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UZBEKISTAN: Tight restrictions on Shia Muslim minority

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The state-approved imam of one of the three registered Shia Muslim mosques has told Forum 18 News Service that Shias "do not have any difficulties with the Uzbek authorities", but many others from the ethnic Iranian Shia minority insist that there are severe difficulties with the authorities. Examples cited to Forum 18 include there being no permitted Shia educational institutions, the impossibility of registering more mosques, and the authorities insistence that Shias must be subject to the Sunni-controlled Muslim Spiritual Administration. The Iranian government has given Uzbek Shias significant help, for example by funding a mosque restoration project. However, because of these links, and the uneasy relations Uzbekistan and Iran have, the National Security Service secret police strictly controls Shia mosques.

While the state-approved imam of one of Uzbekistan's three registered Shia Muslim mosques assures Forum 18 News Service that the country's Shias "do not have any difficulties with the Uzbek authorities", other community members insist that severe government restrictions prevent the community from functioning as it would like. They told Forum 18 that no Shia educational institutions are allowed to function, registration of further mosques is impossible, Shias cannot set up their own administration but must be subject to the Sunni-controlled Muslim Spiritual Administration in the capital Tashkent and Shias cannot get any of the free places allocated on pilgrimages to Mecca.

Of the registered Shia mosques, two are in the central city of Samarkand and one is in Bukhara. The imam of the Panjab mosque in Samarkand [Samarqand], Fakhruddin Khuseinov, dismissed suggestions that the government has restricted the number of mosques. "For example, apart from the registered Shia mosques, there are also eight unregistered mosques in Samarkand where the authorities allow us to hold important Muslim festivals and for which I take personal responsibility," he told Forum 18 on 18 April in Samarkand.

Khuseinov reported that virtually all those attending the Shia mosques are members of Uzbekistan's ethnic Iranian minority. He said the Iranian government has given Uzbek Shia Muslims significant help, such as in funding the restoration of the Panjab mosque. "During official visits to Uzbekistan, Iran's senior officials have visited our mosque," he told Forum 18. "Iranian diplomats from Tashkent are also frequent guests."

Khuseinov said the Shia mosques are under the authority of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan, claiming that under Uzbek law all mosques have to be under the authority of the Spiritual Administration. (In fact there is no such stipulation in Uzbek law.) Asked by Forum 18 whether it would not be more appropriate to separate the Shia mosques into an independent organisation, Khuseinov replied that "in principle", it is "perfectly adequate" for the Shia Muslims to be included in the Spiritual Administration. "The only thing I would like to achieve is that there should be a special Shia representative at the Spiritual Administration in Tashkent, to whom all Shia believers could turn," Khuseinov told Forum 18, pointing out that at present there is "not one Shia Muslim" among the Spiritual Administration leadership. "If, for example, one of my fellow-believers comes to Tashkent, he has to go to Sunni Muslims with his problems," he complained.

Khuseinov said he would like the Spiritual Administration to agree that a special quota of the 250 people who are sent each year free of charge to Mecca at the expense of the Saudi Arabian government should be reserved for Shia Muslims. "The Saudi sponsors just decide on a specific quota for Uzbekistan, but it is the Spiritual Administration that decides precisely who may travel to Mecca in this way," he explained. "As a result, not one of our Shia Muslims has travelled to Mecca free of charge."

Many ordinary Shia believers see relations with the authorities in a far less optimistic light than Khuseinov, Forum 18 has found. Those speaking to Forum 18, who preferred not to be named, said the main problem for Uzbekistan's Shias is in obtaining a Shia education. Not one Shia medresseh currently functions in the country, even though under Uzbek law a religious education is necessary in order to become an imam. Before the communist takeover there were several Shia medressehs in Uzbekistan, but all were subsequently closed down.

Even though the former medresseh attached to the Panjab mosque remains in excellent condition, as Forum 18 observed on a tour of the building, the authorities will not allow it to function as an educational establishment. Five ethnic Iranian citizens of Uzbekistan have completed their religious education in Iran, but their degrees are not recognised in Uzbekistan (the Uzbek government's

committee for religious affairs has compiled a list of foreign educational institutions whose degrees are recognised in the country). The five are therefore not allowed to take up positions as imams.

As a result the only Shia imam in Uzbekistan with a religious education is Khuseinov, who had to study at the Sunni medresseh in Samarkand. Although the authorities have so far permitted imams without a formal religious education to work at the other two Shia mosques, they could sack them from their jobs at any time citing the fact that they do not have appropriate training.

While Uzbek citizens do not have the right to travel to Mecca independently, Forum 18's sources maintain that Shia Muslims have great difficulty when travelling as part of an Uzbek group, because Sunni rituals are intrinsically different from those of the Shias.

Sources said that they believe the two Shia mosques in Samarkand are not enough to meet the community's needs, but seeking registration of the others is unrealistic because the authorities do not want to encourage the spread of Shia Islam. Forum 18's sources also reported that Shia mosques are strictly controlled by the National Security Service secret police, mainly because of the close links between Uzbek Shias and Iran - with which the Uzbek state has very uneasy relations.

Iranians settled in Samarkand and Bukhara as far back as the reign of Timur Tamerlane (1336-1405). In Soviet times, the nationality of most Iranians was written down in their passports as Uzbek and the country's ethnic Iranians have been subjected to strong Uzbek influence. For example, in family circles they generally speak in Uzbek. Nevertheless, they still preserve a clear sense of national identity, mainly because they follow Shia Islam, rather than the Sunni Islam of the Uzbeks. Iranians live in close-knit communities in Bukhara and Samarkand, and there are still ethnic Iranian districts in these cities. There are around 200,000 Iranians in Samarkand, and around 100,000 in Bukhara. Most Uzbek Iranians work as private taxi drivers and in commerce.

For background information, see Forum 18's report of the current

post-terrorist bombing crackdown against all faiths at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298

and latest 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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