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UZBEKISTAN: Total state control over Islamic faith

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After a major investigation, Forum 18 News Service established that the Muslim clergy is almost completely under the control of the Uzbek authorities, while the leadership of the muftiate's spiritual administration is virtually an agency of state authority. Imams do not have the right to compose the Friday addresses themselves, but are obliged to read out texts approved by the muftiate. During the US-led war in Iraq, imams felt obliged to speak in support of the campaign, despite their own and popular opposition to it. In defiance of the law, the state appoints and removes imams. Students in Islamic colleges are closely monitored for their political reliability. Many mosques have been denied registration and Forum 18 has seen some being used, as in the Soviet period, as clubs, libraries or museums. Ironically, Islam is the faith in Uzbekistan that is most thoroughly controlled by the authorities.

As part of a major investigation to establish to what extent the Uzbek authorities exert control over Muslim believers, Forum 18 News Service questioned several dozen Muslims in Tashkent, Bukhara (western Uzbekistan) and in Namangan region (the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, the most religiously active region of the country). Virtually all those with whom Forum 18 spoke agreed to talk only on condition of anonymity because they feared persecution.

Forum 18 established that the Muslim clergy is almost completely under the control of the Uzbek authorities. The leadership of the muftiate's spiritual administration is virtually an agency of state authority. The current muftiate – headed by chief mufti Abdurashid Qori Bakromov – is merely an imitation of the Soviet system, when religious communities were formally separated from the state, but in fact were merely compliant instruments of the communist authorities. Speaking to Forum 18, the leaders of the muftiate stated their full support for the authorities' religious policy. It is curious that these leaders denied such obvious facts as the closure of a number of mosques and a ban on wearing Islamic clothing in general education institutions.

Imams do not have the right to compose the Friday addresses themselves, but are obliged to read out texts that have been approved by the muftiate. It is noteworthy that after the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan began in late 2001, imams in all Uzbekistan's mosques read out an address condemning terrorism on the instructions of the authorities. The chief imam of Tashkent, Anvar-haji Tursunov, welcoming the start of the campaign, said that the action would contribute towards stability in Uzbekistan.

This year - after military action by the US and Britain began in Iraq in March – it was a little different. Although imams received no instructions from the authorities to support the action, many - taking their cue from Uzbek television coverage - repeated in their addresses that Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was a friend of Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and that therefore the military operation in Iraq was a continuation of the battle against international terrorism. All the imams Forum 18 spoke to confirmed that "an imam who decided to condemn the action by the US and Britain in Iraq would have been sacked immediately". Moreover, Forum 18 found that almost all the population of Uzbekistan strongly condemned the military operation in Iraq. It is noteworthy that imams interviewed by Forum 18 told the interpreter that "of course they did not support the US military operation in Iraq, but they should not say that to the correspondent".

Imams told Forum 18 that formally the secular authorities have no right to dismiss the imams they did not like, but in fact all they have to do is to write a letter to the muftiate, which would immediately carry out their wishes.

Formally the imams are chosen by the believers themselves, while the muftiate simply approves or rejects the applicant. But in practice imams are appointed by the muftiate without reference to believers. Additionally, according to article 9 of the law on religion "citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan who have the relevant religious education may be leaders of religious organisations". But the phrase "relevant education" is not entirely clear. In fact imams are appointed who have only just completed their studies at Islamic school, the medresseh.

The medressehs, Forum 18 observed, are strictly controlled by the authorities and it is virtually impossible for a student viewed as "unreliable" from the government's point of view to graduate from them. For example, students at the Mir Arab medresseh (Central Asia's largest medresseh in Bukhara, western Uzbekistan) and at the Namangan medresseh told Forum 18 that they were periodically summoned to the military enlistment office, as men of military service age, where officers of the National Security Service (the former KGB) found out whether any of the students were making critical comments about the government.

Because religious leaders can be people who have simply received a specialist education, today most imams are relatively young. "Today I calculate that around 80 per cent of imams in Namangan region are under 30 years old. This is against our traditions," the head of the regional department of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights in Uzbekistan Gulyam Khalmatov told Forum 18 in Namangan on 6 May. "Such young people do not wield enough authority with many believers."

Another means of control over imams is their attestation, which takes place on average two to three times a year. Formally the muftiate carries out the attestation, but in fact representatives of the secular authorities are almost always present. The questions posed at the exams often bear no relation to religion. One imam related how he was asked at his exam how many stars there were on Uzbekistan's state flag. Imams who want to pass the attestation also have to know when Uzbek president Islam Karimov was born and the words of the state anthem.

"Four years ago the muftiate did carry out the attestation of imams," Shoazim Minovarov, chairman of the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, confirmed to Forum 18 on 12 May in Tashkent. "It was important to ensure that people without elementary religious education were not preaching in the mosques." Minovarov admitted that representatives of the CRA were present at the exams, but denied that imams were re-assessed annually. "No assessment exams have been planned for this year," he claimed.

Article 8 of Uzbekistan's law on religion declares that "religious organisations may have the status of juridical persons and pursue their activity after registration with the justice ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan or with its local agencies in a manner prescribed by law". If believers gather to pray in unregistered prayer houses, the authorities assess this as being against the law and will take punitive action, going so far as to bring criminal charges.

When Forum 18 remarked that this part of the article of the law on religion was against the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is a signatory, and also the principles of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of which Uzbekistan is a member, Minovarov responded: "This section of the law certainly does not mean that people have no right to meet together in private apartments and pray, but they are not allowed to have a leader, and none of them is allowed to teach religious doctrines." Nevertheless, he contradicted himself by adding that "the police will never allow an unregistered community to hold regular meetings".

In fact, the police and special services make sure that believers do not meet in unregistered mosques. After the law on religion came into force in 1998, all mosques were required to re-register. Yet the majority of functioning mosques have not managed to be registered. On many occasions Forum 18 has come across closed mosques in various regions of the country. Moreover, many of them are being used as clubs, libraries and museums, just as in Soviet times. Even Minovarov confirmed that many mosques have been closed since 1998. He told Forum 18 that mosques "started to spring up like mushrooms" after Mikhail Gorbachev launched perestroika in the late 1980s. "For example, in Namangan region there were twice as many mosques as schools. Of course we could not put up with that situation."

An effective means of control over believers is a social institution of Uzbek society, the mahalla. However, if one looks deeper, this is a distinctive community. Here, unlike in city tower blocks, it is impossible to conceal one's private life from neighbours. All members of a mahalla celebrate feasts together. If a misfortune afflicts a local resident, neighbours have to help. Today, the government is actively reviving this traditional institution of Uzbek society. In every town sector of this kind a mahalla committee is formed, the chairman of which is officially called the aksakal (meaning the eldest).

The mahalla committee has the right not only to allow a church or mosque to be built on its territory, but even to turn out residents whose behaviour has rankled with members of the community. The territory of this sort of town sector is guarded by posbony (literally, wardens). However, in practice, this medieval institution has been radically adapted to modern-day realities. The chairman of the mahalla committee is appointed by the authorities and carries out their wishes unquestioningly, while the posbony are casual police employees. For example, when Forum 18's correspondent went to a mahalla to visit an acquaintance, the resident refused to let him into his home, explaining: "I am afraid that the posbony will report back that a foreign correspondent visited me."

With tight government control over the appointment and conduct of imams, the selection of Islamic students, the content of sermons and the approval of mosques, Islam is ironically the faith in Uzbekistan that is most thoroughly controlled by the authorities.

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