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UZBEKISTAN: Increased jailing of Muslims for being Muslim

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

There has recently been an increase in trials in which Muslim religious convictions form part of the case against devout Muslims, Forum 18 News Service has noted. Thus, unusually, Uzbekistan has this month jailed two followers (adepts) of Sufi Islam, a movement which was supported by the authorities but which they now view with great suspicion. Also jailed were eight Muslims whose only crime seems to have been forming a kind of "club" of like-minded people, who discussed religion and read the Koran, as well as Mannobjon Rahmatullaev, who was kidnapped from Russia and sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment. The trial of 23 Muslim businessmen, who are accused of belonging to an Islamic charitable organisation continues. Before now, devout Muslims put on trial by the authorities were usually only accused of terrorist activity without any convincing evidence. Protestant Christians, the relics of Russian Orthodox saints and martyrs, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, have all also recently been targeted by the authorities.

In a relatively rare move, Uzbekistan has this month jailed two followers (adepts) of Sufi Islam, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 17 February, judge Muhiddin Saifuddinov of the Tashkent regional criminal court jailed Abdurashid Toshmatov and Nurali Umrzokov for six years. The charges against the accused, both of whom said they were innocent of any crime, were that they had broken article 159 (undermining the constitutional order) and 244-1 (preparation or distribution of materials containing a threat to public security and public order) of the Criminal Code.

Tashkent human rights activist Surat Ikramov, who attended the hearings, told Forum 18 that it became clear during the trial that both Muslims are adherents of the Sufi Naqshbandi order. Ikramov believes the case against the two men was completely fabricated and that they had no connection to the banned Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir movement. "Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets were planted on them during their arrest and they were cruelly tortured in the investigation prison to try to get them to confess," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 21 February. (An outline of Hizb ut-Tahir's aims is given at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.)

However, it is noteworthy that neither Toshmatov nor Umrzokov were sentenced directly for being Sufi adepts. Ikramov told Forum 18 that he believes they simply fell victim to a "quota" for unmasking "religious extremists" imposed by the Uzbek authorities and so, as is frequently the case in Uzbekistan, incriminating leaflets were planted on them.

At least a quarter of Muslims in Uzbekistan are thought to use some elements of Sufism in their religious practice. Until recently, Sufism was openly supported by the authorities as an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism, which calls for Islam to be cleansed of regional accretions and for a return to the original Islam of the time of the prophet Mohammed (see F18News 1 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=441). But at present, the authorities do not support Sufism and the NSS secret police regards the Sufist "myurid" (discipleship) system as a possible terrorist organisation (see F18News 13 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=319).

Recently the number of trials in which Islamic believers' religious convictions feature in the case against them has increased. Before now, Muslim believers were usually accused of terrorist activity without any convincing evidence. Tashkent human rights activist Mikhail Ardzinov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 21 February of the recent case against eight so-called "Wahhabis" in the capital. On 14 February Tashkent City Criminal Court sentenced Ismatullo Kudratov to 7 years' imprisonment, Dilshod Yuldashev to 7 years, Batyr Yuldashev to 7 years, Hasan Asretidinov to 6 years, Abdullo Nurmatov to five and a half years, Karim Ziyayev to five and a half years, Eamberdiyev to five years and Negmajan Ermatov to five and a half years, all under article 244-2, part 1 of the Criminal Code (forming religious extremist organisations). "Wahhabism" is a label widely and indiscriminately used in Central Asia for Islamic radicals and Muslims who refuse to attend official mosques and even for Jehovah's Witnesses by some Uzbek officials.

In the trial of these eight Muslims, it is notable that in essence the court recognised that their only guilt was that they studied Islam together and adhered to the Hanbali school of Islam. "These men were accused of studying Islam from the position of Wahhabism," Ardzinov told Forum 18. "They criticised the form of Islam traditional in Uzbekistan. They were also accused of establishing a mutual-aid fund." Ardzinov – who was present in court – said those arrested had made no attempt to change the country's religious life by spreading their views to other Muslims. The meetings of the eight were a kind of "club" of like-minded people, who discussed religion and read the Koran. Unlike traditional Uzbek Muslims, these Muslims regarded the veneration of mazars (tombs) and extravagant weddings and funerals as deviations from Islam.

Among other examples of the authorities targeting of devout Muslims are the cases of Mannobjon Rahmatullaev, who was kidnapped from Russia and sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=515) and the continuing trial of 23 Muslim businessmen in Andijan [Andijon], accused of belonging to an Islamic charitable organisation (see F18News 14 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508).

Contacted by phone by Forum 18 on 22 February, the chairman of the Uzbek government committee for religious affairs Shoazim Minovarov stated that he knew nothing of trials of devout Muslims in Uzbekistan. When Forum 18 pointed out that it was his job to know, Minovarov replied: "You can think what you like. I don't want to answer this question. As they say in English – no comment!"

As well as devout members of the majority faith, Islam, being targeted by the authorities, members of the minority faiths of Protestant Christianity and Jehovah's Witnesses have also been targeted (see F18News 16 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=512). And in a bizarre move, Uzbekistan is the only former Soviet country to ban the entry of the relics of saints and martyrs of the Russian Orthodox Church (see F18News 15 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=510). (END)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan 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>

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