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UZBEKISTAN: "We look for men in beards as we are searching for terrorists"

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

From March onwards, Muslim men wearing long beards nationwide have been arrested, had their beards forcibly shaved, and been fined. The fines imposed range between about one month's to just over a week's average wages for those in work. Some Muslim men have told Forum 18 that they have since March kept their beards "trimmed and very thin" to avoid such punishments. Police have claimed shaving beards stops young men being "radicalised".

From March onwards, Muslim men across Uzbekistan wearing long beards have been arrested, had their beards forcibly shaved, and fined. Muslims who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18 of being arrested in and around mosques and street markets by police.

Nationwide, Muslim men with long beards have been arrested during raids led by State Secret Service (SSS) secret police and ordinary police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" officers. The men have then been taken to police stations, had their beards forcibly shaved, and then warned that they will be fined or receive short-term jail sentences if they wear a long beard again. The fines imposed have ranged between about one month's to just over a week's average wages for those in work (see below).

Some Muslim men have told Forum 18 that they have since March kept their beards "trimmed and very thin" to avoid such punishments (see below).

Regime officials have given a variety of excuses for their actions. During a March raid on a Tashkent mosque during Friday prayers, officials forced 15 male mosque attendees with beards into a room at the mosque, a Muslim who was present and wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Police then claimed to the men that young people were becoming radicalised and being influenced by what were described as "all kinds of religious movements". Police then claimed that, therefore, all beards must be shaved off. "If you follow their logic, a person who does not have a beard does not become radicalised," the Muslim commented (see below).

One police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" official claimed to Forum 18 that "we sometimes look for men in beards as we are searching for terrorists. It is difficult to determine who they are at first, and sometimes they look alike. But," he continued, "when there is no beard or very short beard we can identify the person" (see below).

When Forum 18 asked why people who the police did not identify as terrorists after an arrest still had their beards shaved, the police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" official claimed: "I think it was because they resist the police officers' demand that they go to a police station." He then refused to talk more, and claimed that "we cannot discuss cases with you without the permission of the Interior Ministry." The regime has often made allegations of alleged "terrorism" (typically against devout Muslims) without any credible evidence (see below).

Many police, Interior Ministry, SSS secret police, and court officials refused to explain to Forum 18 why Muslim men wearing long beards nationwide have from March onwards been arrested, had their beards forcibly shaved, and fined (see below).

Muslims and human rights defenders, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that they think the regime may be planning to attack women wearing the hijab in a similar way to attacks on men wearing long beards (see below).

Tashkent mosque raids

In March, the State Security Service (SSS) secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) and ordinary police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officers raided a Tashkent mosque during Friday prayers.

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anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Police then claimed to the men that young people were becoming radicalised and being influenced by what were described as "all kinds of religious movements". The police then claimed that, therefore, all beards must be shaved off.

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The regime has often made allegations of alleged "terrorism" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) (typically against devout Muslims) without any credible evidence. A symptom of this attitude is the long-standing involvement of police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" officers in human rights violations against people of all beliefs.

Some Muslim men have told Forum 18 that they have since March kept their beards "trimmed and very thin" to avoid such punishments.

In June, the SSS secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), ordinary police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officers, and Tashkent Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials raided a different mosque in Tashkent Region during Friday prayers.

Religious Affairs Committee official Odil Saidaliyev questioned the men who were present, one of them who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Saidaliyev then ordered all the men to shave off their beards.

Tashkent Regional Police spokesperson Captain Bobur Tulyaganov refused on both 29 July and 18 October to answer Forum 18's questions about the raids. After Forum 18 asked the questions he put the phone down and did not answer further calls.

Tashkent Religious Affairs Committee official Saidaliyev did not answer his phone whenever Forum 18 called on numerous occasions between 29 July and 18 October.

Raids, fines, and forcible beard shavings continue nationwide

Raids, fines, and forcible beard shavings have continued nationwide. When charges are brought against bearded men, they typically have been under Administrative Code Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order"), Administrative Code Article 183 ("Petty hooliganism"), and Administrative Code Article 184²⁴ ("Being in public places with the face covered to an extent that does not allow identification of a person"), introduced in September 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2864).

A typical example was a series of raids between 22 May and 29 May by Jizzakh Regional Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) on Jizzakh's Kuk bozor open air market. Muslim men wearing beards were arrested, ordered to shave off beards, prosecuted and fined. The fines imposed ranged between 1,700,000 Soms (about two weeks' average wages for those in formal work) and 680,000 Soms (just over a week's average wages for those in work).

A Jizzakh Regional Police officer, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 on 21 October that the raids and fines happened, but refused to explain why Muslim men are not allowed to grow long beards.

Regional Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officer Rahmiddin Pardayev, who took part in the raids, refused on 21 October to explain why Muslim men were ordered to shave off their beards and fined. He went on to claim that "we cannot do anything without the Interior Ministry in Tashkent agreeing, including talking to you." "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" Deputy Head Ilhom Hajamkulov put the phone down each time Forum 18 called him and introduced itself.

Judge Janibek Tangmatov of Jizzakh Court imposed some of the fines, and Court Chancellery officials who refused to give their names refused on 21 October to explain to Forum 18 why the Court fined Muslim men for wearing beards. Judge Tangmatov's assistant, Sardor Saadullayev, asked Forum 18 on 21 October to call back the following day as "the Judge is busy". When Forum 18 called back on 22 October, Saadullayev refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Tangmatov and also refused to explain why Muslim men were fined for wearing beards.

Andijan Region raids

Similar raids on bazaars and streets also took place in Andijan Region. For example, on 10 May Asaka District Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officers stopped in the street a Muslim man for wearing a long beard. Asaka District Court then fined him 3,400,000 Soms (just over one month's average wages for those in work).

On 13 June, Andijan Regional Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) raided Andijan's Jahon bazaar, an open air market. Timurshah Odilov, a local Muslim man with a beard, refused to go a police station to have his beard shaved off as he had a child with him. However, he told officers that he would shave off his beard at home.

One of the "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" officers then grabbed Odilov by the collar while another officer twisted his arm. They then took him to a police station to have his beard shaved off. He was then prosecuted for wearing a beard.

Judge Mukhayyakhon Turdiyeva of Andijan City Court fined Odilov 1,020,000 Soms (about one and a half weeks' average wages for those in formal work) under:

- Administrative Code Article 184⁴ ("Covering one's face in public places to the extent that it hinders identification");
- Administrative Code Article 183 ("Petty hooliganism");
- Administrative Code Article 184-3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ("Production, storage or distribution of works promoting national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred");
- and Administrative Code Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order").

Officer Murad Kasimov of Andijan Regional Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) on 21 October at first denied to Forum 18 that raids took place, or that Muslim men were stopped, had beards shaved off, and were fined. "I do not know where you take your facts but we do not raid looking for bearded men," he claimed.

When Forum 18 referred to cases it knew of, Officer Kasimov admitted that "maybe minor incidents took place, but there were no raids". He refused to explain why Muslim men wearing beards were targeted. He asked Forum 18 on 22 October call the head of Andijan Regional Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department," Kasim Maripov. When Forum 18 repeatedly called Maripov on 22 October, the duty officer put the phone down as soon as he heard Forum 18's name.

Andijan Regional Court officials on 21 and 22 October refused to explain to Forum 18 why courts fined Muslim men for wearing long beards. One official, Jovokhir Jubakov, Head of the Court's Chancellery, put the phone down on 21 October after Forum 18 asked questions about the fines.

"We sometimes look for men in beards as we are searching for terrorists"

In August in Namangan Region, police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officers stopped a Muslim man with a beard, who was then given a five-day short-term jail sentence under Administrative Code Article 183 ("Petty hooliganism").

Akramjon Omonov, Deputy Head of Namangan Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), on 21 October denied that Muslim men are punished for wearing long beards. His subordinate Mansur Valiyev claimed that "we sometimes look for men in beards as we are searching for terrorists. It is difficult to determine who they are at first, and sometimes they look alike. But," Valiyev continued, "when there is no beard or very short beard we can identify the person."

When Forum 18 asked why people who the police did not identify as terrorists after an arrest still had their beards shaved, Valiyev claimed: "I think it was because they resist the police officers' demand that they go to a police station." He then refused to talk more, and claimed that "we cannot discuss cases with you without the permission of the Interior Ministry".

Avazjon Khasanov, Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), would not explain to Forum 18 on 18 October why Muslim men were being punished nationwide for wearing beards. "I am not responsible for religious issues any longer, please talk to someone else," he claimed – even though Khasanov's colleagues stated he was still responsible for freedom of religion or belief cases. When Forum 18 called Khasanov again, he claimed that it was "a wrong number".

An SSS secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officer at their Tashkent headquarters on 18 October refused to talk about the raids and punishments for beards. He refused to give his name and claimed that "I am responsible for the Education Department". He refused to put Forum 18 through to any other responsible SSS officials.

Officials of the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), which is responsible along with other regime agencies for suppressing freedom of religion or belief, did not answer their phones on 21 or 22 October.

Regime plans attacks on women wearing hijab also?

Muslims and human rights defenders, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that they think the regime may be planning to attack women wearing the hijab in a similar way to attacks on men wearing long beards. They note that regime-controlled TV channels have since September been claiming that women who wear the hijab are doing something "foreign to Uzbek culture and tradition".

Some regime officials have also suggested that "officials and university and school teachers must carry out explanatory work among women not to wear the hijab", one human rights defender told Forum 18.

People the regime rules had wanted to see the 2021 Religion Law end a de facto hijab ban among other changes, but the regime paid little to no attention (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) to any suggestions made during its "consultations" before it adopted the Law.

The regime has in 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2727), in 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2712), and earlier targeted women wearing the hijab in a variety of ways. This includes adding devout Muslim women to the Preventative Register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), which results in a wide range of alleged "preventative measures".

From August 2018, a government decision imposed a secular dress code in all educational institutions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2472). This meant a de facto ban on female students covering their heads by wearing a hijab.

In 2021, officials warned parents across Uzbekistan of unspecified consequences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2658) if they teach Islam to their children, or if any of their children wear the hijab.

The regime is also in 2024 adopting a draft law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2919) to allegedly "further strengthen the rights of children". The Law would ban and introduce punishments for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18. The Senate – the upper chamber of the non-freely elected parliament – approved the draft law on 16 August, according to its website.

Existing laws target those who teach religion to under-18s, not the parents or guardians targeted by the draft Law. Many of the people the regime rules have expressed strong opposition to the draft Law. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18

Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY