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UZBEKISTAN: Roadblocks around trial, more Nursi readers arrested

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Uzbekistan has begun the trial of Hairulla Hamidov, a journalist arrested for Muslim religious activity, and 18 others, human rights defender Surat Ikramov has told Forum 18 News Service. The trial is being conducted in a building 30 km [19 miles] from the capital Tashkent, which is surrounded by roadblocks to bar access to close relatives, journalists and human rights defenders. Only a few of the defendants have lawyers appointed by their families. The rest have state-appointed lawyers, who will "do nothing to defend them" Ikramov insisted. The defendants face criminal charges with penalties ranging from a fine of 50 times the monthly minimum salary to 15 years in jail. Elsewhere, arrests of readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi continue, and some previously arrested Nursi readers are still awaiting trial. As part of its harsh punishments for those who conduct peaceful religious activity the government does not control, Uzbekistan routinely imposes prison terms. Known prisoners of conscience jailed for religious activity are Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians.

Tashkent Regional Criminal Court on 29 April began hearing the case against Hairulla Hamidov, a journalist arrested for his Muslim religious activity, and 18 others, Surat Ikramov, an independent human rights defender told Forum 18 News Service from the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 5 May. Meanwhile, the latest arrests of readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi came in early April in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Region, sources have told Forum 18.

As part of its harsh punishments for those who conduct peaceful religious activity the government does not control, Uzbekistan routinely imposes prison terms on religious believers. At least 47 Nursi readers were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years in 2009 (see F18News 31 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1344). Short-term jailings of up to 15-days on religious minorities have recently re-started with the jailing of two Protestant Christians and a Jehovah's Witness (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438).

Similarly, Mehrinisso Hamdamova and two other Muslim women in Karshi [Qarshi] were given prison sentences of up to seven years in April (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

As well as many Muslim prisoners of conscience, Protestant Christian pastor Dmitry Shestakov from Andijan [Andijon] is in the final year of a four year term handed down in 2007. Three Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are serving sentences of between three and a half and four years for "illegal" religious activity. The three are: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev (see F18News 6 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1280).

More recently, Baptist prisoner of conscience Tohar Haydarov was given a ten-year jail term on drugs charges in Guliston in March. Church members insisted to Forum 18 that the charges were fabricated to punish him for his faith. His appeal was rejected in April (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Closed trial with roadblocks

The trial of Hamidov and 18 others is being conducted in the building of Yangiyul District Criminal Court, 30 km [19 miles] from Tashkent. Roadblocks have been set up by the authorities two km [just over one mile] away from the court building. "Close relatives of the defendants, journalists and human rights defenders are not being allowed to attend the hearing," Ikramov told Forum 18. He added that only a few of the defendants have lawyers appointed by their families. The rest are having to rely on state-appointed lawyers. "They'll do nothing to defend them," he insisted.

Hamidov was initially charged with breaking Criminal Code Article 216 ("Illegal establishment or reactivation of illegal public associations or religious organisations as well as active participation in their activities") (see F18News 17 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1410). The other 18 defendants are charged with breaking a variety of Criminal Code articles.

In the indictment signed on 2 April by Lieutenant Colonel N. Ayupov, Chief Investigator of Tashkent Regional National Security

Service (NSS) secret police, and approved on 12 April by Tashkent Region's Deputy Prosecutor Muzaffar Egamberdiyev, which Forum 18 has seen:

- Hamidov's charges have been made more severe, as he is now charged with breaking Criminal Code's Articles 244-2 Part 1 ("creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations"), and 244-1 Part 3 a ("preparation or distribution of materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction of individuals, or aimed at creating a panic among the population, as well as the use of religion for purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilizing fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and public order – a) with previous planning or by a group of individuals");

- Zoir Jurayev, Gulom Ziyoyev, Abdurahim Bayboev, Ulugbek Payziyev, Doniyor Ibrahimov, Abrar Turakulov, Anvarjon Kayumov, Mukhamadnizoz Kayumov (Anvarjon's son), Umid Inamutdinov, Abdugarim Inamutdinov (Umid's father), Orol Togoymuratov, Bahodir Batyrov (a journalist who contributed to Hamidov's religious broadcasts), and Davlatjon Ibrahimov are charged with breaking Criminal Code Article 244-2 Part 1;

- Tohirjon Ismoilov is charged with breaking Criminal Code Articles 244-1 Part 3 a, and 216;

- Aziz Saidov, Saidhuja Erhujayev, Jahongir Hikmatov, and Izzatulla Saydullayev are charged with breaking Criminal Code Article 216.

Penalties for these offences range, depending on the precise Article, between a fine of 50 times the monthly minimum salary to 15 years in jail.

The Assistant of Tashkent Regional Criminal Court Chair, who did not give his name, said that only the Court's Chair could speak about the case. He asked Forum 18 on 7 May to call back in one hour. No-one answered the phone when Forum 18 called back.

An official of Tashkent Regional Prosecutor's Office, who also did not give his name, asked Forum 18 on 7 May to call back in 30 minutes. However, Deputy Prosecutor Egamberdiyev was then said to be busy and not available to talk.

It remains unclear why Hamidov and his co-defendants, as well as around 10 others were arrested. Human rights defender Ikramov, however, thinks that one factor may have been their presence at a celebration at a private party of the birth of a child, at which various Islamic movements were discussed (see F18News 17 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1410). A private video of the party was subsequently seized by the NSS secret police.

More Nursi readers arrested

Elsewhere, more readers of the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi have been arrested. Islomjon Manopov and a group of people who studied in Turkish-run colleges in Uzbekistan were arrested in Fergana Region at the beginning of April, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 6 May. "The exact number is unknown, but investigation of the case has finished and it will probably be heard in the regional criminal court."

Manopov studied in Turkey in the early 1990s, under a government programme, and on his return worked at Fergana State University as well as in the Fergana Turkish lyceum. He is also known in the region as a theatrical actor.

Fergana Regional Criminal Court refused to talk to Forum 18 on 6 May. The Assistant, who did not give his name, of Court Chair Radohan Mahmudova asked Forum to call back in one hour. When Forum 18 called back several times, the Assistant claimed that he could not hear Forum 18, although Forum 18 could clearly hear him.

Shukhrat Turdikulov, the religious affairs official in Fergana Regional Administration, refused to discuss the case on 7 May. As soon as he heard Forum 18's question about the case, he put the phone down.

Other Nursi readers await trial

Still awaiting trial are around 40 Nursi readers arrested in Bukhara [Bukhoro] in January (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Among them are a brother of Muzaffar Allayorov and a brother of Alisher Jumaev, sources who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Muzaffar Allayorov received a six-year prison term and Alisher Jumaev a five and a half year prison term at a trial of nine Nursi readers in Bukhara in April 2009. Their appeals were rejected in June 2009 (see F18News 4 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1306). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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