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## UZBEKISTAN: Religious communities blocked from using own buildings, registering

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

*A wide range of religious communities continue to be blocked from using or repairing their own buildings, forcibly closed, gaining state registration, or having their grounds seized without compensation. These include Bukhara's registered Baptist Union Church, Tashkent Region's Abu Zar Mosque, Gazalkent's local Baptist Union Church, Gulistan's Baptist Church, Urgench Council of Churches Baptists, Jehovah's Witness communities nationwide, and the country's only functioning Buddhist temple in Tashkent. Officials do not answer their phones, refuse to answer, or give evasive excuses when questioned by Forum 18 about this.*

Bukhara's registered Baptist Union Church has not been able to meet publicly for worship since May 2021. After a broken water pipe caused damage, the authorities sealed the Church building. Baptists told Forum 18 that they want to rebuild the Church building, but were told that they cannot do this as the regime's Cultural Heritage Agency will allow repair work to be done only by a specialised state company. A neighbour's house collapsed at the same time, but local authorities allowed them to rebuild their own house.

Bukhara City Administration "keeps promising us that they will hand over the building to us and asked us that we sign a paper we have received 500,000 Sums [about a week's average wages] for the repair work", Baptists told Forum 18. "We are not so naive, and did not sign any papers." Baptists added that they think that the "local officials may have expropriated the funds and are trying to cover it up". Corruption has long been endemic in the country, including in relation to freedom of religion or belief violations (see below).

The Head of the City Administration, Kurbon Tursunov, claimed to Forum 18 that "we cannot give the building to the Church without the permission of the central government in Tashkent as the Church is not a state entity but a private entity." He appeared evasive when Forum 18 asked whether the central government had been asked for permission, dropping his voice and mumbling: "Yes we have, but maybe they have not had time to look at our request." He then claimed that the central government will answer within a week. Officials in the Office of the Prime Minister in Tashkent did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called (see below).

Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov on 24 June ordered the seizure and possible demolition of more than 400 unregistered mosques and houses, built by residents but not registered with the Justice Ministry. In mid-July 2024, a State Security Service (SSS) secret police officer and an official of the local Administration's Religious Affairs Department came to Abu Zar Mosque in Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. They said that as the Mosque is not functioning, it will be handed over for business use. A local Muslim linked the move to the Prime Minister's reported 24 June order (see below).

Abu Zar Mosque, built with state permission, functioned from the 1990s. The regime closed the mosque in 2007 and it has not functioned since then, despite campaigns by local Muslims to reopen it. When Forum 18 on 25 April pointed out to Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, that the Abu Zar Mosque was built by the mosque community who would like to pray every day in their own mosque, and that travel to other mosques can be difficult, Azomkhanov did not address those points. On 21 November he refused to speak to Forum 18 about the continued forced closure of Abu Zar Mosque (see below).

Gazalkent's local Baptist Church, part of the state-registered nationwide Baptist Union, has repeatedly tried to register with the regime. However, Bostanlyk District authorities in Tashkent Region continue to refuse registration applications. "The Church can hold meetings in the building without any interference from the authorities," Baptists told Forum 18. "But we would like to gain legal status so that we are not in a situation when at any time the Church could be prosecuted for the 'illegal' exercise of freedom of religion or belief." Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, claimed not to be able to hear Forum 18 when it called him, although the line was clear. He then switched his phone to a fax machine. Bostanlyk District Administration officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called (see below).

In June 2024, Baptists in Gulistan asked Syrdarya Region Architecture and Justice Departments to register a new building the

congregation had built on land they own. Although the congregation has met for worship in the new building, they want registration as "it is safer under the law to have meetings in a registered building." However, the Regional Justice and Architecture Departments refused the application. The excuse given was that the Land Cadastre Department refused to recognise the sale of the land to the Baptists when the original landowner tried to register the sale. The mainly unoccupied building has now been damaged by vandalism, including broken windows. Repairing the damage is likely to be expensive for the congregation (see below).

Sherzod Rasulov, who is responsible for the registration of religious organisations in Syrdarya Regional Justice Department, claimed to Forum 18: "We do not have a problem to register them, but the Regional Administration and Architecture Department have not given them permission." He then refused to discuss the issue more with Forum 18. Land Cadastre Department officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called. Irkin Muminov, Deputy Head of Syrdarya Regional Administration, refused to tell Forum 18 why his Administration refuses to register the Baptists' new church building. "I do not know you and we have been told not to give any information over the phone," he claimed (see below).

On 25 April, two buildings under construction belonging to Urgench Council of Churches Baptists were ordered to be destroyed and were partially demolished. The demolition was halted after protests, but they are not being permitted to repair the damage or complete the construction of the buildings, local Baptists told Forum 18. Khorezm Regional Administration officials, and Zafarbek Khojaniyazov of the Land Cadastre Department (who is responsible for dealing with complaints) all did not answer whenever Forum 18 contacted them. So Forum 18 was unable to ask why they are refusing to give permission for the Baptists to repair the damage the regime has caused and complete the construction work (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses have made multiple attempts over many years to gain registration for their communities in Uzbekistan outside the town of Chirchik, the only place where they have a registered community. This problem exists throughout Uzbekistan, with regime officials frequently using property-based excuses to block registration applications from a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities. Such refusals cause many problems for religious communities seeking to exercise their freedom of religion or belief. The Religion Law does not allow religious communities to meet outside their registered address, and such meetings can face police raids (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses have many times sought to meet officials to discuss how to solve the problems caused by the regime's human rights violations. One such meeting was on 5 July with Dilnoza Muratova, Deputy Director of the state-controlled National Human Rights Centre. She claimed that Uzbekistan could not implement human rights obligations "since there are no tools in Uzbek law". Muratova did not explain why, when her state-controlled Centre was drafting the Religion Law, it was not drafted in a way that provided "tools" to implement legally-binding human rights obligations instead of "tools" to violate them. Forum 18 asked the Centre's Chief Specialist, Amir Khamidov, to explain this. He refused to answer, claiming: "I need to get permission from the leadership to answer you" (see below).

The grounds of the only functioning Buddhist temple in Uzbekistan, the Chaynsa (Compassion) temple in Tashkent, has long been under threat from the local authorities. In Buddhist belief this is a serious matter, as each part of a temple grounds has a sacred significance. The expansion of Tashkent's metro line was initially planned to include the demolition of the Chaynsa Temple. The Temple was not demolished, but a 12 meter wide overpass for the metro line was built 5 meters above the Temple grounds and close to the Temple itself. "Although the noise from the metro line is not loud, a lot of dust from the line collects in the grounds and on the temple every day," members of the Buddhist Community told Aleksei Volosevich, the editor of Asia Terra independent Tashkent news website (see below).

The community wants the existing Temple to be moved to another location and reconstructed according to Buddhist beliefs. They also wanted any agreement to be made in writing and signed by the relevant officials, as well as published immediately. Contrary to their previous agreement, Zangiota District Administration has not given the Buddhist community a plot of land for a new temple and no agreement was reached at the July 2022 meeting. Tashkent Administration officials and Religious Affairs Committee officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. So Forum 18 was unable to ask them why they have not honoured their promise to the Buddhist community to provide them with another plot of land for their Temple (see below).

#### Bukhara Baptist Church still blocked from using its building

The registered Baptist Union Church in the historical part of the south-western city of Bukhara has not been able to meet publicly for worship ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2888](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888)) since May 2021. After a broken water pipe caused damage because the authorities sealed the Church building, which dates from 1971. Baptists told Forum 18 that they wanted to rebuild the Church building, but were told that they cannot do this as the regime's Cultural Heritage Agency will allow repair work to be done only by a specialised state company. A neighbour's house collapsed at the same time, but local authorities allowed them to rebuild their own house ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2888](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888)).

"We asked the authorities to allow us to repair the new building, since they are not doing anything with it now, or allow us to construct a new building in the place of our sealed building," Baptists told Forum 18 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)). "But they refused both our proposals."

Sukhrob Ochilov, Head of the Heritage Department's Bukhara regional division, wrote to the Church's pastor in July 2024, claiming the Department was not competent ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)) to remove the church building from the heritage register to allow it to be rebuilt. Ochilov declined to talk to Forum 18.

Officials in 2024 appear to have changed their attitude to church members. "Last year [2023] at least they were listening to us and promising that they will help us. Now some officials tell us directly to our face: Leave my office and get lost!" local Baptists told Forum 18 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)). They did not want to identify these officials, for fear of state reprisals

Since May 2021 the Church has been meeting privately in members' homes and renting public buildings, Bukhara Baptists told Forum 18 on 19 November. Bukhara City Administration was allocated funds by the government to repair a building offered to the Baptists ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2888](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888)), but has not begun the repairs, Baptists told Forum 18.

Bukhara City Administration "keeps promising us that they will hand over the building to us and asked us that we sign a paper we have received 500,000 Sums [about a week's average wages] for the repair work," Baptists told Forum 18. "We are not so naive, and did not sign any papers." Baptists added that they think that the "local officials may have expropriated the funds and are trying to cover it up."

Corruption has long been endemic (<https://www.uzbekforum.org/category/our-programs/corruption/>) in the country, including in relation to freedom of religion or belief violations ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)). Many are reluctant to discuss corruption as a factor in the human rights violations they experience, yet there appears to be a strong connection between human rights violations and corruption (<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Defying%20Exclusion%202021.pdf>).

Nozim Nurov, Deputy Head of Bukhara City Administration, claimed to Forum 18 on 19 November that "We cannot resume work on the building since there are some legal issues our administration's lawyers are working on." He then declined to talk further.

The Head of the City Administration, Kurbon Tursunov who was appointed on 1 May, claimed to Forum 18 on 19 November that "we cannot give the building to the Church without the permission of the central government in Tashkent as the Church is not a state entity but a private entity." He appeared to be evasive when Forum 18 asked whether the central government had been asked for permission, dropping his voice and mumbling: "Yes we have, but maybe they have not had time to look at our request." He then claimed that the central government will answer within a week.

Officials in the Office of Prime Minister in Tashkent did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November.

Tashkent Region's Abu Zar Mosque still closed

Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov on 24 June ordered the seizure and possible demolition ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)) of more than 400 unregistered mosques and houses, built by residents but not registered with the Justice Ministry. Prime Minister Aripov has long been hostile – like the regime – to Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief outside state control ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)). In September 2023, he is reported to have warned state officials not to attend mosques ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2864](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2864)).

Officials in the Office of Prime Minister did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. So Forum 18 was unable to ask them why the regime has ordered the demolition of unregistered mosques.

In mid-July 2024, a State Security Service ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) (SSS) secret police officer and an official of the local Administration's Religious Affairs Department came to Abu Zar Mosque in Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. They said that as the Mosque is not functioning, it will be handed over for business use ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)). A local Muslim linked the move to the Prime Minister's reported 24 June order that unregistered Mosques should be demolished or handed over for business use.

"They just came, brazenly told us this and said that no one from the mahalla [local district] should get angry about it," a local Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2927](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927)).

Abu Zar Mosque, built with state permission, functioned from the 1990s. The regime closed the mosque in 2007 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2752](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2752)) and it has not functioned since then, despite campaigns by local Muslims to reopen it. "Mahalla residents have actively tried to register it since 2017, going to all state agencies," the Muslim said. "Finally, in

2022 officials promised us that it would soon be re-opened. A full-scale renovation then took place. Now they are acting like this – I don't even know what to call it."

The regime has a long-standing policy of blocking state registration attempts ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2752](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2752)) by Shia and Sunni Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, and other religious communities, making it impossible for them to meet legally. Often the excuses used are property-related, with officials taking full advantage of the opportunities provided to them by the Religion Law for arbitrary and inconsistent actions. This has continued in 2024 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)).

Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, defended the regime's blocking of the Abu Zar Mosque community's registration attempts. "There are very large mosques in the areas where Muslims can pray, and they can attend those," he claimed to Forum 18 on 25 April ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)). "Those Mosques also have convenient parking places for private cars. Why don't they just attend those Mosques?"

When Forum 18 pointed out that the Abu Zar Mosque was built by the mosque community who would like to pray every day in their own mosque, and that travel to other mosques can be difficult, Azomkhanov did not address those points ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)). On 21 November he refused to speak to Forum 18 about the continued forced closure of the Abu Zar Mosque.

Gazalkent Baptist Church repeatedly denied state registration

The local Baptist Church in Gazalkent in Bostanlyk District of Tashkent Region, which is part of the state-registered nationwide Baptist Union, has repeatedly tried to re-register with the regime after the 1999 Religion Law imposed compulsory re-registration on religious communities. The 2021 Religion Law ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) continues to impose a burdensome and arbitrary registration procedure, which violates the regime's legally-binding international human rights obligations.

However, Bostanlyk District authorities continue to refuse registration applications, Baptists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 19 November 2024. "The Church can hold meetings in the building without any interference from the authorities," Baptists told Forum 18. "But we would like to gain legal status so that we are not in a situation when at any time the Church could be prosecuted ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) for the 'illegal' exercise of freedom of religion or belief."

Bostanlyk District Administration first refused a registration application in May 2000, alleging that registering a non-Baptist Protestant church in the District had caused riots. The Baptists had not heard of these alleged riots in their District, and the regime did not substantiate these claims with evidence. "The District Administration then told Gazalkent Baptists to attend the Russian Orthodox Church instead."

Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, claimed on 21 November not to be able to hear Forum 18 when it called him, although the line was clear. He then switched his phone to a fax machine.

Bostanlyk District Administration officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November.

Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. So Forum 18 was unable to ask them why the regime continues to, against its legally-binding international human rights obligations, obstruct state registration attempts and ban the unregistered exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Gulistan Baptist Church repeatedly denied state registration

Regime officials in Syrdarya Region south-west of Tashkent refused in 2019 to register ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2527](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2527)) a local Baptist Union congregation in Gulistan, local Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18. The congregation eventually gained state registration, but "the registered address where we meet for worship is very small place, a 15 square meter room in a private house which does not have space for all our members," local Baptists explained to Forum 18.

In June 2024 the Baptists asked Syrdarya Region Architecture and Justice Departments to register a new building the congregation had built on land they own. Although the congregation has met for worship in the new building, they want registration as "it is safer under the law to have meetings in a registered building".

However, the Regional Justice and Architecture Departments refused the application. The excuse given was that the Land Cadastre (Registry) Department refused to recognise the sale of the land to the Baptists when the original landowner tried to register the sale.

In 2019 the absence of a document from the Land Cadastre (Registry) Department was one of the excuses used to refuse a registration application ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2527](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2527)).

The mainly unoccupied building has now been damaged by vandalism, including broken windows. Repairing the damage is likely to be expensive for the congregation.

Sherzod Rasulov, who is responsible for the registration of religious organisations in Syrdarya Regional Justice Department, claimed to Forum 18 on 20 November 2024: "We do not have a problem to register them, but the Regional Administration and Architecture Department have not given them permission." He then refused to discuss the issue more with Forum 18.

Land Cadastre (Registry) Department officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November.

Irkin Muminov, Deputy Head of Syrdarya Regional Administration, refused to say why his Administration refuses to register the Baptists' new church building. "I do not know you and we have been told not to give any information over the phone," he claimed to Forum 18 on 20 November.

Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November.

Urgench Baptist Church demolition stopped, church still not allowed to build

On 25 April, Judge Nurlubay Akimniyazov ordered the destruction of two buildings under construction belonging to Urgench Council of Churches Baptists. The decision, which against Uzbek law the Baptists had not seen, entered into force on 27 May. Demolition began on 30 July ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2926](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926)). One of the buildings was intended to be a church.

The Judge, regime officials, and state-appointed Muslim clerics involved in the destruction have either refused to explain the demolition order or given contradictory explanations, and officials have stated they are "determined to complete the demolition sooner or later".

Council of Churches Baptists do not seek state permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief, and normally meet for worship in homes owned by church members. Under Uzbekistan's legally-binding international human rights obligations, the Baptists have the right to exercise their freedom of religion or belief in these ways, as the OSCE / Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/139046.pdf>) note.

The demolition stopped after the Baptists complained. However, officials do not allow them to repair the damage or complete the construction of the buildings. "We are waiting for the regional authorities to give us permission to go ahead with the construction," local Baptists told Forum 18 on 21 November.

Khorezm Regional Administration officials, Zafarbek Khojaniyazov of the Land Cadastre Department (who is responsible for dealing with complaints ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2926](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926))) all did not answer whenever Forum 18 contacted them between 21 and 25 November. So Forum 18 was not able to ask them why they are refusing to give permission for the Baptists to repair the damage the regime has caused and complete the construction work.

Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November.

Jehovah's Witness registration attempts still blocked

Jehovah's Witnesses have made multiple attempts over many years to gain registration for their communities in Uzbekistan outside the town of Chirchik, the only place where they have a registered community. "Each time the communities faced insurmountable obstacles from state authorities," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 in June 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2752](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2752)).

This problem exists throughout Uzbekistan, with regime officials very frequently using property-based excuses to block registration applications from a variety of Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities. "The Religion Law gives the authorities unlimited powers to refuse our registration, to our regret," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 in April 2024 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)).

Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. So Forum 18 was unable to ask

them why the regime continues to, against its legally-binding international human rights obligations, obstruct state registration attempts and ban the unregistered exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Such refusals cause many problems for religious communities seeking to exercise their freedom of religion or belief. For example, the Religion Law does not allow religious communities to meet outside their registered address ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)), and such meetings can face police raids.

In March 2024, Navoi Police raided the local Jehovah's Witnesses' commemoration of the Memorial of Jesus' Death – the most important annual event for Jehovah's Witnesses. Five police officers between 07.00 am and 09.30 "pounded on the door and windows of the flat".

The head of Navoi Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)), Yusufbek Ismoilov, refused to explain to Forum 18 on 26 November why his officers raided the meeting, claiming that he could not hear well.

The Jehovah's Witness community in the capital Tashkent has long tried to gain state registration – so far in vain. During the latest registration attempt in 2024, Tashkent City Administration refused an application ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)) for a building to be designated as the Tashkent community's legal address. Such an address is necessary for a state registration application.

The regime claimed that urban planning construction regulations prevented the building from being the community's legal address, and that "a number of [unspecified] neighbours of the Jehovah's Witnesses in their mahalla [local district] had in the [unspecified] past made [unspecified] complaints against the community."

On 6 February, Judge Olimjan Shamsiyev of Tashkent Inter-District Administrative Court rejected the Jehovah's Witnesses complaint against the decision. He claimed that as local authorities have "discretionary powers" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)) to refuse a request to use a building as their legal address, "the contested decision cannot be considered illegal". Shamsiyev also defended the use of alleged "complaints" by unspecified "neighbours" as a reason for Tashkent Administration to reject the Jehovah's Witness application. He refused on 23 April to discuss his claims with Forum 18, or to explain what religious communities could do ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2905](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905)) when faced with arbitrary regime decisions.

Jehovah's Witnesses have many times sought to meet officials to discuss how to solve the problems caused by the regime's human rights violations. One such meeting was on 5 July with Dilnoza Muratova, Deputy Director of the state-controlled National Human Rights Centre.

Muratova claimed that Uzbekistan could not implement United Nations Human Rights Committee Concluding Observations (such as those from May 2020 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699))) "since there are no tools in Uzbek law".

Uzbekistan ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>) (ICCPR) and its Optional Protocol (OP1) (under which individual complaints are made (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/FactSheet7Rev.2.pdf>)) in 1995. By voluntarily doing this, Uzbekistan took on both the binding international human rights law obligations of the ICCPR, and the obligation to correct any violations of its obligations (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms/international-human-rights-law>) – such as violations found by the UN Human Rights Committee.

Muratova did not explain why, when her state-controlled Centre was drafting the Religion Law ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2576](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2576)), it was not drafted in a way that provided "tools" to implement human rights obligations instead of "tools" to violate them ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)).

On 26 November 2024, Forum 18 asked the Centre's Chief Specialist, Amir Khamidov, to explain this. He refused to answer. "I need to get permission from the leadership to answer you," he claimed. He could not specify when he might get permission and then refused to talk more to Forum 18.

Will Tashkent officials honour their promise to the Buddhist community?

The grounds of the only functioning Buddhist temple in Uzbekistan, the Chaynsa (Compassion) temple in Tashkent, has long been under threat from the local authorities. In 2018, Zangiota District Administration wanted to seize most of the temple grounds to expand a road. In Buddhist belief this is a serious matter, as each part of a temple grounds has a sacred significance. A compromise was eventually reached, Cabar news agency reported on 30 January 2019 (<https://cabar.asia/en/a-bit-of-zen-in-tashkent-the-structure-of-the-only-functioning-buddhist-temple-in-central-asia>), under which a plot of land of equivalent size will be given to the Buddhist community to build a new temple.

However, the expansion of the Circle Line of Tashkent's metro was initially planned to include the demolition of the Chaynsa Temple. The Temple was not demolished, but in early 2023 a 12 meter wide overpass for the metro line was built 5 meters above the Temple grounds and close to the Temple itself. "Although the noise from the metro line is not loud, a lot of dust from the line collects in the grounds and on the temple every day," members of the Buddhist Community told Aleksei Volosevich, the editor of Asia Terra independent Tashkent news website, in November 2024.

Aleksandr Khegay of the Buddhist community on 13 July 2022 met a Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) official and Almardon Karshiyev, head of Tashkent City Administration's section responsible for work with religious organisations, to discuss the relocation of the Temple.

The community wanted the existing Temple to be not demolished, but moved to another location and reconstructed according to Buddhist beliefs. They also wanted any agreement to be made in writing and signed by relevant officials, as well as published immediately. Contrary to their previous agreement, Zangiota District Administration has not given the Buddhist community a plot of land for a new temple and no agreement was reached at the July 2022 meeting.

Tashkent Administration officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November 2024. Religious Affairs Committee ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2699](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)) officials, including Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov, also did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 21 and 27 November. So Forum 18 was unable to ask them why they have not honoured their promise to the Buddhist community to provide them with another plot of land for their Temple. (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](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](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