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UZBEKISTAN: Sentenced for Wahhabism – or independence?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Human rights activist Surat Ikramov has denounced the 17-year prison sentence on charges of "religious extremism" imposed in September on former Tashkent imam Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov, one of a group of Uzbeks deported back to their homeland by the Kazakh authorities in late 2005. He was "an educated and influential imam who did not hide his independence from the authorities", Ikramov told Forum 18 News Service. "This sums up his sole crime." Jamshid Saidaliev, the lead judge at Fahrutdinov's trial, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Although Uzbekistan has suffered from Islamist-related violence, it is very difficult to establish independently how true government accusations against individual suspects are. The Uzbek authorities refuse to allow independent mosques to function, forcing all to be subject to the state-sponsored and controlled Muslim Board.

With the Uzbek authorities refusing to allow independent mosques and Muslim organisations to function, the latest independent imam to be sentenced to a long term of imprisonment is Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov. The government alleges that he is a "Wahhabi" and therefore - by its definition – a religious extremist. "Fahrutdinov, like [exiled imam] Obidhon qori Nazarov, was an educated and influential imam who did not hide his independence from the authorities. This sums up his sole crime," Surat Ikramov, chairman of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, complained to Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tashkent on 10 October. "'Wahhabi' is simply a term of abuse applied by the authorities to independent Muslims." He said such independent Muslims continue to face persecution, pointing to another arrest of a "Wahhabi" in early October.

Although Uzbekistan has suffered from Islamist-related violence in recent years, it is very difficult to establish independently how true government accusations against individual suspects are, especially given the subjugation of the courts to the executive and the repression of any actual or potential opposition to the government. The authorities frequently use the term "Wahhabi" – mostly inaccurately – for any Muslim who works outside the framework of the government-sponsored muftiate (Muslim Board), regardless of their Muslim orientation.

Unlike minority religious faiths in Uzbekistan, which the government controls from outside, Islam as the largest faith is controlled from inside. As the then head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shoazim Minovarov, told Forum 18 earlier this year, all mosques in Uzbekistan must be subject to the authority of the muftiate. This in turn is completely under the control of the state. Many mosques functioned independently of the muftiate until 1998 when – in the wake of the adoption of the harsh new religion law – all places of worship were required to re-register to be allowed to continue to exist. Many mosques were then closed for failing to re-register as government pressure on all religious communities increased.

On 15 September in the Tashkent suburb of Chirchik, Tashkent City Criminal Court sentenced Fahrutdinov to 17 years' imprisonment, to be served in a general regime labour camp. The court building was cordoned off by about 50 Interior Ministry officers dressed in camouflage or police uniform, wearing bullet-proof vests and armed with automatic weapons. Ikramov complained that no observers and none of Fahrutdinov's close relatives were allowed into the court.

Fahrutdinov was sentenced under at least four articles of the Criminal Code: Article 159 "Undermining the constitutional basis of the Republic of Uzbekistan", Article 216 "Illegally setting up public organisations or religious organisations", Article 244-1 "Preparing or distributing documents that pose a threat to public safety and public order", and Article 244-2 "Setting up, leading, or participating in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations".

Jamshid Saidaliev, the lead judge at Fahrutdinov's trial, refused absolutely to discuss the case by telephone. "Send me a written request and only then will I talk to you," he told Forum 18 on 11 October from his office at Tashkent City Criminal Court.

Fahrutdinov – who had served as an imam in Tashkent before fleeing the country - was arrested in the city of Shymkent in southern Kazakhstan and was one of nine people deported by Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan in November 2005. The Uzbek authorities accused all nine of having links with Obidhon qori Nazarov, the former imam of Tashkent's Tukhtaboi mosque now in exile in Europe, who the Uzbek government claims is a Wahhabi leader (see F18News 12 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=758). Fahrutdinov counted himself as imam Nazarov's most influential pupil.

Nazarov is one of Uzbekistan's most popular Muslim theologians. Over 1,000 Muslims used to meet in the 1990s at the Tukhtaboi

mosque where he was imam, and recordings of his sermons – which the authorities regard as illegal - are still being distributed throughout Uzbekistan. In 1998 – after publicly criticising the authorities' decision to ban beards and the hijab (headscarf worn by some Muslim women) - Nazarov was forced to leave Uzbekistan to avoid arrest. 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 madhhab (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.

Nevertheless, Nazarov voices views that are typical of the Hanbali madhhab. He strongly opposes the veneration of holy places and favours a ban on music at weddings. He also believes that women should wear the paranja (a full-length robe designed to completely hide the outline of a woman's body). Interestingly, in June this year Uzbekistan's former chief mufti Muhamad Sadyk Muhamad Yusuf, who can be considered a source of information independent of the president Islam Karimov, said that both Nazarov and Fahrutdinov could be identified as so-called Wahhabis. "It is true that both Nazarov and Fahrutdinov follow the Hanbali madhhab which is widespread in Saudi Arabia," he told Forum 18. "But it does not follow from this that these people are terrorists."

Human rights activist Ikramov told Forum 18 that another "Wahhabi" was arrested soon after Fahrutdinov was sentenced. Bahrom Niyozov was arrested on 6 October in Chirchik and is under investigation on suspicion of taking part in the "Wahhabi" religious movement.

Ikramov said that police officers arrived during the night and broke down the door of the apartment where Niyozov was staying to break in. They put him in handcuffs and started to beat him, at which point the noise caused neighbours to come out to find out what was going on. Nothing suspicious was found during a search of the apartment. Niyozov was taken to the Interior Ministry investigation cells, where his wife Nodira Niyozova reports that police officers subjected him to a severe beating until 11 o'clock at night.

At a preliminary hearing, Niyozov was accused under Criminal Code Article 244-2 "Setting up, leading or participating in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations".

"Bahrom is a believer, he says regular prayers, but is not a member of any religious movement," Ikramov quoted Nodira Niyozova as telling him. "He had to spend three years in hiding because of the repression of believers, whom the law enforcement agencies subject to beatings and trumped-up criminal 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=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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