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UZBEKISTAN: Has imam been framed?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

One day before he was due to take up his post as imam of a mosque in the town of Margelan, a satellite town near Fergana, young imam Alokxon Ishankhojayev was arrested after police and secret police officers claim to have discovered a gun and bullets during a house search. At his trial, which began on 17 June, five witnesses retracted earlier testimony that he had tried to turn them against the constitutional order. One admitted he was drunk that day and had signed a statement the secret police had drawn up without reading it. Ishankhojayev denied the charges. "I am a believer and have nothing to do with politics, let alone with terrorist activity," Forum 18 News Service heard him tell the court. Prosecutors are continuing the case.

The prosecution case against a young imam is in disarray after five witnesses who had claimed to police that he had turned them against the constitutional order retracted their testimony in court. The imam, Alokxon Ishankhojayev, was arrested in March in Margelan, a satellite town near Fergana [Farghona] in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley. His trial under articles 248 of the criminal code (unlawful possession of firearms) and 159 (undermining the constitutional basis of the republic of Uzbekistan) began on 17 June. He denies the charges. "The case against Ishankhojayev has been cobbled together so badly that there is reason to hope that he will succeed in establishing his innocence," local human rights activist Akhmajon Madmarov told Forum 18 News Service from Margelan on 25 June after the second hearing. However, prosecutors seem determined to continue the court case and it remains unclear when a verdict will be handed down.

A graduate of the medresseh in the capital Tashkent, Ishankhojayev had been appointed imam of Margelan's Kulka-tash mosque and was due to take up his post on 1 April. However, on 31 March officers of the secret police (National Security Service, NSS) and the police came to his house with a search warrant. During their search, the officers claim to have discovered a gun and bullets and immediately arrested him.

At the first court hearing on 17 June, where Forum 18 was also present, Ishankhojayev said that the weapon had been planted on him. "I am a believer and have nothing to do with politics, let alone with terrorist activity," he told the court. "Weapons are simply no use to me." He pointed out to the judge that one of the bullets had been "found" between the pages of a copy of the Koran. "It's simply ridiculous - no believer would keep a bullet in the Holy Book."

In his turn, the judge Burkhan Usmanov asked in detail about what Ishankhojayev had studied in 1991 under a certain "unofficial" mullah Anvar (whose surname was not given in court), who had later been convicted for being a member of the banned Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir. "I was 15 years old in 1991, and Anvar taught me only about Islam," Ishankhojayev insisted. "At that time no-one in Uzbekistan knew about Hizb-ut-Tahrir and in general Anvar did not talk to us about politics."

One of the main accusations - that Ishankhojayev had turned others against the constitutional order - appears to be fabricated. The witness Isroja Muminov, one of those whom Ishankhojayev supposedly turned against the constitutional order, completely retracted his evidence in the courtroom. "I was drunk that day," Muminov told the court on 17 June. "I was suddenly called into the NSS offices and asked to sign some papers. I didn't even read them. In fact, not only did Ishankhojayev not work on me, I don't even know him."

Other witnesses also retracted their evidence at the next court hearing on 23 June. According to the human rights activist Madmarov, who attended the second court hearing, all four witnesses questioned that day, who had previously signed declarations stating that Ishankhojayev had tried to turn them against the constitutional order, retracted their evidence.

Madmarov told Forum 18 that in the wake of the terrorist attacks at the end of March and beginning of April, the National Security Service and the police "evidently had a plan for how many people should be arrested on suspicion of committing the terrorist attacks" (see F18News 4 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334). He said most of those arrested were devout Muslims and claimed that Ishankhojayev is a victim of "this witch hunt".

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY