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UZBEKISTAN: Varying availability of adult religious education

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The availability of religious education for Uzbek religious believers varies greatly from faith to faith, Forum 18 news Service has found. For Sunni Islam, the majority faith, religious education is available, but on a very small and highly regulated scale, compared to the numbers of adherents in the country. Shia Islamic education is restricted by the authorities' unwillingness to formally recognise the training of imams outside the country – and no education for Shia imams is available inside the country. Non-Muslim religious communities generally have more opportunities to acquire religious education in their own faith. Orthodox Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishna devotees have all told Forum 18 that the authorities do not prevent them from setting up courses on religious subjects, and Catholics and Lutherans do not yet want to set up such courses. But the authorities have not allowed the Jewish community to set up a rabbinate, and hence a yeshiva to train rabbis.

There are varying views amongst religious believers in Uzbekistan about the state of adult religious education, for adherents of their faith, Forum 18 News Service has found. Sunni Muslims are the majority faith in the country, and the Sunni former chief mufti has called for restrictions on the Islamic education of both children and adults to be lifted, stating that only those training to be imams in officially-approved educational establishments can study their faith. "Currently one can only receive religious education in a medresseh," Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent on 20 October. "Schoolchildren and adults who work in secular professions are not allowed a religious education.

However, speaking to Forum 18 on 2 November, the head of the government's committee for religious affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, categorically denied that only people attending a medresseh can receive an Islamic religious education. "It is true that according to the Uzbek religion law teaching religion in a private capacity is forbidden," he told Forum 18 in the capital Tashkent. "But a person who has specialist religious training and who has been given permission by the muftiate can teach Islam. There are courses being devised at the mosques at which people can study Islam if they wish."

Neither Minovarov nor Muhamad Yusuf discussed the situation of Shia Muslims or of non-Islamic faiths. Forum 18 has found that the true situation for Sunni Muslims is somewhere in between the views offered by Muhamad Yusuf and Minovarov. There are indeed fee-based Arabic courses available for anyone at the medressehs, not at mosques. These courses generally charge a monthly fee of roughly 6 US Dollars, which is over the minimum wage per month of 5,540 sums (34 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros, or 5 US Dollars) a month. "There are 10 medressehs functioning in Uzbekistan today and virtually all of them offer courses in Arabic," Kabijon Sidikov, head of the Mir Arab medresseh, the largest in Central Asia, told Forum 18. "Students on these courses study Arabic in the Koran and they can also put questions about religion to the teacher." He claimed that this allowed students on these courses also to receive "a basic religious education".

Sidikov also said the medresseh can offer purely religious courses to anyone who wishes, such as courses on the Koran and the hadiths (oral sayings of the Prophet Muhammed written down by his followers) or on Shariah law. "The main thing is to find enough people willing to form such a group," he told Forum 18. "Given that the courses are fee-based, it is quite hard to find sufficient pupils. So far we have only had applications from people who want to learn Arabic, because without that it is simply impossible to have a genuine understanding of Islam."

Nevertheless, the number of such courses is clearly inadequate for the number of Muslims living in Uzbekistan, which is in excess of 20 million. And "according to secret orders, mosques are forbidden to offer courses on Islam," human rights activist Tulkin Karayev told Forum 18 on 7 November in the southern Uzbek town of Karshi [Qarshi]. "The medressehs are situated a long way from any town - for example, the nearest medresseh offering courses about Islam is 120 kilometres (75 miles) away from our town." He added that a strict ban is in place on giving instruction about Islam in a private capacity.

As Minovarov and Karayev both indicated, under Article 9 of Uzbekistan's religion law teaching religion in a private capacity is banned and "religious educational establishments acquire the right to function after registering with the justice ministry for the Republic of Uzbekistan and being issued with the appropriate licence... persons teaching religious disciplines at religious educational establishments must have a religious education and carry out their activities with the permission of the appropriate agency of the central administration".

Also, under Article 241 of the administrative code, "teaching religious doctrines without specialist religious education and without the permission of an agency of the central administration of a religious organisation, and equally teaching religious doctrines in a private capacity, will attract a fine of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage, or administrative detention of up to 15 days". For repeat offences, Article 229 (2) of the criminal code (breaking the law on teaching religious beliefs) may be applied, which specifies a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum wage or up to three years' imprisonment.

In practice, neither Article 241 of the administrative code nor Article 229 (2) of the criminal code have been applied to Muslims. Article 241 of the administrative code is quite widely applied to religious minorities. There are several cases recorded where fines have been imposed on them under Article 229 (2) of the criminal code (eg. see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455). However, Muslims who teach Islam illegally, and their pupils are generally sentenced to lengthy prison terms under Article 242 (organising criminal groups) and Article 244-2 (setting up, leading or participating in extremist religious organisations) of the criminal code (see eg. F18News 6 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=388).

Most of the Muslims arrested after the terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in March and April this year were "guilty" only of meeting to read the Koran. This at least is the view of human rights activists in those regions, where the most arrests were recorded: the Fergana [Farghona] valley, as Fergana-based human rights activist Ahmajon Madmarov told Forum 18 on 1 November, and Kashkadarya region, as Karayev noted.

According to Karayev, "preventive measures" are frequently applied to devout Muslims. For example, police officers take statements from them declaring that if they join "extremist Islamic groups" or participate in illegal Islamic study groups, they will be prosecuted under criminal law (see F18News 29 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=379). There are also very strict state controls on Islamic religious education in the state founded and controlled Islamic University of Tashkent, the only Muslim higher educational establishment in Uzbekistan (see F18News 11 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318).

Shia Muslims also experience difficulty in acquiring an education in their faith. There are around 300,000 Shia Muslims in Uzbekistan, mainly in Samarkand [Samarqand] and Bukhara [Bukhoro]. Virtually all of them are Iranian nationals and there are currently three Shia mosques registered in Uzbekistan. Shia believers, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that their main problem is obtaining a Shia education. Not one Shia medresseh currently functions in the country, even though under Uzbek law a religious education is necessary in order to become an imam. All Shia medressehs in Uzbekistan were closed down during the communist period.

Even though the former medresseh attached to the Panjab mosque in Samarkand remains in excellent condition, as Forum 18 observed on a tour of the building, the authorities will not allow it to function as an educational establishment. Five ethnic Iranian citizens of Uzbekistan have completed their religious education in Iran, but their degrees are not recognised in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek government's committee for religious affairs has compiled a list of foreign educational institutions whose degrees are recognised in the country (see F18News 11 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=318). The five trained Shia imams are therefore not allowed to take up positions as imams.

As a result of this, only one Shia imam in Uzbekistan has a religious education. Although the authorities have so far permitted imams without a formal religious education to work at the other two Shia mosques, they could sack them from their jobs at any time citing the fact that they do not have appropriate training (see F18News 27 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=307).

At the same time, the imam of the Panjab mosque in Samarkand, Fahrudin Huseinov, told Forum 18 on 18 November that the authorities do allow him to offer believers courses on Islam. However, Huseinov does not have the right to confer degrees on students. Huseinov also emphasised that the imams at the two other mosques do not have the right to give classes to believers, because they do not hold recognised degrees. When Forum 18's correspondent commented that this concession is against the Uzbek religion law, under which religion may only be taught at registered educational establishments, Huseinov replied that "evidently in this instance the authorities have made an exception".

Non-Muslim religious minorities generally have more opportunities to acquire religious education in their own faith. Orthodox Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees have all told Forum 18 that the authorities do not prevent them from setting up courses on religious subjects at registered places of worship, even if there is no registered educational establishment attached to them.

But the authorities have not allowed the Jewish community to set up a rabbinate, and hence a yeshiva to train rabbis (see F18News 16 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=364).

"The law states that religious subjects may only be taught at an educational establishment that has been registered at the justice ministry, but churches belonging to religious minorities operate religious circles, and we turn a blind eye to them. For example, the Baptists even have an unregistered seminary, but we don't stop it from operating," commented Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist at

the government's religious affairs committee, to Forum 18 on 18 November.

However, this religious instruction is only available in towns where communities of religious minorities are registered. If representatives of religious minorities start teaching in towns where their community is not registered, they may be prosecuted under Article 241 (breaking the law on giving religious instruction) of the administrative code, and sometimes, through very rarely, under Article 229 (2) (breaking the law on teaching religious doctrines) of Uzbekistan's criminal code (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=455, and the Forum 18 Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105).

A clear problem for religious minorities is the difficulty they encounter in trying to open registered educational establishments whose graduates would have a degree in religious education that would be legitimate in Tashkent's eyes.

Today, there are just two officially registered seminaries in Uzbekistan - one Orthodox and one Pentecostal. The Baptists have been trying for several years to register their own seminary. "Yes, so far the authorities have not closed down our unregistered seminary, and they don't even stop its graduates from working in churches. But that could stop at any time, because under Uzbek law degrees conferred by an unregistered seminary are invalid," reported a Tashkent Baptist, who preferred not to be named, to Forum 18.

Under Article 9 of the religion law, only central agencies of a religious organisation have the right to set up religious educational establishments. Additionally, under Article 8 of the religion law a central agency of a religious organisation must be registered by communities "in at least eight territorial divisions of the republic of Uzbekistan (a region, the city of Tashkent or the Republic of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston])".

The Orthodox, Baptists, Catholics and Pentecostals are currently the only religious minorities with a central administration. Given that the majority of communities belonging to religious minorities have not managed to be registered in 8 territorial divisions, they have no right to a religious educational establishment either.

However, the great majority of representatives of minority religious communities are not unhappy with their own educational situation in Uzbekistan. Fr. Stanislaw Kawa at the Catholic Cathedral in Tashkent and Tashkent Pastor Kornelius Wiebe of the Lutheran Church both told Forum 18 on 18 November that their communities are too small to think of setting up a religious educational establishment.

Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishna devotee Razumbai Hasanov both thought that a more immediate issue for their communities was that of being registered with the authorities in various regions of the republic where their fellow-believers live, "and then we can think about setting up a religious educational establishment".

However, the Jewish community in Uzbekistan does believe that it is vital to set up a registered educational establishment. "We need a yeshiva. We are experiencing a serious lack of personnel, and rabbis from abroad refuse to come here on the grounds that we do not even have a religious educational establishment," said Abe Dovid Gurevich, chief rabbi for Central Asia and envoy of the world-wide Lubavich movement, speaking to Forum 18 in Tashkent on 13 July (see F18News 16 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=364). (END)

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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