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UZBEKISTAN: Muslim prayer rooms closed, Bukhara Baptists unable to meet

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The regime has blocked Bukhara's registered Baptist Union Church from meeting since May 2021, but it hopes to be given a new building in 2024. "When we tried to rent other places to meet, we were refused," Baptists said. The Interior Ministry has closed public Muslim prayer rooms nationwide, using excuses such as escaped prisoners may use them. An Interior Ministry official could not explain to Forum 18 how Muslims who want to pray the five-times-a-day namaz prayers can pray if they are in public places.

Following a May 2021 break in public water pipes in the south-western city of Bukhara which caused major damage to the registered Baptist Union Church, officials told the Baptists that they cannot use their building as it could collapse at any moment. "When we tried to rent other places to meet," Baptists said, "we were refused as they were not registered for holding religious ceremonies or meetings. The authorities did not support us to overcome this problem." So since May 2021 the Baptist Church has not been able to meet for public worship.

The Baptists had been using the church building – which is located in a historic part of the city – since 1971.

For almost two days after the May 2021 flood, the authorities did nothing to stop the flood and fix the water pipes. The Church immediately warned the authorities, who after two days came and sealed the building. The flood caused major damage to the Church's walls and due to that damage to the roof also (see below).

A neighbour's house collapsed, but local authorities allowed them to rebuild their own house. This work is finished, but the authorities have not paid them compensation for the damage and building work caused by the water pipes breaking (see below).

"Some members," Baptists stated, "stopped coming to Church as we could not arrange a place for worship every Sunday." The congregation went down from around 70 people to 30 people, and the community of Baptists with hearing loss could no longer attend as their meetings relied on the Church building's facilities (see below).

Officials would not explain to Forum 18 why Baptists have been blocked from meeting since May 2021. In early 2023, Bukhara Regional Administration officials showed Baptists a derelict storage building, which officials said would be given to the Baptists as their official place of worship. "The building needs a lot of repair work," Baptists told Forum 18. "The authorities promised us that they will soon begin restoring it, but no work was done" (see below).

The day after Forum 18 called Bukhara City Administration work began on the building. "But the workers are unskilled and we are afraid that we will be given another building that might collapse." Baptists have asked Bukhara City Administration for architectural plans for the new building, but they have not been given them. "They keep telling us not to worry as everything will be fine" (see below).

In a 5 January 2019 Presidential Decree, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (who has never faced a free and fair election) ordered the state-owned Uzbekistan Airways and Uzbekistan Railways to establish Muslim prayer rooms to boost the tourism industry. Prayer rooms were also opened in other public places, such as petrol stations and restaurants (see below).

Yet now the regime is closing such public prayer rooms. The Interior Ministry has closed many prayer rooms in Tashkent and nationwide, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "They have been closing prayer rooms since 2022 and closures continue. For example, I know of two Tashkent prayer rooms in a restaurant and petrol station which were both closed in December 2023." Employees of a number of restaurants and petrol stations from around the country have confirmed such closures to Forum 18. They all wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals (see below).

"The prayer room was closed because a decision was made by higher authorities," one employee told Forum 18. They did not wish to discuss why the prayer room was closed. "We are afraid to talk about this as it is a very sensitive issue" (see below).

Some employees of restaurants and petrol stations have told Forum 18 and local human rights defenders that the Interior Ministry claimed in December 2023 that prayer rooms were closed as "some criminals who escaped from a prison in November may use them". Human rights defenders who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals commented to Forum 18 that "this is not a serious reason to close prayer rooms. The Interior Ministry has used different excuses to close prayer rooms in different parts of the country" (see below).

Avazjon Khasanov, Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department," which is responsible for freedom of religion or belief cases, confirmed to Forum 18 that the Interior Ministry ordered the prayer rooms to be closed. He would not explain why prayer rooms across the country were closed (see below).

Bukhara Baptists unable to meet for public worship since May 2021

The registered Baptist Union Church in the south-western city of Bukhara had been meeting for worship in its church building – located in a historic part of the city – since 1971.

In May 2021 there was a flood just outside the church, caused by public water pipes next to the building breaking. This was the responsibility of the district authorities, not the Church, human rights defender Jahongir Kulijanov told Forum 18 on 18 January 2024. Local Baptists told Forum 18 that for almost two days the authorities did nothing to stop the flood and fix the water pipes.

A neighbour's house collapsed, but local authorities allowed them to rebuild their own house. This work is finished, but the authorities have not paid them compensation for the damage and building work caused by the water pipes breaking.

The flood caused major damage to the Church's walls and due to that damage to the roof also. The Church immediately warned the authorities, who after two days came and sealed the building. Officials told the Baptists that they cannot use the building as it could collapse at any moment.

Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, and human rights defender Kulijanov, told Forum 18 that the Baptist Church has not been able to use their building or meet for public worship since May 2021 when the authorities sealed the building.

Baptists told Forum 18 that they wanted to rebuild the Church building, but were told that they cannot do this as the regime's Cultural Heritage Agency will allow repair work to be done only by a specialised state company. "We waited for a long time and no work was done to restore the building," Baptists complained.

Banned from meeting elsewhere since May 2021, congregation drops

"When we tried to rent other places to meet," Baptists told Forum 18 from Bukhara, "we were refused as they were not [as is required (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)] registered for holding religious ceremonies or meetings. The authorities did not support us to overcome this problem."

"Some members," Baptists stated, "stopped coming to Church as we could not arrange a place for worship every Sunday." The congregation went down from around 70 people to 30 people, and the community of Baptists with hearing loss could no longer attend meet as their meetings relied on the Church building's facilities.

Baptists told Forum 18 that they made many complaints to regional and central authorities from May 2021 onwards, including to the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) in Tashkent. Religious Affairs Committee officials did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 19 and 25 January.

Feruz Khamroyev, Deputy Head of Bukhara City Administration, refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18 on 19 January. He asked an official who was sitting next to him, Jahongir Sharipov (who is responsible for freedom of religion or belief issues in Bukhara city) to answer Forum 18's questions. He claimed he could not explain why the Church could not meet since May 2021 "I have only been appointed for six months and I cannot answer that question." Khamroyev also refused to answer the question.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 that earlier that week the Church had been temporarily allowed to use a kindergarten building, but it is not suitable for meetings for worship. They then began moving Church books, literature, and equipment from the closed Church to the kindergarten. "However," Baptists said, "many books were damaged beyond repair as we had been forced to leave them in a damaged building open to rain from the holes and cracks in the roof and walls."

Sharipov of Bukhara City Administration refused to tell Forum 18 whether the Church will be compensated for the damage caused to the books and other property by the authorities' actions of sealing the Church and refusing to help find other places to meet. He also refused to say whether the Church will be compensated for extra expenditure since May 2021. "We cannot guarantee that," was all he would say in answer to Forum 18's questions.

Bukhara Baptists told Forum 18 that they think that temporary use of the kindergarten building "may be a sign of good news, but we are cautious as there have been so many promises since May 2021". The congregation is still struggling to rent places for worship.

New church building?

In early 2023, Bukhara Regional Administration officials showed Baptists a derelict storage building, which officials said would be given to the Baptist as their official place of worship.

"The building needs a lot of repair work," Baptists told Forum 18. "The authorities promised us that they will soon begin restoring it, but no work was done."

Sharipov of Bukhara City Administration instead insisted that the City Administration wants to help the Church. "We are constantly in touch with the Baptists," he claimed to Forum 18, "and will start renovating the new building soon when the weather becomes warmer." Deputy Bukhara City Administration Head Khamroyev's voice could then be heard telling Sharipov to change his answer. "It turns out that we have already begun the renovation work," Sharipov then claimed, "and the building will be ready in one month."

Baptists told Forum 18 that work began on the new building on 20 January. "But the workers are unskilled and we are afraid that we will be given another building that might collapse." Baptists have asked Bukhara City Administration for architectural plans for the new building, but they have not been given them. "They keep telling us not to worry as everything will be fine."

Muslim prayer rooms closed nationwide

In a 5 January 2019 Presidential Decree, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (who has never faced a free and fair election (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/561161.pdf>)) ordered the state-owned Uzbekistan Airways and Uzbekistan Railways to arrange the "organisation of special places for prayer and ablution [following Islamic rites] at international airports and at railway stations" by 1 June 2019. The instruction was part of a wide range of measures aimed at boosting the tourism industry.

Prayer rooms were also opened in other public places, such as petrol stations and restaurants.

Yet now the regime is closing such public prayer rooms. The Interior Ministry has closed many prayer rooms in the capital Tashkent and nationwide, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 15 January. "They have been closing prayer rooms since 2022 and closures continue. For example, I know of two Tashkent prayer rooms in a restaurant and petrol station which were both closed in December 2023."

Employees of a number of restaurants and petrol station from around the country have confirmed such closures to Forum 18. They all wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals. One employee told Forum 18 that "the prayer room was closed because a decision was made by higher authorities." They added that "people can now only pray in registered mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)," but did not wish to discuss why the prayer room was closed. "We are afraid to talk about this as it is a very sensitive issue."

All public expressions of Islam are controlled by the state-controlled Muftiate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). This works with the regime to, for example, decide who should lead mosques and what they preach, as well as the numbers and locations of mosques. All public manifestations of Islam outside the Muftiate are banned.

The regime has stepped up its crackdown on Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief outside state-controlled mosques. In a September 2023 meeting with the State Security Service (SSS) secret police head Abdusalom Azizov, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov is reported to have warned state officials not to attend mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2864).

Some employees of restaurants and petrol stations told Forum 18 and local human rights defenders that the Interior Ministry claimed in December 2023 that prayer rooms were closed as "some criminals who escaped from a prison in November may use them". Human rights defenders who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals commented to Forum 18 that "this is not a serious reason to close prayer rooms. The Interior Ministry has used different excuses to close prayer rooms in different parts of the country."

A state-owned Uzbekistan Railways official (who refused to give her name) told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 18 January that railway station prayer rooms "do not function". However, she refused to tell Forum 18 when and why they were closed, or say which official was responsible for overseeing the closures. An Uzbekistan Railways official in a major regional railway station told Forum 18 that "this station's prayer room was closed in 2022". They then refused to discuss the issue further.

Why the prayer room closures?

Avazjon Khasanov, Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department"

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), which is responsible for freedom of religion or belief cases, on 19 January confirmed to Forum 18 that the Interior Ministry ordered the prayer rooms to be closed.

However, he added that "they still operate at the airports". Forum 18 and human rights defenders have confirmed that the prayer rooms at Tashkent and Samarkand international airports are still open.

Khasanov of the Interior Ministry's "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" would not explain why prayer rooms across the country were closed. Instead, he stated that "there are mosques which are much larger and more comfortable. There is no need for those small prayer rooms." When Forum 18 asked how Muslims who want to pray the five-times-a-day namaz prayers can pray the namaz if they are in public places, Khasanov was silent. He then said: "I cannot talk to you about these issues over the phone. Please send your questions to the Ministry in writing."

Officials at the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) in Tashkent did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 19 and 25 January. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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