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UZBEKISTAN: Ramadan ban on children at mosques, fasting by National Guard officers

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

Police have expelled children from mosques in Tashkent, Fergana and elsewhere or prevented them from entering during Tarawih night prayers since the Muslim holy month of Ramadan began in late February. "Police officers caught children present during the prayer, and drove them out, scolding and threatening them with punishment," one Muslim complained. "These children are under 18 and under the Law are not allowed to participate in religious activity," insisted Abdurahim Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee. National Guard officers had to sign a pledge not to fast during Ramadan.

At mosques across the country, including in Fergana and Tashkent, police have expelled children or prevented them from entering during the Tarawih night prayers since the Muslim holy month of Ramadan began in late February. "Police officers caught children present during the prayer, and drove them out, scolding and threatening them with punishment," one Muslim complained to Forum 18.

"The police are doing everything to alienate people from the Mosque," the Muslim added. "At the same time the media and television channels, which are all practically under government control, lie and propagate that everything in the country is fine and people have great religious freedom" (see below).

Officials of Fergana Regional Police Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism as well as at the Interior Ministry's Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism in Tashkent would not explain to Forum 18 why children are banned from the mosque prayers (see below).

Abdurahim Kadyrov, Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, adamantly defended the actions of the police expelling children from mosques. "These children are under 18 and under the Law are not allowed to participate in religious activity," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Police attempts to prevent children attending night prayers during Ramadan come just after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a law allegedly "aimed at further strengthening the protection of the rights of the child". The Law banned and introduced fines of over one month's average wages or up to 15 days in jail for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18 (see below).

The authorities have also banned the exercise of religion or belief by police officers, military and National Guard officers. This in particular includes a ban on fasting during Ramadan (see below).

Officials required all National Guard officers to sign an official declaration – seen by Forum 18 - pledging under oath that during service in the National Guard they will "not perform religious rituals and ceremonies, including fasting during the month of Ramadan, in order to ensure constant combat readiness". They also had to pledge not to organise religious rituals or have religious materials where they are serving. Any National Guard officer violating these promises would be dismissed (see below).

An official of the National Guard Press Service (who refused to give her name) insisted to Forum 18 that abstaining from the fast during Ramadan is "only a recommendation since the officer needs to be physically ready at all times". She refused to say why National Guard officers cannot exercise freedom of religion or belief (see below).

From mid-January 2025, police in Tashkent again stepped up their campaign against men wearing beards. They raided mosques to identify bearded Muslim men to warn them about beards and not to complain about state policies publicly. Imams of the mosques also lectured the men that it is not necessary in Islam to keep a beard. Police officers present in the Imam's office warned the men that they must shave their beard unless they want to be identified as extremists or terrorists (see below).

A local police officer told one Muslim to go to the mosque. "As I came to the Mosque, I saw that more than a hundred men in beards were assembled in the yard, and were waiting for the officials," the Muslim – who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals

- told Forum 18. The Imam told the men they "must not complain about the authorities publicly". He then added: "It is not necessary to keep beards in Islam as long as we believe in Allah in our hearts" (see below).

The police officer present in the Mosque, who observed the men during the Imam's lecture, then warned them that "we must shave our beards unless we want to be identified as extremists or terrorists" (see below).

Several Muslim men told Forum 18 that police officers "sit in the Mosque and wait for any bearded Muslim men to visit so they can catch them" (see below).

Regime surveillance of places of worship

The regime has long kept places of worship under surveillance. From 2018 mosques 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 told Forum 18 in 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2736) that some people 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".

Earlier Ramadan restrictions

Each year the regime imposes stricter than usual controls on Islamic communities during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Officials continue to express hostility to people – including children – attending mosques.

Soon after the start of Ramadan in April 2021, the regime-controlled media broadcast a discussion between the then Interior Minister Pulat Bobojonov and Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov in which among other issues they discussed what they saw as a problem of people attending mosques, in particular people under 18.

"Two thousand mosques were attended by 800,000 people, and unfortunately 22,000 children attended Tarawih prayers [congregational night prayers in Ramadan]," Interior Minister Bobojonov told Prime Minister Aripov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), who was seen to nod his head in agreement. Bobojonov added that "we will gradually and significantly cut down the number of children attending not by ordering them but by explanatory work with their parents."

Muslim prisoners in at least one prison - Open Prison No. 49 in Olmalyk in Tashkent Region - were warned not to fast during Ramadan in 2023. "They threatened prisoners that, if they fast, they will be accused of violating prison regulations and will be sent back to the prison camp," one Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2824). "They also began to close the canteen for suhur, the morning meal before the start of the fast."

Neither Major Shukur Jurayev, the acting head of Open Prison No. 49, nor the Interior Ministry were willing to answer Forum 18's questions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2824) about why prisoners were banned from fasting during Ramadan, and why the prison closed the canteen for prisoners wanting to eat the pre-dawn meal.

Police expel or prevent children attending Mosque Ramadan prayers

At mosques across the country, including in Fergana and Tashkent, police have expelled children or prevented them from entering during the Tarawih night prayers as the 2025 Muslim holy month of Ramadan began, several Muslims from Tashkent and elsewhere complained to Forum 18. The Muslims did not want to identify Mosques or the children for fear of state reprisals.

Forum 18 has also seen video footage on social media of police officers forcing children out of an unnamed Tashkent mosque and Fergana City's Okarik Mosque.

Ramadan began this year at the end of February.

"Police officers caught children present during the prayer, and drove them out, scolding and threatening them with punishment," one Muslim complained to Forum 18 in early March. "The police are doing everything to alienate people from the Mosque. At the same time the media and television channels, which are all practically under government control, lie and propagate that everything in the country is fine and people have great religious freedom."

Police attempts to prevent children attending night prayers during Ramadan come just after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a law on 20 February allegedly "aimed at further strengthening the protection of the rights of the child". The Law banned and

introduced fines of over one month's average wages or up to 15 days in jail for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2965) before the age of 18.

Telephones at Tashkent City Police went unanswered between 10 March and 17 March.

Forum 18 asked Fergana Police why officers raided mosques to hunt for children during Ramadan prayers. The duty officer at the Regional Police (who did not give his name) on 10 March referred it to Lieutenant Colonel Elyorbek Bababekov, Chief of the Regional Police Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism. Bababekov's phone went unanswered.

The duty officer then gave the number for Numon Jurayev, Bababekov's subordinate at the Regional Police. Jurayev answered his phone on 10 March but put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's name. He did not answer when called back multiple times the same day.

Ravshan Shamshimetov, an Expert on "religious extremism" at the Interior Ministry's Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) in Tashkent, refused to comment on why police force children out of mosques during Ramadan. He also refused to say why the authorities ban children from receiving Islamic or other religious education without state permission. "Please, send us your questions in writing," he told Forum 18 on 7 March. He also refused to put Forum 18 through to Mirjamol Miralimov, Deputy Chief of the Department, or other officials.

Abdurahim Kadyrov, an Expert of the State Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) in Tashkent, adamantly defended the actions of the Police expelling children from mosques. "These children are under 18 and under the Law are not allowed to participate in religious activity," he told Forum 18 on 7 March.

Forum 18 asked whether the Religious Affairs Committee does not recommend to the state authorities to observe Uzbekistan's Constitution, which allows religious freedom, and Uzbekistan's international obligations in the area of freedom of religion or belief flowing from the international human rights agreements the country has signed. Kadyrov did not answer. "Please, send your questions in writing," he said.

Muhammadolim Muhammadsiddikov, spokesperson of the state-controlled Muslim Board, on 7 March at first was adamant children are not being forced out of mosques during this year's Tarawih prayers. When Forum 18 insisted that it has seen video footage of Police in Fergana forcing children out of Okarik Mosque, he responded: "You need to talk to the State Religious Affairs Committee and the Interior Ministry about these issues and not to us." He further declined to talk or put Forum 18 through to other Board officials.

The reason for the Law punishing parents for obtaining a religious education for their children and expelling children from mosques is that "the state wants to show the people that they not only adopt such laws against religious freedom but that they are determined forcefully to execute those laws", one Muslim complained to Forum 18. "Religious people are under close surveillance and the control of the state. The regime is now threatening religious people as in the time of [former president Islam] Karimov and Soviet times."

Police, military, National Guard officers banned from Ramadan fasting

The authorities have also banned the exercise of religion or belief by police officers, military and National Guard officers. This in particular includes a ban on fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Muslims from Tashkent complained to Forum 18.

Officials required all National Guard officers to sign an official declaration – seen by Forum 18 - pledging under oath that during service in the National Guard they will "not perform religious rituals and ceremonies, including fasting during the month of Ramadan, in order to ensure constant combat readiness". They also had to pledge that they would "not organise religious rituals and ceremonies nor store religious materials or objects in the building or territory of the institution where their [military] service is performed". Any National Guard officer violating these promises would be dismissed.

An official of the Press Service of the National Guard (who refused to give her name) insisted to Forum 18 on 17 March that abstaining from the fast during Ramadan is "only a recommendation since the officer needs to be physically ready at all times". Asked why officers for instance cannot keep religious books like the Koran or other religious objects, cannot read religious materials, cannot participate in religious ceremonies like praying the namaz (Muslim prayers) or religious rites, she responded: "Please, send your further questions in writing to the Foreign Ministry." She declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Tashkent police raid mosques, target bearded Muslim men

Even before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan at the end of February, police have again targeted Muslim men with beards.

The regime has long launched nationwide campaigns against Muslims wearing the hijab or beards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2712). When charges are brought against bearded men, they typically have been under Administrative Code Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order"), Administrative Code Article 183 ("Petty hooliganism"), and Administrative Code Article 184²⁴ ("Being in public places with the face covered to an extent that does not allow identification of a person").

From March 2024 onwards, Muslim men wearing long beards nationwide were arrested, had their beards forcibly shaved, and were 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 told Forum 18 in October 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2938) 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".

From mid-January 2025, police in Tashkent stepped up their campaign. They raided mosques to identify bearded Muslim men to warn them about beards and not to complain about state policies publicly. Imams of the mosques also lectured the men that it is not necessary in Islam to keep a beard. Police officers present in the Imam's office warned the men that they must shave their beard unless they want to be identified as extremists or terrorists.

Police have also stopped bearded men on the streets to photograph them to check the length of their beards.

Muslims believe that the raids, lectures and warnings are part of a bigger campaign by the authorities to reduce to a minimum the visibility and influence of Islam on society, so that society could have little or no resistance to their decisions or policies.

Several Muslim men have posted online video complaints about being invited to the Mosque and warned by Police. They declined to comment to Forum 18.

Muslim men who were subjected to police pressure were either individually targeted and invited to the mosques for a talk with the police or were caught at random when they attended prayers by police officers sitting in Mosques.

The Muslims, who asked not to give their names for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 that these police officers were "not security officers but came to the mosque specifically to catch Muslim men with beards and warn them".

Asked why State Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials and police raided mosques in Tashkent to identify bearded men and warn them to shave their beards, a State Committee official Aziz (who refused to give his last name) did not answer. "Wait on the line, and I will answer your question very soon," he told Forum 18 on 17 March. Then he did not come back with any answer for several minutes it waited on the line, after which the call was cut off. Repeated calls on the same day went unanswered. Other officials of the State Committee did not answer their phones on 17 March.

The Interior Ministry and Tashkent Police Department officials also did not answer their phones on 17 March.

Officials of the state-controlled Muslim Board put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself on 17 March.

Police pressure Muslim to go to Mosque for lecture about beards, economy

One Muslim man complained to Forum 18 that the local police officer came to his home in Tashkent and told him that he "needs urgently to visit the Mosque for a talk". The man immediately got dressed and went to the Mosque the same day.

"As I came to the Mosque, I saw that more than a hundred men in beards were assembled in the yard, and were waiting for the officials," the Muslim – who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals – told Forum 18 in early March. "Later we were told to enter the Mosque. The Imam began his lecture not about religion or our faith but about the sudden increase in prices, saying that this is happening all over the world and not just in Uzbekistan. He told us that we need to thank Allah that we are not the worst economy in the world."

The Imam then told the men that they "must not complain about the authorities publicly". He then continued his lecture about keeping beards. "It is not necessary to keep beards in Islam as long as we believe in Allah in our hearts."

The police officer present in the Mosque, who observed the men during the Imam's lecture, then warned them that "we must shave our beards unless we want to be identified as extremists or terrorists".

Police "invite" another Muslim to Mosque twice in one week in February

Another Muslim, who attends a different Mosque in Tashkent, complained that the local Police twice invited him to his local Mosque within one week in February. "They told me in the presence of the Imam of the Mosque not to grow a beard," the Muslim – who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals – told Forum 18 in early March.

"But at the second visit to the Mosque, I laughed at them and showed my very thinly trimmed beard, and told them that I have not grown my beard since they saw me the previous week." Police then released the man.

Police watching any bearded Muslim man that visits Mosque

A third man from Tashkent complained that in late January he needed to visit his friend who works in a local Mosque. "When I went to see him in the Mosque, I saw that our local police officer, another officer from the Police Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism in plain clothes and two representatives of the State Religious Affairs Committee were sitting in my friend's office," the individual – who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals - told Forum 18 in early March.

As the man's friend was not in the office, he decided to leave the room. "When I turned around and stepped out of the room, the officer from the Police Department for the Struggle against Terrorism and Extremism jumped up and hurried after me." The officer asked him whether he was invited for a talk. "When I told him, No, and that I came to see my friend, he told me that in any case, I need to go back into the room and that they need to talk to me about my beard."

The officers wrote down the man's identity details. Then they began to tell him and another Muslim man in the office that Uzbekistan's economy "will blossom and that we need to be patient for a couple more years. Everything will be in order soon."

When the man complained that he had many family chores to do and that he was in a hurry, the officers agreed to release him but warned that he should shave his beard.

Several of these Muslim men told Forum 18 that police officers "sit in the Mosque and wait for any bearded Muslim men to visit so they can catch them".

The Muslims said that they believe that the authorities are doing this "because they want to bring the visibility of Islam to a very minimum since they are afraid that practicing Muslims can influence society against their decisions and policies". (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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