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KYRGYZSTAN: Is mullah latest Uzbek KGB kidnapping victim?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

When he was kidnapped in the town of Uzgen in southern Kyrgyzstan on 7 September, local mullah Sadykjan Rahmanov became at least the sixth devout Muslim seized in the area, apparently by Uzbek secret police agents from across the border. "The investigation's main line of inquiry is that Sadykjan Rahmanov has been kidnapped by the Uzbek special services," the deputy head of Uzgen district Mamatali Turgunbayev told Forum 18 News Service. "The Uzbek special services act in Kyrgyzstan as if they are at home." He speculates that the Uzbek authorities believe the mullah was connected to the violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The mullah's brother Salimjon Rahmanov claims he is innocent. "He is simply a believer who has never been involved in politics," he told Forum 18.

More than six weeks after he was kidnapped in the town of Uzgen in Osh region of southern Kyrgyzstan, there is still no sign of local mullah Sadykjan Rahmanov. "He is simply a believer who has never been involved in politics," his brother Salimjon Rahmanov told Forum 18 News Service in Uzgen on 16 October. Salimjon expressed the strong belief that his brother had been kidnapped by the Uzbek secret police, a view shared by local officials. "The investigation's main line of inquiry is that Sadykjan Rahmanov has been kidnapped by the Uzbek special services," the deputy head of Uzgen district Mamatali Turgunbayev told Forum 18 the same day. Uzbek security officials have denied all knowledge of the kidnapping.

In the wake of Sadykjan Rahmanov's abduction from a bus station in Uzgen on 7 September, local police have always said the evidence they have gathered indicates the kidnappers were security officers from the nearby Namangan region of Uzbekistan. According to the Uzgen police, the car in which Rahmanov was abducted was purchased six months ago by a Namangan security officer. Uzbek officials say that officer has since been transferred to a distant region of Uzbekistan.

In 1993 Sadykjan trained at a medresseh (Islamic school) in Namangan, Salimjon Rahmanov told Forum 18. He added that his brother had organised a haj pilgrimage to Mecca for Uzgen residents and was held in great respect by those living in the town.

Turgunbayev speculated that Sadykjan Rahmanov was probably kidnapped because the Uzbek authorities suspect him of links with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a violent movement that has been seeking to overthrow the regime of Uzbek President Islam Karimov and replace it with an Islamic government. "Sadykjan Rahmanov was also under surveillance by the Kyrgyz National Security Committee [the former KGB]," Turgunbayev told Forum 18. "In Namangan he studied at an underground medresseh with one of the current IMU leaders, Tohir Yuldashev. There were rumours that during his annual haj pilgrimages he met IMU leaders and even that Yuldashev appointed him the emir [spiritual and secular leader] of south Kyrgyzstan."

Turgunbayev complained about the way the Uzbek National Security Service (the former KGB) operates freely within his country. "The Uzbek special services act in Kyrgyzstan as if they are at home and do not even bother to agree their actions with us," he told Forum 18. "Usually, Tashkent sends onto our territory Uzbeks who were born in southern Kyrgyzstan and who then obtained Uzbek citizenship and started working for the Uzbek special services."

He pointed out that this was the third case of such a kidnapping in Osh region. All those kidnapped were, he said, devout believers. The head of the human rights organisation Justice in Jalal-abad region Valeri Uleyev agreed that all those seized were devout believers. He told Forum 18 in Jalal-abad on 15 October that his organisation had recorded three further such kidnapping cases, bringing to at least six the number of Kyrgyz citizens kidnapped in southern Kyrgyzstan by the Uzbek secret police.

Salimjon Rahmanov warned of popular local anger about his brother's abduction. "If Sadykjan does not return home, then I will find it very hard to dissuade people from spontaneous demonstrations," he told Forum 18. "Already a number of Uzgen residents have come to me suggesting that they block the road between Osh and Jalal-abad [the main city in south Kyrgyzstan] as a protest against my brother's kidnapping. But so far I have managed to hold people back from these desperate measures."

Turgunbayev feared that Sadykjan Rahmanov's abduction might lead to outbreaks of violence between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the district. "The Uzgen district is the most vulnerable place in the whole of Kyrgyzstan," he told Forum 18. He said it was there, in 1990, that the bloodiest conflicts between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz took place. One of the Rahmanov brothers died during these outbreaks of violence. "The Rahmans, like most Uzgen residents, are Uzbeks, while most of those working as police officers are

Kyrgyz."

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