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UZBEKISTAN: Jailings "to intimidate all who speak about freedoms"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

After police and secret police home raids, at least eight bloggers were jailed "to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms", a relative of one told Forum 18. Tashkent blogger Adkham Olimov, jailed for 15 days and fined at a midnight court hearing, had to pay for his own jailing.

In an attempt to clamp down on public discussions of religious freedoms, police and secret police officers between late August and early September raided without warrants the homes of at least ten bloggers who write on such themes in at least five regions of Uzbekistan. Courts then handed many of them fines and jail terms of up to two weeks, Forum 18 notes. The authorities "wanted to showcase the jailings to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms", a relative of one of the bloggers told Forum 18.

Names of only eight of the jailed bloggers are known to Forum 18, but human rights defenders suspect that the number could have been greater. As well as those jailed, at least three other bloggers are known to have been raided, detained or questioned (see below).

"We hear that up to thirty bloggers may have been detained in various regions," human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 18 September. "But their relatives are afraid to talk to human rights defenders or the media."

One of the Tashkent-based bloggers, Adkham Olimov, was jailed for 15 days and fined at a court hearing shortly after midnight. He also had to pay for his detention. He twice unsuccessfully appealed against his jailing (see below).

According to Ikramov and independent local news agencies, the eight bloggers were all freed from custody between 6 and 11 September. "The authorities warned them not to speak publicly about their arrests on Facebook and other social media," Ikramov told Forum 18. "It was good that independent media and rights defenders made noise about the arrests, otherwise the authorities could have opened criminal cases against some."

The bloggers had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls for women to be allowed to wear hijabs (headscarves), men to have beards and children to be allowed to pray in mosques (see below).

Also punished for expressing his views on religious themes was Fazliddin Parpiyev, Imam-hatyp of a mosque in Tashkent's Yunusabad District. Uzbekistan's state-sponsored Muslim Board dismissed him from his position after he condemned the authorities' pressure on Muslims for wearing the hijab and growing beards and called on Muslims to complain to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Officials at the Muslim Board refused to discuss the Imam's dismissal with Forum 18 (see below).

Asked about the raids and arrests of the bloggers, the Interior Ministry on 20 September referred Forum 18 to Shakhrukh Giyasov, Chief of the Ministry's International Relations Section. Giyasov declined to discuss the cases with Forum 18. Asked why Police carried out a campaign of arrests of bloggers for speaking for religious freedoms, he responded: "It's not ethical to call by phone and ask about such issues." He asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing through the Foreign Ministry.

Censorship

Speaking and publishing on religious themes in Uzbekistan - including in print and online - is under tight state control. The import, production and possession 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 state's Religious Affairs Committee. Punishments for those who violate these restrictions can be severe, including imprisonment (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314>).

Why were bloggers arrested?

The bloggers were arrested for "freely publishing their opinions on religious freedoms on Facebook and other social media and for

criticising the authorities for restricting women wearing hijab in public places and state institutions, men growing beards and children attending Mosque", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

According to information given him by the bloggers' relatives, "they were all charged for not obeying the orders of the Police", Ikramov added.

A relative of one of the bloggers, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, confirmed this to Forum 18. They said that their relative and other bloggers "were recently actively promoting women's right to wear hijab and men's right to grow beards and the right of children to attend Mosque."

After Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President in 2016, "he released many prisoners of conscience from prisons and allowed public discussions on religious themes and freedoms", the blogger's relative told Forum 18. They said that their relative, like others, perceived this as "a beginning for greater freedoms and began writing blogs on these topics".

Asked why they think the authorities jailed the bloggers, the blogger's relative told Forum 18: "They do not want greater freedoms, I guess. Maybe these discussions were too much for them. They are afraid that people will become bolder and ask for more freedoms."

The authorities "wanted to showcase the arrests to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms", the blogger's relative added.

How many bloggers arrested?

The bloggers known to have been arrested between 27 August and 2 September and handed jail terms are Adkham Olimov (known by his penname Musannif), Miraziz Akhmedov, Tulkin Astanov, Ziyodullo (Rahmon) Kabirov and Ziyovuddin Rahim from Tashkent City; Otobek Usmonov from Andijan Region; Khurshidbek Mukhammadrozikov from Kokand in Fergana Region; and Dilshodbek Khalilov from Namangan Region.

Sulaymon Erkin and Shokir Sharipov (known as Mukhammad Shakur), who lives in Kibrai District of Tashkent Region, were detained and questioned, Ikramov told Forum 18. He could not confirm whether or not the two men were arrested.

Sharipov "was questioned on 27 August and released the same day because he has a disability," a Tashkent resident who has followed the bloggers and is familiar with the cases, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 17 September. "I know for a fact that those eight were arrested, but I also heard that many more could just have been questioned and released but not arrested."

In late July or early August, before the moves against other bloggers, Tashkent City's Uchteppa District Police opened a case against Davronbek Tojliiyev, who runs websites which publish Islamic materials. Forum 18 was told this by Uchteppa Police and Gayrat Ziyakhoyayev, a Muslim man who was criminally convicted for downloading religious materials from Tojliiyev's websites. However, Tojliiyev told Forum 18 on 13 September he is not aware that a case against him is current (see F18News 14 September 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2414>).

Campaign's "pre-planned scenario"

Ikramov complained to Forum 18 that the arrests were a campaign carried out "according to a pre-planned scenario by officers of the State Security Service (SSS) secret police and the regular Police in various regions in violation of Uzbekistan's law and international norms."

"Up to ten officials in plain clothes would arrive at a blogger's home in the evening or late at night, and without showing their identification documents or warrant carried out searches," Ikramov complained. "They confiscated desktop and laptop computers, DVD discs, memory chips, and mobile phones of family members. They did not provide the families with copies of the confiscation record."

Typical of the raids was that on Olimov's home in Tashkent. Officers of the SSS secret police and Almazar District Police broke into his flat in Sebzor mahalla [city district] at 19:30 on 28 August, Ikramov complained to Forum 18. Eight officers "without showing their IDs or telling their names carried out an unauthorised search. They seized two desktop computers, two laptop computers, two computer hard drives, DVD discs, memory chips, and three mobile phones as well as several books."

Ikramov told Forum 18 that the authorities have not returned the property. Officers told Olimov that it will have to go through an "expert analysis" and only then will the authorities decide what to do with it.

After raiding their homes in various parts of the country, officers then took the bloggers to police stations and brought them before the courts, Ikramov added.

Jail terms

Judges in their turn "in the absence of defence lawyers and witnesses and without notifying their relatives handed down administrative arrests", Ikramov complained.

Among the early arrests in Tashkent was that of Astanov on 27 August, Ikramov and a Tashkent resident familiar with the cases told Forum 18. A court then jailed Astanov for ten days.

After Olimov's arrest on the evening of 28 August, officers held him for four hours at Tashkent's Almazar Police Station. They then brought him before Almazar District Administrative Court, where Judge Sherbek Inamjanov handed down his punishment at 00:30 am. Judge Inamjanov "in violation of the procedures heard the case in the absence of Olimov's relatives or any witnesses," Ikramov complained.

In the early hours of 29 August, Judge Inamjanov found Olimov guilty under Article 194, Part 1 and Article 195 of the Administrative Code.

Article 194, Part 1 punishes failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order with a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly wage.

Article 195 punishes resisting the orders of police officers, and punishments are between three times the minimum monthly wage and 15 days' detention.

Judge Inamjanov handed Olimov a 15-day jail term and fined him 184,300 Soms or one month's minimum wage, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. He also ordered Olimov to pay 27,645 Soms or 15 per cent of the minimum monthly wage for each day spent in prison to "cover the expenses of his administrative arrest".

"These were fabricated charges just to put Olimov in custody," Ikramov told Forum 18. All the other bloggers were brought to trial under "the exact same charges", he added.

In separate hearings later on 29 August, Tashkent's Almazar District Administrative Court similarly handed down 15-day jail terms on Kabirov and Rahim, a person familiar with the cases told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

Between 10 and 19 September, officials (who refused to give their names) of Tashkent's Almazar District Administrative Court, which heard the cases of Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim, refused to discuss them with Forum 18.

Asked why he punished Olimov with administrative arrest, Judge Inamjanov, who heard the case, evaded the question. "He will be released after he finishes his 15-day arrest," he told Forum 18 on 10 September. Told that human rights defenders and independent journalists complained that his Court had punished Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim for speaking on religious freedoms, the Judge declined to discuss anything more. "Please, send your further questions in writing to the Supreme Court."

Asked between 10 and 11 September about the arrests of the three bloggers, officials (no names were given) of Almazar Police referred Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Bakhadyr Yusufjanov, Deputy Chief of Almazar Police, as well as Major Makhmud Tolipov, Chief of Almazar Police's Struggle against Extremism and Terrorism Division. Both of them refused to discuss why they arrested the three men.

Major Tolipov on 10 September greeted Forum 18, but as soon as it asked why Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim were arrested he claimed that it is a "wrong number". He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him between 10 and 11 September went unanswered.

Lieutenant Colonel Yusufjanov, reached by Forum 18 twice on 11 September at his landline and mobile phone numbers, provided by Almazar Police officials, claimed that it was a wrong number. "I work for a florist," he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 asked why Almazar Police arrested the bloggers, he replied angrily: "Who are you to question me?" He then put the phone down.

The rest of the bloggers were arrested between 28 August and 2 September.

Appeals unsuccessful

Judge Jahongir Jurayev of Tashkent City Administrative Court rejected Olimov's first appeal on 6 September, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Supreme Court rejected his further appeal on 11 September, Ikramov told Forum 18. Both appeals were heard while Olimov was in detention.

Held for five days in Tashkent City Police basement

The first five days of his arrest Olimov spent in the basement of Tashkent City Police Station, Ikramov told Forum 18. "Neither Almazar Police nor the District Prosecutor's Office would tell Olimov's relatives where exactly he was being kept," Ikramov complained. "Not until 4 September was his lawyer allowed to see him."

While Olimov was in custody, SSS secret police and Interior Ministry officers "pressured relatives not to talk to human rights defenders, foreign journalists and international human rights organisations", Ikramov told Forum 18.

Olimov was released on 11 September on the fourteenth day of his arrest, Ikramov said. Olimov paid the fine and an additional 359,385 Soms for the 13 days he spent in prison.

On the day of his release, Olimov told the BBC Uzbek service that "though the law-enforcement agencies did not physically abuse me, they put psychological pressure on me". He was questioned while in prison on the blogger Shokirov and his position on hijabs and beards.

Another of the Tashkent-based bloggers, Astanov, was released on 6 September after ten days of custody, Ikramov and the Tashkent resident told Forum 18. The rest of the bloggers - arrested between 28 August and 2 September - were all released on 11 September.

Imam dismissed for speaking for religious freedoms

Dismissed from his position as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque in Tashkent's Yunusabad District was Fazliddin Parpiyev. Usman Olimov, Chief Mufti of Uzbekistan and Chair of the state-sponsored Muslim Board, dismissed Imam Parpiyev allegedly for health reasons.

The 8 September Muslim Board decision, signed by Chief Mufti Olimov and seen by Forum 18, declares that Imam Parpiyev was dismissed on the ruling of the Board's Ethics Committee "on the basis of Article 100, Part 2 of Uzbekistan's Labour Code". It does not specify why he was dismissed.

Labour Code Article 100, Part 2 allows an employer to dismiss an employee for "incompatibility of the employee for the job they carry out as a result of their insufficient qualification or lack of health".

However, the independent Uzbek media reported that Imam Parpiyev was dismissed for his "open criticism of the authorities' restrictions on wearing hijab and growing beards as well as on children attending mosque".

The 32-year-old Parpiyev is a graduate of Medina Islamic University and Tashkent Islamic University. He had been appointed Imam of Omina Mosque one month earlier, Uzbek news agency eltuz.com reported on 9 September.

In his 7 September sermon after Friday prayers, Imam Parpiyev "called on his community members to write complaints to President Mirziyoyev about the pressure by the authorities on women not to wear hijab and men not to grow beards."

Eltuz noted that "Parpiyev at first published his sermon on his Facebook page but then removed it." He also told his online audience that "he was planning to criticise the Uzbek government's religious policies."

Imam Parpiyev "wrote on his Facebook page on 9 September that the public should not expect him to speak on this issue any longer since he was dismissed from his position", the news agency noted.

Asked why the Imam was dismissed, Akmal Khan Shakirov, the official responsible for international relations at the Muslim Board, asked Forum 18 on 17 September to call back later. "I am busy at a round table," he claimed. Called back several times between 17 and 18 September he did not answer his phones.

Similarly reluctant to talk about the issue was Abdulazim Mansurov, Deputy Head of the Muslim Board. On 18 September he claimed to Forum 18 that "I cannot talk to you because we are busy with guests." (END)

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>>.

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>.

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://www.nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>>.

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