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UZBEKISTAN: Mahalla and Mullah block Jehovah's Witness registration

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The latest instance known to Forum 18 News Service of a religious minority being barred from gaining state registration – thus rendering its activity illegal – is a Jehovah's Witness community in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. Following open hostility against the community from the head of the city's Yaksarai district, a subsequent meeting of local residents (the Mahalla committee), presided over by the local Mullah (Islamic clergyman), reversed a decision to allow a Jehovah's Witness congregation to apply for state registration. Under Uzbekistan's complex registration procedure, which institutionalises obstacles to religious minorities, the approval of both the Mahalla committee and the head of the district administration is necessary before a religious community can even apply for state registration from the Ministry of Justice. The Mahalla committees, theoretically independent but in practice under state control, are used to maintain controls over religious believers of all faiths.

Jehovah's Witnesses in the capital Tashkent have complained to Forum 18 News Service that, in November, Valim Muladjanov, the Hakim (administration chief) for the city's Yaksarai district, revoked a decision taken a year ago to allow a local congregation to apply for registration. A subsequent meeting of local residents, presided over by the local Mullah (Islamic clergyman), blocked the application from going ahead, rendering continuing religious activity by the community illegal. The Jehovah's Witnesses – who have been allowed to register only two communities in Uzbekistan – have been trying in vain for many years to register in Tashkent.

Under Uzbek law, a religious community only has the right to operate if it has been registered with the Ministry of Justice. Uzbekistan's registration procedure institutionalises discrimination against religious minorities as, in a complex procedure, all applications must have the prior written consent of the committee of the Mahalla (a local self-governing agency that administers a city sector and is the lowest level of government) for the district in which the religious community intends to open a place of worship. This permission must also be certified by the Hakim, or head, of the district administration. Significantly – and in defiance of Uzbek international human rights commitments – the government has banned all unregistered religious activity and participants in such activity risk penalties under the Administrative or Criminal Codes.

The Mahalla committee where the Jehovah's Witness congregation is based approved the registration of their place of worship at the end of 2004. However, it remains unclear why Muladjanov demanded new written permission from the Mahalla committee. Andrei Shirobokov of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 24 November. Additionally, speaking in the presence of the head of the Mahalla committee, Muladjanov declared that he personally opposed the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Forum 18 tried to reach Muladjanov at the Yaksarai district administration to find out why he had revoked the earlier Mahalla committee approval and was demanding that it be considered again. However, on 1 December his aide Alisher (who did not give his last name) said that Muladjanov was away on a work trip. Alisher claimed to know nothing about the case.

Shirobokov told Forum 18 that, the day after Muladjanov's openly declared his opposition to Jehovah's Witness registration, the head of the Mahalla invited Jehovah's Witnesses to a residents' meeting, presided over by the local Mullah. All those who spoke at the meeting said that Jehovah's Witness teachings were against Islam and that therefore Mahalla residents did not want a Jehovah's Witness place of worship on their territory. "This Mahalla's population is made up mostly of Uzbeks. Let them open their church in a Russian Mahalla," people told the Jehovah's Witnesses at the meeting.

Shirobokov insisted the meeting was prompted by the authorities, pointing out that a year earlier the same Mahalla committee agreed to the registration of their community. "The authorities are actively exploiting the Mahalla system of self-government which is theoretically independent, but is in fact completely controlled by the authorities," he complained to Forum 18. "Although the Mahalla leadership has changed since last year, we shouldn't have to keep going to them for permission."

Begzot Kadyrov, from the government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that the Jehovah's Witnesses had already complained to him about the Mahalla meeting. But he defended the power of the Mahalla to veto the opening of places of worship of faiths the people do not like. "If residents of the Mahalla don't want a Jehovah's Witness church on their territory, we cannot make them change their minds," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 24 November. "The Mahalla system is an ancient institution of Uzbek

society. Mahalla residents have together resolved their own problems for many years. Current Uzbek laws reinforce the Mahalla system of self-government at a juridical level."

Although the Mahalla leadership is formally elected by local residents, in practice it is appointed by the government and is often used as an instrument of state control. Mahalla committees have long played a role in supervising, controlling and restricting religious activity and often refuse to approve religious communities' registration applications, whether for mosques, Christian churches or places of worship of other faiths. The Mahalla committees are also used to control Muslims (see F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58).

Until last January, Mahalla committees even had to approve which local Muslims could go on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca (see F18News 19 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=493). In late October, the head of a Mahalla in Tashkent's Mirobad district, Olga Bedrina, was sacked for having allowed a Full Gospel Church to function (see F18News 11 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686).

Shirobokov also maintains that "NSS [National Security Service] secret police officers tell us [Jehovah's Witnesses] openly that our work is not wanted in Uzbekistan." He stated that Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi [Qarshi] in central southern Uzbekistan are in the most difficult position of all their communities (see F18News 21 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=692), their situation having deteriorated sharply since August. "For example, a police officer struck Jehovah's Witness Guzal Buzurukova while she held a small child in her arms," he told Forum 18. "He told her husband that he would imprison him if he did not renounce his faith."

Kadyrov said he knew nothing about the incident in Karshi. "Of course, if a policeman did strike a woman, that is a matter of concern. Why didn't the Jehovah's Witnesses tell us about it straight away?" he told Forum 18. "I'm always telling them that they should contact us as soon as they encounter problems with the police. But in fact we often only find out about the Jehovah's Witnesses' problems during court cases." (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546

For an outline of what is known about Akramia and the Andijan uprising see 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586

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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