

16 August 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Another Muslim jailed for being a Muslim?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Abdugafar Karimov is the latest Muslim apparently jailed for being a devout Muslim known to Forum 18 News Service, being sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "undermining the constitutional basis of the Republic of Uzbekistan". His wife, Oklima Karimova, says that evidence of about 10 Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets and a video was planted, and told Forum 18 that one prosecution witness refused to appear in court because of "a troubled conscience". Further similar trials are continuing.

In a further example of someone being sentenced apparently for being a devout Muslim, Abdugafar Karimov was on 27 July sentenced to five years' imprisonment by Judge Alimjon Katokhojaev of the Namangan regional court. This is in eastern Uzbekistan, in the well-known devout Muslim region of Fergana [Farghona] Valley. Karimov (no relation of Uzbekistan's President) was sentenced under Article 159 of the criminal code, "undermining the constitutional basis of the Republic of Uzbekistan". (See eg. F18News 10 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=391 for a similar case.)

Karimov's wife, Oklima Karimova, speaking to Forum 18 News Service from her home village of Jumasha (30 kilometres or 19 miles west of Namangan) on 10 August, said that on 10 July around 10 members of the National Security Service secret police and ordinary police searched the Karimov's home, apparently finding about 10 leaflets by the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir party and a video cassette. "The leaflets and video cassette were supposedly found in a shed next to the house. My husband and I were shown some pieces of paper and a video and were told that these items had been found in our shed and would be sent off for analysis. My husband refused to sign the search warrant, but it emerged during the court case that the police had simply forged his signature," Karimova told Forum 18.

During the court hearing, the statements of two posbony (literally, wardens) were used in evidence against him. Posbony are employed by the mahalla - the smallest territorial division in Uzbekistan, roughly equivalent to an urban district – but are in practice employees of the police. (See F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58 for further explanation of the role of mahallas and the posbony)

"These people, who are subservient to others, were simply forced to write these statements. One of them later suffered a troubled conscience and refused to go to the court hearing," Karimova reported. Karimova also said that in 1998 drugs and bullets were planted on her husband, for which he was sentenced to 12 years in prison, but he was freed in 2003 under an amnesty. "My husband worked as a history teacher. He was also a very devout believer. He says his prayers five times a day, observes Muslim fasts and does not drink alcohol. I believe that both in 1998 and now, my husband has been made to suffer for his religious beliefs," Karimova told Forum 18.

Judge Katokhojaev told Forum 18 by telephone on 12 August that "I refuse to make any comment over the telephone. I can only say one thing, which is that if Karimov does not agree with my sentence, he can lodge an appeal with a higher court."

Further trials of men, apparently for being Muslims, are under way. On 12 August, Akhmajon Abdullaev, a Namangan human rights activist, told Forum 18 that "at least 16 devout believers have been arrested in our region. Today a court case is under way in Namangan regional court against 12 young people who have had weapons and drugs planted on them."

For more background information see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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