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UZBEKISTAN: State control of Islamic religious education

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The Uzbek state makes great efforts to control Islam through a network of secondary and higher educational institutes, who educate the state-appointed imams of the country's mosques. Non-state controlled religious education is forbidden. State educational institutions are keen to ensure that students are politically loyal to the President, using means such as asking applicants questions to test their political reliability, as well as maintaining informers amongst the students.

In Uzbekistan, the state makes great efforts to try to control Islamic religious education, trying to keep all such education official and under its control, and forbidding by law private religious education. Under article 10 of Uzbekistan's law on religion, "religious educational establishments acquire the right to operate after being registered at the justice ministry for the Republic of Uzbekistan and receiving the appropriate licence... persons who teach religious subjects in religious educational establishments must have a religious education and pursue their activity with the permission of the appropriate agency of the central administration."

The administrative code is equally severe on the subject. Under article 241, "teaching religious doctrines without specialist religious education and without the permission of an agency of the central administration, and equally teaching religious doctrines in a private capacity, will attract a fine of between five and ten times the minimum monthly wage, or administrative detention of up to 15 days." The minimum wage in Uzbekistan is 5,400 Uzbek Sum, or around 37 Norwegian Kroner, 4.50 Euros, or 5 US Dollars.

Control of the Islamic religious leadership is also perceived to be important by the authorities, especially through the control of where imams are educated and who these bodies accept as students. The vice-principal of Tashkent's Islamic institute, Abdurasul Abdulayev, told Forum 18 News Service that "the central [state-controlled] administration for Muslims in Uzbekistan is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan (the muftiate), and specialist Islamic education is provided in the muftiate's educational establishments." The Islamic Institute is the only Muslim higher educational establishment in Uzbekistan, and there are currently 150 students, of whom 30 are women. Women are not permitted to become imams.

As the Uzbek muftiate has become an arm of the state which unquestioningly carries out the will of the government (see F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58), the authorities are in complete control of the permitted Muslim religious organisations in Uzbekistan. Addressing the question of those imams who received Islamic education outside of Uzbekistan, Abdulayev stated that "we have a special list of foreign educational establishments from which we believe students receive an adequate Islamic education to work as imam-hatybs in Uzbekistan."

In the field of secondary education, there are ten permitted Islamic colleges in Uzbekistan. Eight of the ten colleges are for boys only, i.e. they are medressehs whose students can gain the right to work as imam-hatybs, as can the students of the Tashkent Islamic Institute. Students from the girls' Islamic colleges may be employed as teachers in the girls' Islamic colleges.

In order to win a place at either a medresseh or the Islamic Institute, applicants must pass exams in a foreign language, in spirituality and the Koran, and in the history of Uzbekistan, as well as attending an interview. Both Abdulayev and also Kobiljon Sadykov, head of the teaching staff at the Mir Arab medresseh in Bukhara [Bukhoro], which is the largest in Central Asia, admitted to Forum 18 on 6 May that, in admission interviews, teachers try hard to ensure that prospective students do not have links with non-state approved Islam. Teachers also ask about the applicant's political views. A standard interview question is the Uzbek president's date of birth, and interviewees may be asked to recite the Uzbek national anthem.

Forum 18 has found that teachers at the Islamic educational establishments are keen to check that pupils are loyal to Uzbekistan's secular authorities. The teaching staff are particularly careful to ensure that their pupils are not influenced by so-called Wahhabis. This is a term widely and extremely loosely used in Central Asia to denote both Islamic fundamentalists, and a variety of religious groups which the state disapproves of. Abdulayev admitted that there were informants among the students. Sadykov himself also implied very much the same thing. "The students live in the medresseh itself and are constantly under our scrutiny. Therefore we have a very good idea of what each student is up to," Sadykov told Forum 18 in Bukhara on 6 May.

The Uzbek leadership is also trying to maintain control over Muslims through an Islamic University in Tashkent, established by decree of President Islam Karimov under the auspices of the government's Cabinet of Ministers in 1999. This university offers a four

year baccalaureate course, and a master's degree. Students study Islamic and secular subjects for the baccalaureate, and there is also an Islamic research centre attached to the university. The university, which has over 780 students, also offers courses for imam-hatybs to learn Arabic and Islamic philosophy. Ulugbek Kadyrov of the university's international department told Forum 18 that "because our students acquire a very deep knowledge of Islam they are more likely to find work when they finish university, not just in secular institutions but also in the mosques." Effectively, the university represents yet another attempt to make Islam subject to the state.

For more background, see Forum 18's 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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