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UZBEKISTAN: Book banning, censorship, illegal fines, reprisals

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

A Muslim hairdresser and one of his regular customers with his family is being intensively investigated by an Uzbek police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department for sharing a Muslim book electronically. Several Protestants also have been fined - two illegally threatened - for keeping Christian material in their own homes.

Muslim Hairdresser Abduboki Yunusov and regular customer Gayrat Ziyakhojayev is being investigated by a police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department for sharing a Muslim book electronically. The two Muslims and their families have been illegally searched and intensively questioned since April to this month (October) (see below).

Liliya Sitdikova and her son Vildan Sitdikov, both members of Tashkent's officially registered Seventh-day Adventist Church, have been fined for keeping their own Christian material in their own home (see below).

In Urgench local Protestant Sharofat Allamova is facing attempts to illegally fine her twice for keeping her own Christian books in her home. Local Protestants think that this may be because she was present during a raid on a meeting for worship of local Protestants (see below).

And an Andijan Protestant has also been ordered to pay the same fine for having Christian books in her home twice (see below).

Approved and then banned Islamic book sparks intensive questioning

Hairdresser Abduboki Yunusov and regular customer Gayrat Ziyakhojayev is being investigated by a police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department for sharing a Muslim book electronically. On 2 April police in the capital Tashkent's Uchteppa District questioned Yunusov and some of his family, some being fined, Muslims who are anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

This followed an incident in March when one of Yunusov's cousins was stopped late at night on the street and searched. Islamic materials were found on his phone and police then began from April to this month (October) repeatedly interrogating Yunusov, his family, and Ziyakhojayev, who are all Muslims. Police have claimed they will bring prosecutions, but have not specified the charges. This is not unusual in Uzbekistan's "justice system" (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

State-approved and then state-banned book?

Some years ago Ziyakhojayev bought a book entitled Islam between Two Fires, which had passed state censorship and was published by the still-operating Mavoronnahr publishing house. He had shared the book, which is critical of non-Islamic missionary movements, with Yunusov. In May police found the book on Yunusov's phone and then summoned Ziyakhojayev for questioning in July.

In July police claimed to Ziyakhojayev that the book was banned and had been sent for "expert analysis" to the Religious Affairs Committee. Alleged "expert analysis" is often used by the authorities as an excuse to confiscate and destroy religious literature (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Ziyakhojayev was also questioned repeatedly in August and on 12 and 16 October. Senior Lieutenant Dilmurod Akhmedov of Uchteppa's police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department questioned Ziyakhojayev. Akhmedov on 16 October stated that police had found the book on Yunusov's phone.

In January police confiscated a car from a Seventh-day Adventist Pastor because he did not pay illegal fines for giving religious books away. The books were approved by the Religious Affairs Committee, which apparently changed its mind so as to fine the Pastor (see F18News 10 February 2017 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2255>).

Illegal search

Uchteppa police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, led by Senior Lieutenant Akhmedov, on 12 October raided Ziyakhojayev's parents' flat in the District, but without a search warrant signed by the District Prosecutor's Office. Such violations of the rule of law are common in Uzbekistan (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>). Police confiscated his father's two computers, and sent them for "expert analysis" to the Religious Affairs Committee.

Senior Lieutenant Akhmedov and Major Jahongir Gaziyeu, the head of Uchteppa Police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 25 October. Both put the phone down and did not answer subsequent calls.

Tashkent ordinary police and police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department officers (who would not give their names) on 25 October claimed that no-one called Yusupov works for them.

As this and many similar police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" cases illustrate, the regime's definition of "terrorism" includes people exercising their human rights (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Severe state censorship, harsh punishments

There is severe state censorship of all religious literature, and the import and production of literature - including the Koran and the Bible - is strictly controlled. This includes material on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media, with compulsory prior censorship by the Religious Affairs Committee. Officials often search mobile phones and other electronic devices in the hunt for religious materials. Punishments can be severe, and from around 2013 the authorities have often jailed for up to five years or fined Muslims (including foreign citizens) found with the Koran and Muslim sermons on their mobile phones (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Tashkent fine for keeping own Christian material in own home

On 2 June Liliya Sitdikova and her son Vildan Sitdikov, both members of Tashkent's officially registered Seventh-day Adventist Church, were fined 2,995,500 Soms or 20 times the minimum monthly wage under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). Judge Bobyr Inagamov of Mirabad District Criminal Court also ordered the destruction of the notebooks and computers with Christian material confiscated from the family, local Adventists who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Numerous court verdicts seen by Forum 18 order that such literature - including Muslim books or Christian Bibles - be destroyed, which is often carried out by burning (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

The Adventists appealed, but on 27 September Judge Mumin Astanov of the Supreme Court upheld the fine and destruction.

Judge Inagamov of Mirabad District Court refused to answer, when asked by Forum 18 on 26 October why Christians and other religious believers cannot keep religious books or materials in their private homes or on their electronic devices. "You need to ask that question to the Supreme Court", he claimed. When Forum 18 repeated the question, he claimed that "I gave my reasoning in the decision." He then refused to talk further to Forum 18.

Judge Astamov of the Supreme Court also would not answer, when asked by Forum 18 twice on 26 October why Christians and other religious believers cannot keep religious books or materials in their private homes or on their electronic devices. He asked Forum 18 to call back the next morning, but did not answer his phone when repeatedly called again on 27 October.

Raids, literature searches, torture continues

Such raids continue and searches for religious literature continue. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that between September 2016 and July 2017 they had experienced 185 raids on their meetings for worship and searches of private homes. These resulted in 155 convictions for exercising freedom of religion and belief, 148 fines (19 of them for between 50 and 100 times the minimum monthly wage), and seven short-term jailings. Police severely tortured 15 Jehovah's Witnesses and sexually assaulted women. Torture and impunity for torturers continues, directed against Muslims, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and people of other faiths. Women are targeted for assault, and in another torture case police told a Jehovah's Witness that complaining makes no difference as "we will remain unpunished" (see F18News 12 October 2017 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2325>).

Urgench illegal fine order as reprisal?

On 21 August Sharofat Allamova, Protestant from Urgench [Urganch] in the north-western Khorezm Region, received a summons dated 14 August from Urgench Bailiff D. Yuldashev that she must in person pay a May 2012 fine to the Bailiff. Allamova was fined on 18 May 2012 for keeping her own Christian books in her home (see F18News 6 August 2012 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1729>).

But under the law the maximum time for Bailiffs to make such demands is three years after a fine, local Protestants who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Local Protestants told Forum 18 that Allamova did not pay the fine "because she is only guilty of peacefully exercising her freedom of religion and belief as guaranteed by the Constitution".

After the May 2012 fine the authorities then brought criminal charges against her, for the same "crime" of keeping her own Christian books in her own home. In April 2013 she was sentenced to 18 months' corrective labour, for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious literature". She was placed in a low-paid state job, her salary being further reduced by having to pay 20 per cent of it to the state during her sentence (see F18News 21 May 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1838>).

Local Protestants think that Bailiffs may have summoned Allamova because she was present during a raid on a meeting for worship of local Protestants. Urgench Police armed with automatic weapons raided the meeting, took all present to the Police Station, and strip searched all the women (see F18News 7 August 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2304>).

Urgench Bailiffs (who refused to give their names) on 26 October refused to discuss their actions with Forum 18. They also claimed that they have no Bailiff called Yuldashev.

Pastor Ahmadjon Nazarov, who led the Urgench meeting for worship, was put under surveillance and followed to a neighbouring region where another meeting was raided. A Bible was ordered to be destroyed, and one person was tortured. Police replied to complaints about torture: "We do not care, you can complain anywhere" (see F18News 19 October 2017 <http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2326>). On 13 October Judge Zh. Sultanova of Khorezm Regional Court upheld fines and short-term jail sentence imposed on five of the Protestants.

Andijan Protestant ordered to pay same fine twice

On 14 September 2014 police and the NSS secret police raided a meeting for Sunday worship of state-registered Baptists in Andijan [Andijon]. The police halted the worship meeting, confiscated the Christian books they found, threatened those present (see F18News 1 October 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2003>). On 17 October Zamira Kurbangaliyeva was fined 538,175 Soms under Administrative Code Article 184-2 ("Illegal production, storage, or import into Uzbekistan, with the intent to distribute or actual distribution, of religious materials by physical persons"). She paid the fine plus a 5,381 Soms payment fee on 30 March 2015, and has documentation seen by Forum 18 of this payment.

But on 23 August 2017 Andijan City Court Bailiff Sardor Goipov, in a letter received on 9 September, ordered Kurbangaliyeva to pay the fine again. The letter threatens that if she does not pay the same fine twice that she will also be fined 1,497,750 Soms, or 10 times the minimum monthly salary, local Baptists who wish to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Bailiff Oybek (who would not give his last name) of Andijan's Bailiffs Department on 26 October claimed to Forum 18 that Bailiff Goipov opened the case because he did not have the receipt for the payment. He then claimed that the case was closed after Kurbangaliyeva presented them. He refused to answer when Forum 18 pointed out that the Bailiffs had been given the receipt in March 2015 and asked why she was ordered to pay the same fine again. Other calls to Andijan Bailiffs on 27 October were not answered. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating freedom of religion and belief for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338>.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=2314>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <<http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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