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UZBEKISTAN: Exiled imam denies links to arrested Tashkent Muslims

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

At least 22 Muslims are believed to have been arrested in the Uzbek capital Tashkent in a crackdown launched in late March. The authorities accuse them of being extremists and claim they had links with exiled imam Obidhon qori Nazarov and another imam, Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov, extradited back to Uzbekistan by the Kazakh authorities last November. Nazarov denies any links to the detainees. "Maybe some of these people heard my sermons or studied with my students," he told Forum 18 News Service from exile in western Europe. "But in fact the only 'crime' all these people committed is that they are devout Muslims." Human rights activist Surat Ikramov agrees. "The only guilt of the detainees is that they regularly read the namaz [daily prayers]," he told Forum 18.

Exiled Tashkent imam Obidhon qori Nazarov, who had to flee Uzbekistan to avoid arrest in 1998, has denied to Forum 18 News Service that he had links with any of the Muslims recently held in mass arrests in the Uzbek capital and accused of maintaining contact with him. "Maybe some of these people heard my sermons or studied with my students," he declared. "But in fact the only 'crime' all these people committed is that they are devout Muslims." Nazarov was speaking to Forum 18 on 11 April from the western European country where he has now been granted refugee status through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The Paris-based *Asie Centrale* website reported that at least 22 men have been arrested in the crackdown on Muslims in Tashkent which began in late March. It said all were accused of "setting up, leading and participating in a religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisation" under Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code.

The arrested Muslims were allegedly linked to imam Nazarov and Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov. Fahrutdinov, another prominent Uzbek imam, was arrested in the city of Shymkent in southern Kazakhstan and handed over to Uzbekistan in November 2005 after the Uzbek authorities accused him of trying to overturn the constitutional order and leading a banned religious organisation. *Asie Centrale* maintained that none of the arrested people knew or had contacts with Fahrutdinov either.

On 29 March Doniyor Magdaazimov, a student of the University of International Economy and Diplomacy, was arrested at Tashkent airport while departing for Egypt for further study. Later that evening his home was raided by police, who confiscated his books and computer. The following day another four Muslims who lived nearby - Zoir Husanov, Anvar Maksudov, Nosir Ibrahimov and Abdugofir Toirov - were also arrested. The next day, some of Toirov's co-workers were also seized.

Iltom Mahkamov was held on 31 March when four men stopped him while he was driving his car in Tashkent and took him away in handcuffs in another car. Friends and neighbours witnessed his arrest. Two other reported detainees are cafe owner Surat Zuhurov and television producer Rahimberdi Rahomberdiev. Djamshit, Mirpulat and Khojiakbar - whose surnames and address are still unknown - are among other Muslims reportedly detained recently in Tashkent.

Tulkin Karaev, a journalist from *Asie Centrale* who fled Uzbekistan last year, told Forum 18 that he had received information about the 22 arrests directly from Uzbekistan and that almost all of those arrested have been accused of having links with Nazarov. "We trust our sources, but in the interests of safety we cannot divulge their names," he told Forum 18 on 11 April from Sweden. "A huge wave of arrests is under way in Tashkent. The news from there is very contradictory."

Human Rights Watch said they were aware of the reports of the 22 arrests, but currently have confirmation of 18 detainees. "Seven of them are accused of belonging to the so-called Wahhabis, while 11 are said to belong to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisation," Andrea Berg, head of Human Rights Watch's office in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 10 April.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a self-styled international Islamic political party aiming to recreate an Islamic Caliphate. It is violently anti-democratic and antisemitic views, strongly opposed to core human rights such as religious freedom (an outline of its aims is given at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170). Hizb-ut-Tahrir is banned in Central Asia and has had many of its members or alleged members imprisoned.

Berg could not give an opinion on the legality of the recent arrests, saying that Human Rights Watch did not yet have sufficient information. "All I can say at present is that the arrests were conducted in a manner that was far from being in line with procedural standards. In some cases, the relatives of the detainees only found out about the arrests after several days."

Human rights defenders are sceptical of the government's accusations against those they have arrested. "The only guilt of the detainees is that they regularly read the namaz [daily prayers]," Surat Ikramov, head of the Independent Group for Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 on 11 April. "The special services are trying, without foundation, to accuse the detainees of links with the well-known imam Obidhon qori Nazarov, who recently emigrated to Europe. It is likely that most of the detainees will be accused of Wahhabism in court."

The father of Ilmurat Khamzaev, a Muslim who managed to escape police detention, shared Ikramov's view. "My son is simply a believer," Abdusator Khamzaev, Ilmurat's father, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 10 April. "He says his prayers regularly and takes no interest in politics. I think they'll try to send my son to prison because of his religious convictions."

Obidhon Nazarov is one of the Uzbekistan's most popular Muslim theologians. Over 1,000 Muslims used to meet in the 1990s at the Muhtaba mosque where he was imam. Audio cassettes and video tapes of his sermons – which the authorities regard as illegal - are still being distributed throughout Uzbekistan. In 1998 Nazarov publicly criticised the authorities' decision to ban beards and the hijab (headscarf worn by some Muslim women).

In the wake of Nazarov's flight from the country, the Uzbek authorities arrested several of his relatives and his son disappeared without trace. Nazarov himself was accused in absentia of undermining Uzbekistan's constitutional order and was denounced as a leader of the country's Wahhabis.

Wahhabism strives for what it regards as an Islam purified of later additions and innovations and rejects the veneration of holy places and construction of expensive gravestones, seeing this as idolatry. Strictly speaking, the movement is linked to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam which has become the official faith of Saudi Arabia. However, the term "Wahhabi" is widely and generally inaccurately used as a term of abuse for devout Muslims in Central Asia.

Nazarov noted this widespread incorrect use of the term "wahhabism" in the region. "I am not a Wahhabi. My only 'offence' against [Uzbek President Islam] Karimov is that I took a stand against corruption and alcoholism and stood up for women's right to wear the hijab and paranja [a full-length robe designed to completely hide the outline of a woman's body]," Nazarov told Forum 18. Nevertheless, he admitted that he opposes elaborate weddings and funerals and veneration of holy places. "But it does not follow that I am a Wahhabi. I follow the Hanafi tradition, which is traditional in Central Asia. My views by no means conflict with our madhhab [school of Islamic law]."

Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf, Uzbekistan's former chief mufti, reports that Uzbekistan does have a "small number" of genuine Wahhabis. He said that in the mid-1990s Wahhabis destroyed elaborate gravestones in cemeteries on a few occasions. "But in reality the majority of those who call themselves Wahhabis in Uzbekistan have nothing to do with that branch of Islam," he told Forum 18 several months ago. "As soon as two imams have a disagreement, they immediately start calling each other Wahhabis. Here in Uzbekistan the word 'Wahhabi' has simply become a slang term applied by Muslims to a believer who has upset them." He added that the authorities also brand as Wahhabis independent Muslims who avoid visiting mosques controlled by the state.

Nazarov also complained that the Uzbek authorities were trying to set him against Sufi followers in Uzbekistan. "I have great respect for the founders of Sufism," he insisted to Forum 18. "But unfortunately there are many pagan rituals in Uzbekistan's Sufi Islamic community that have nothing to do with Islam. It is this distorted Sufism that the Uzbek authorities support, as an alternative to the true Islam."

Until recently, Sufism was indeed openly supported by the authorities as an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism, which calls for Islam to be cleansed of regional accretions and for a return to the original Islam of the time of the prophet Mohammed (see F18News 1 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=441). But at present, the authorities do not support Sufism and the NSS secret police regards the Sufist "myurid" (discipleship) system as a possible terrorist organisation (see F18News 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=319). (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 F18News 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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