told Forum 18 that they would among other changes like to see an end to the ban on teaching religion privately, an end to the ban on private teaching of Islam to children or opening new madrassahs [religious schools] (see below).

The Legislative Chamber published the text of the then draft Law to "further strengthen the rights of children" on its website on 26

June 2024 for public discussion lasting just a week. Comments were almost universally hostile. "I'm against it," one typical comment read. "Parents should decide how to educate and raise their children .. this draft Law limits the people's choice and desire. Legal religious education for our children!" (see below)

Another comment included the remark: "What kind of parents are parents if they do not give religious education to their children?"

Many also expressed concern on social media that the draft new Law would further restrict freedom of religion or belief. "What we found is that religious radicalism and fanaticism are on the rise! If it is on the rise, shouldn't religion be taught more deeply? Can bans work?" the writer Alisher Nazar commented. Stressing what he regards as the importance of religion in life, he noted: "how can I not become a Muslim before the age of 18? How can I call myself a Muslim if I don't know anything about Islam until this age? The most important features in human life: manners, honour, modesty, chastity are not formed until the age of 18?" (see below).

New punishments for parents allowing children's religious education

The Law on the introduction of additions and amendments to some legislative acts aimed at further strengthening the protection of the rights of the child came into force on 21 February 2025.

An addition to Article 47 of the Administrative Code ("Non-fulfilment of the obligations for the upbringing and education of children") specifies punishments of a fine of 5 to 10 base units for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education. Repeat "offences" within a year face a fine of 10 to 15 base units or a short-term jail term of up to 15 days. Parents or guardians also face punishment for sending their children to unregistered religious education establishments.

A fine of 10 base units (3,400,000 Soms) represents more than one month's average wage.

An addition to Article 23 ("Guarantee of the right of the child to education") of the 2008 Law on Guarantees of the Rights of the Child reads: "Illegal involvement of a child in the process of religious education by parents or their guardians, that is, at the discretion of unregistered or unlicensed organisations or individuals who do not have special religious education and carry out religious education without the permission of the central governing body of religious organisations in Uzbekistan, is not allowed or to transfer them for education there."

Parliament adopts new punishments despite criticisms

On 25 June 2024, the Legislative Chamber (lower chamber) of the non-freely-elected parliament, the Oliy Majlis, adopted in the first reading a draft law to allegedly "further strengthen the rights of children". The draft Law banned and introduced punishments for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18. the Legislative Chamber adopted the draft law on 14 August 2024.

No election in Uzbekistan has ever been found to be free and fair (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan>) by Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election observers.

Existing laws target those who teach religion to under-18s (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), not the parents or guardians targeted by the draft Law. However, parents and guardians who facilitated their children's religious education have long been targeted by regime oppression. This includes being warned by the State Security Service (SSS) and ordinary police of unspecified consequences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2658) if they teach Islam to their children, or any of their children wear the hijab.

The Interior Ministry claimed that the draft Law would prevent children from falling under the influence of terrorist groups. A Deputy Interior Minister Ramazon Ashrapov, who presented the draft Law to the Legislative Chamber in June 2024, argued that the number of groups engaged in religious education without a licence "increases day by day" and that the number of people falling under the influence of terrorist organisations is increasing.

Officials in the office of Deputy Interior Minister Ashrapov would not put Forum 18 through to him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2919) in July 2024 and would not answer any questions on the draft Law.

The regime has often made allegations of alleged "terrorism" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) (typically against devout Muslims) without any credible evidence. A symptom of this attitude is the long-standing involvement of police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" officers in human rights violations against people of all beliefs.

The Senate, the upper chamber of the non-freely elected parliament, approved the new Law on 16 August 2024, according to its website. The Senate then sent the Law to the President for signature.

The hearing heard that between 2021 and 2023, 2,457 administrative cases had been brought to punish those who teach religion without state permission. "No one can guarantee that a child will not become a victim of religious extremist ideas as a result of

receiving religious education in some unregistered, informal centres and from persons engaged in illegal religious activities," the Senate website declared.

"Moreover," the Senate website added, "during such illegal education, various serious crimes are committed against children. Restricting the child's freedom of movement, keeping them in buildings and premises that do not meet sanitary and hygienic requirements, causing them physical suffering or moral pressure, and even turning them into a victim of sexual violence are clear confirmation of this."

On 20 February 2025, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed the Law. It came into force the following day on its official publication.

Violating legally-binding international human rights law obligations

The regime's new restrictions violate its legally-binding international human rights law obligations. As Article 18 ("Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion") of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states, "The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

The United Nations Human Rights Committee's General Comment 22 (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html>) on ICCPR Article 18 notes: "The freedom from coercion to have or to adopt a religion or belief and the liberty of parents and guardians to ensure religious and moral education cannot be restricted."

Concerns over new punishments

Several people Forum 18 spoke to in late February and early March expressed concern about the new punishments on parents for arranging a religious education for their children. All asked that they not be identified for fear of state reprisals.

"The authorities are tightening the screws harder and harder," a Muslim from Tashkent complained to Forum 18. "What is most interesting is that this Law will punish 'illegal religious education' but at the same time there is no legal religious education for children in Uzbekistan except for a few children selected by the authorities. That's the paradox." The Muslim added that they know other Muslims who "have left the country for this particular reason".

"People are tired of this regime," another Muslim complained to Forum 18. "But they are afraid to complain about their situation, including about the state religious policies."

"The authorities need at first to open or allow the opening of many licensed Islamic schools for children as the demand is great," a third Muslim complained to Forum 18. "They can then demand that citizens attend licensed schools." The Muslim added that the Law "will now force parents secretly to send their children abroad for religious education".

"Millions of Uzbeks have left for Russia, Turkey and other countries as labour migrants," a fourth Muslim explained. "Many took their children with them, and some of these parents send them to private individuals or Islamic courses arranged in the countries of their residence. The parents do so to safeguard their children from the corrupt influence of gangs or crime or other negative influences."

These parents will "also get in trouble with the Uzbek authorities if found to have done so," the Muslim explained. "The government wants total control of children and their education."

Officials decline to explain why new punishments adopted

Forum 18 asked Muzaffar Khusanov of the General Section of the Presidential Administration on 7 March:

- why President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed the restrictive Law to punish parents;
- why the authorities ban children from receiving religious education without state permission;
- and why they ban children from participating in religious worship or other religious activity.

Khusanov wrote down the questions, then refused to put Forum 18 through to any Presidential Administration officials. "We are not specialists in religious issues. You should call the Muslim Board," he responded. He then declined to talk further.

Abdurahim Kadyrov, Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee, adamantly defended the actions of the Police expelling children from mosques during Ramadan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2966). "These children are under 18 and are not allowed to participate in religious activity under the Law," he told Forum 18 on 7 March. Asked why Uzbekistan adopted Laws prohibiting children from practice of their religion or punishing parents for arranging religious education for their children

unauthorised by the State, he declined to comment. "You need to talk to the Oliy Majlis [Parliament] about it, and not to us."

Senators of the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) were reluctant to talk to Forum 18. Asked about the new Law, officials from Parliament's General Section referred Forum 18 on 12 March to Senator Gulnara Marufova. Marufova's assistant (who did not give her name), who answered the phone the same day, told Forum 18 that she is "busy" and that it should talk to Senator Malika Kodyrhanova from the Committee on Youth and Women. "They were responsible for that Law," the official said.

Senator Kodyrhanova on 12 March was adamant that "I did not participate in the adoption of that Law". Forum 18 asked:

- whether she gave her opinion on the Law during discussion in Parliament;
- why she thinks Uzbekistan adopted such a restrictive Law;
- why parents cannot arrange for their children to have private lessons on their faith, such as to learn to read the Koran or to say Islamic prayers;
- and why they must be punished for this.

However, Kodyrhanova would not answer. "I think you should talk to other Senators who were responsible for this Law," she responded.

Forum 18 wanted to ask Feruza Eshmatova, the regime-appointed Oliy Majlis Human Rights Commissioner or Ombudsperson, why Uzbekistan adopted a law to punish parents who arrange for their children to have religious education. However, the official who answered the phone at her office on 12 March (who refused to give her name) refused to put Forum 18 to Eshmatova or any other officials. "They are all either out of the office or busy," was her response. "I remember you called one month ago but unfortunately we cannot give any information since it is all confidential."

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) has found that the Human Rights Commissioner does not comply with the Paris Principles (<https://ganhri.org/accreditation/>) for national human rights institutions, as among other problems it is not independent of the regime.

Long-standing regime hostility to religious education and involvement of under-18s

Teaching religion without state permission has long been banned (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). Religion teachers require written permission from the headquarters of a religious community that has state permission to exist. The Religion Law bans religious education without state permission, and the regime uses a wide range of tools to target this exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

For example, mosques and non-Muslim places of worship have had surveillance cameras controlled by the regime to be installed. The police are interested, among other things, in whether any under-18-year-olds and their parents are present at meetings for worship. "The surveillance cameras make it easy to find the parents and to punish them," one community commented (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2736).

Mosques have been raided and those who teach boys and adult men how to read the Koran and pray have been jailed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2660). Increased restrictions across the country on under-18s being taught Islam (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2658) and attending mosques have also been implemented.

Almost universally hostile public comments on draft Law

Many of the people the regime rules without ever being elected freely and fairly (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan>) do not agree with the regime. For example, when the regime introduced more repressive measures in its 2021 Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), individuals told Forum 18 that they would among other changes like to see an end to the ban on teaching religion privately, an end to the ban on private teaching of Islam to children or opening new madrassahs [religious schools].

The Legislative Chamber published the text of the draft Law to "further strengthen the rights of children" on its website on 26 June 2024, giving just one week for public discussion. By the closing period of 2 July 2024, 6,490 comments had been submitted. Comments were almost universally hostile (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2919).

"I'm against it," one typical comment read. "Parents should decide how to educate and raise their children. The state should deal only with the elimination of the factors that threaten it. And this draft Law limits the people's choice and desire. Legal religious education for our children!"

Another comment included the remark: "What kind of parents are parents if they do not give religious education to their children?"

Many also expressed concern on social media that the draft new Law would further restrict the freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the Constitution.

"What we found is that religious radicalism and fanaticism are on the rise! If it is on the rise, shouldn't religion be taught more deeply? Can bans work?" the writer Alisher Nazar commented on Facebook.

Stressing what he regards as the importance of religion in life, Nazar noted: "how can I not become a Muslim before the age of 18? How can I call myself a Muslim if I don't know anything about Islam until this age? The most important features in human life: manners, honour, modesty, chastity are not formed until the age of 18?"

Mubashshir Ahmad (Alisher Tursunov), a human rights defender and religious blogger now in exile in Istanbul, called for an example to be taken from Turkey's experience. "Schoolchildren are on vacation in Turkey now. That's why they are widely involved in 'Summer Koran courses'. Believe me, Turkish children are more modern and ambitious than our children," he wrote on Facebook. "Therefore, it is far from extremism and radicalism."

Tursunov was the founder of Azon.uz, which had an online television and radio channel, as well as pages on social media, covering news and comment from a Muslim perspective. On 21 June 2021 journalists and editors from Azon.uz and Kun.uz were fined for publishing articles on religious themes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) without Religious Affairs Committee permission. Azon.uz abruptly closed without explanation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2864) and deleted all its online platforms in August 2023. Tursunov is wanted in Uzbekistan on criminal charges and has been added to Russia's wanted list (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2892).

"The law does not specify what constitutes giving one's children over to illegal religious education," a human rights defender told Forum 18 from Tashkent in July 2024. "They say that under the new draft Law it would be possible to punish even parents who teach their own children religion at home. This would violate the Constitution, as under the Constitution parents have the right to educate their children in accordance with their religion."

When Forum 18 pointed out in July 2024 the many negative comments about the draft Law on the parliamentary website, Rakhmatjon Umarov of the Legislative Chamber's Information Department conceded that many were negative. "We are aware of the comments. We will study and discuss them." (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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