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UZBEKISTAN: Religious crackdown follows Andijan crackdown

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Igor Rotar, Forum 18

"Purges are already underway – religious organisations have immediately fallen under suspicion," Protestants in the capital Tashkent who preferred not to be named have told Forum 18 News Service, following the Uzbek government's bloody suppression of a popular uprising in the Fergana Valley. "Local authority and secret police officials are visiting and inspecting churches, and checking up on documentation," Forum 18 was told. Such visits have taken place throughout Uzbekistan, not just in the Fergana Valley. Jehovah's Witnesses say numerous cases against members caught up in coordinated raids in March are now in the courts. "Almost weekly there are new cases of fines or interrogations – this is merely business as usual," Forum 18 was told. The official reason given for the uprising – "Islamic radicalism" – is widely disbelieved, but as long as Islam and other faiths remain highly restricted, fundamentalist Islam is seen as a valid alternative to the current political structure. Some fear the Uzbek crackdown will complicate the situation in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

In the wake of the bloody government suppression of a popular uprising in Andijan - Uzbekistan's fourth largest city, located in the densely populated Fergana [Farghona] Valley in the east of the country - and a rebellion in nearby Karasu, many observers predict a new crackdown on all religious activity. "These events will undoubtedly increase state control over believers in Uzbekistan considerably," Sadykjan Kamaluddin, an ethnic Uzbek who is the former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18 News Service from Osh on 14 May. "The actions of the Uzbek authorities very clearly show their intention to restore order with an iron fist." Forum 18 has learnt that a crackdown may now be beginning, just as a crackdown on all religious faiths followed the terrorist bombings in March and April 2004 which left nearly 50 people dead.

"Purges are already underway – religious organisations have immediately fallen under suspicion," Protestants in the capital Tashkent who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 on 23 May. "Local authority and secret police officials are visiting and inspecting churches, and checking up on documentation. In this tense situation they have to show they are taking measures." Such visits have taken place not just in the Fergana Valley, but in Tashkent and other cities.

The assistant pastor of Bethany Protestant church in Tashkent told Forum 18 that officials visited the church after the Sunday service yesterday (22 May). "Local authority officials were investigating whether we were a proper religious group or a 'sect'. They talked to us for an hour before taking away copies of all our correspondence with government agencies." The church has been repeatedly denied registration as its place of worship is designated for domestic use. Two church members, including the pastor, were fined last October for leading an unregistered religious organisation (see F18News 28 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=440).

Other Protestants have confirmed official visits to congregations across the country since the unrest broke out in Andijan on 13 May. However, Hare Krishna leaders told Forum 18 on 23 May that so far none of their communities have been affected.

Jehovah's Witnesses say numerous cases against members caught up in coordinated raids on their communities in March are now in the courts (see F18News 1 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=536). "The regional court in Samarkand fined and warned some of our members on 17 and 18 May, but these all relate to earlier cases," a Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 on 23 May. "Almost weekly there are new cases of fines or interrogations – this is merely business as usual. However, unlike earlier occasions, since the events in Andijan there are no accusations that our people are linked to terrorism."

So far the official visits to Protestant churches have entailed inspecting the premises, finding out who attends and taking copies of documents. Protestants told Forum 18 that investigations have not gone further. One Protestant was optimistic that the restrictions on them might ease in future. "It's my personal view that the crackdown on Muslim extremists will be harsher, but perhaps we might even see an eventual liberalisation towards others. After all, we weren't involved in the unrest."

In Uzbekistan the activity of unregistered religious communities is subject to administrative or even criminal prosecution. Since in practice it is very difficult for members of religious minorities to register religious communities, many members of religious minorities have been punished under the code of administrative offences (see F18News 20 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=546). Widespread human rights abuses continue against members of religious minorities such as Christians (see eg. F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557).

The 2004 crackdown

In the crackdown that followed the 2004 bombings in Tashkent and other cities – blamed by the government on Islamic extremists and linked by some without evidence to Al-Qa'ida - Forum 18 established from investigations in various parts of Uzbekistan that all religious believers who had earlier been convicted of criminal or administrative offences were called in to the police. They were warned to be careful, photographed and had their fingerprints taken.

Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees were among those targeted. One Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 that he was interrogated in a police station, accused of being a potential terrorist, and threatened by police that "If you do not renounce your ridiculous beliefs, then I will simply plant drugs on you and put you away for a long time!" (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

Among those detained was a leading imam, Rustam Kilichev, who has tried to persuade imprisoned Muslims to renounce the views of the banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. The National Security Service (NSS) secret police refused to say why he was being held. Police engineered arrests of religious believers by planting Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets, drugs and weapons on people. They searched believers' private homes, enquired about their religious views, confiscated religious literature, and in one case detained 25 Muslim women for 24 hours because they were wearing headscarves (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

The Andijan and Karasu uprisings

The protests began peacefully on 10 May, as hundreds of Andijan residents joined a well-organised demonstration outside a local court on behalf of 23 young men on trial on charges of being affiliated with what the government claimed was an outlawed Islamic group Akramia (see F18News 14 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508). The demonstrations were the latest of a regular series over four months as the long-running trial drew to a conclusion. The court concluded on 11 May and verdicts were expected imminently when the unrest broke out. Numbers attending the calm protest swelled to 3,000. Trials in this area of those the government claims are Islamist extremists are frequently accompanied by protests, but this was the largest and best-organised to date.

Trouble escalated on 12-13 May, when a group of the businessmen's supporters seized weapons from a local military base, then stormed the prison and freed the defendants along with all the other inmates, some of them convicted Islamic extremists. The situation degenerated and troops opened fire on the crowd on 13 May, shooting women and children as well as the rebels.

President Karimov initially downplayed the loss of life, but the authorities later claimed 169 people died on 13 May, most of them "Islamic extremists". Human rights activists now put the number at about 700. Surviving protestors and rebels fled towards Kyrgyzstan, about 45 kilometres (30 miles) away.

On 14 May, the protest spread to Karasu, a border town about 15 kilometres from the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh. The Uzbek-Kyrgyz border divides Karasu into two. Government offices, including those of the prosecutor, police, and customs, were set on fire. The Karasu protest appeared to have been led by local businessman Bakhtior Rakhimov, who claimed to want to establish Islamic rule but – quite plausibly - denied belonging to any organised political or religious group. After four days the Karasu rebellion was crushed.

The Akramia trial

The 23 Andijan businessmen, whose trial began in February, had been arrested in summer 2004. All were successful young businessmen suspected of being members of the Islamic movement Akramia, which the government claims was established by Akram Yuldashev. Yuldashev soon attracted a circle of followers who had read a brief theological tract "Yimonga Yul" (Path to faith) he wrote in 1992 and wanted to adhere to his view of Islamic norms. In April 1998 he was imprisoned on trumped-up drugs charges, but was released in the December 1998 prisoner amnesty. Re-arrested following explosions in central Tashkent in February 1999, he was sentenced to 17 years in prison. At that time the authorities accused Yuldashev without any factual evidence of organising the explosions. He was also accused of establishing the "religious-extremist organisation Akramia", which allegedly sought to create an Islamic state. The court derived the name "Akramia" from Yuldashev's first name. According to the court's verdict, Yuldashev's brochure calls for a changing the constitutional order in Uzbekistan, seizing power, and ousting the legitimately elected and appointed state representatives.

Yuldashev himself has repeatedly claimed that he is not interested in politics and that he has never called for the creation of an Islamic state (see F18News 14 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508).

On 14 May, President Karimov declared that Hizb ut-Tahrir – which aims to unite all Muslims of the world into a single Caliphate, or political unit, and is openly anti-semitic - was behind the Andijan disturbances. But Akramia representatives bluntly deny any link to Hizb ut-Tahrir – which itself denies any involvement - or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. An outline of Hizb ut-Tahrir

views can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.

Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf, the former Mufti of Uzbekistan, regards Akramia as an organisation far removed from politics. "Akramia has nothing in common with Hizb ut-Tahrir, and other radical political Islamic organisations," he declared. "It is for entirely different reasons that I consider Akram Yuldashev's teaching a heresy." He claims that Yuldashev teaches that it is not necessary for a Muslim to pray five times a day and to fast during Ramadan.

Government misinformation

Since 1991, President Karimov has been haunted by memories of being paraded and humiliated in front of the crowds in the city of Namangan – another Fergana Valley city then in the hands of a radical Islamic group Adolat (Justice). Forced to endure a torrent of complaints about poverty, corruption and indifference on the part of officialdom, his feeble defence of his record as Uzbek leader was answered with jeers. Adolat's vocal calls for an Islamic state under Sharia law terrified him. He was determined he would never face such humiliation again.

Karimov has identified his main opponents as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and has tried hard to convince the rest of the world that his regime's widespread human rights abuses and holding of, according to Human Rights Watch, over 7,000 political prisoners is part of the "war on terror" – even though his regime's attacks on human rights pre-date 2001.

But with repeated high-level official condemnation of Hizb ut-Tahrir, it is little wonder that many in Uzbekistan believe it is the only movement capable of challenging the discredited Karimov regime. But few in Uzbekistan know what Hizb ut-Tahrir espouses, though activists have been open with Forum 18 in explaining their views (see 29 October 2003 F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

The IMU was a violent movement that staged cross-border incursions into Uzbekistan from Kyrgyzstan, but it remained small and has gone quiet in recent years.

Yet by tarring all Muslim opponents of the regime with the same brush, Karimov has alienated vast swathes of Muslim opinion. Uzbek officials have even accused Jehovah's Witnesses of being Islamic fundamentalists (see F18News 8 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=358). Even those not wanting an Islamic state (and secularism remains a strong force after decades of state-enforced atheism, especially in cities) see the closed mosques and tight restrictions on those that remain and feel their religious beliefs are being trampled on. Government actions lend credence to arguments that the regime is anti-Islamic and drive peaceful Muslims into the arms of more radical Islamists.

What happened in Andijan?

Following the Uzbek government's refusal to allow a credible, independent and international investigation into the events in Andijan, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) launched its own investigation. The OSCE "Preliminary findings on the events in Andijan" is at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/15653>. It considers that a realistic estimate of deaths is that between 300 to 500 people were killed either in Andijan or fleeing from the town during the 13-14 May 2005. The OSCE also observed the trial in Uzbekistan of some alleged participants in the Andijan events and its "Report from the OSCE/ODIHR trial monitoring in Uzbekistan, September/October 2005" may be found at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/18840>. Both OSCE reports were categorically rejected by the Uzbek Government.

Implications

The Andijan demonstrations that sparked the unrest demonstrate that, despite all the Uzbek government's efforts, it has failed to stamp out alternative forms of Islam not under government control. Second, despite the authorities' harsh repressive policy, the trials of real or alleged Islamists are increasingly causing mass protests.

However, almost all the protesters questioned by journalists – and an appeal apparently written by one of the defendants and found by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting on the streets in the wake of the crackdown – focused on economic grievances. It is highly unlikely that the uprising would have occurred had the local economy been stronger. Living standards in Uzbekistan are among the lowest in Central Asia, lower than in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Data about average salary levels in Uzbekistan are highly classified.

Poor economic conditions led to disturbances in the Fergana Valley city of Kokand last November when 6,000 traders threw stones at one of the tax offices and set two police cars on fire. The following month, 300 demonstrators joined a protest in Marhamat, a town some 30 kilometres south of Andijan, after the district's electricity supply was cut.

The Kyrgyz dimension

The Uzbek crackdown might also considerably complicate the situation in Kyrgyzstan. Geographically Andijan is nearer Osh, a

major city in southern Kyrgyzstan, than Tashkent. Popular protests that led to the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of President Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan earlier this year began in Osh. Almost one-third of the population of southern Kyrgyzstan is made up of ethnic Uzbeks. The Kyrgyz authorities' more liberal policy has given a freer hand to local Islamic radicals, primarily members of Hizb ut-Tahrir but also members of the Tabligh movement (see F18News 3 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=468). The Kyrgyz part of Karasu, which is almost entirely inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks, is considered the unofficial capital of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia.

Since the fall of President Akaev, few authorities function in this part of Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek authorities fear that southern Kyrgyzstan could become the centre of armed resistance to the Karimov regime.

The Kyrgyz authorities say at least 12 Islamic radicals freed by the insurgents in Andijan were among the hundreds of Uzbek refugees who fled to Kyrgyzstan, the American researcher Ethan Vilensky told Forum 18 from Osh on 14 May. Some believe this migration to Kyrgyzstan of a large number of refugees dissatisfied with Karimov is potentially dangerous. "Among those who have fled to Kyrgyzstan are quite a few supporters of creating an Islamic state," Askar Azimjanov told Forum 18 from Bozor-Kurgan, a town 30 kilometres west of the Kyrgyz city of Jalal-Abad. "And, of course, they will try to unite with our Islamic radicals."

What now? (May 2005)

While Uzbekistan does have a small minority of Muslims working to overthrow the current regime and install an Islamic administration, by force if necessary, blanket government accusations against all active Muslims who oppose state policy on religion or other issues have angered many. With democratic movements crushed, many see Islamist solutions to the economic and political crisis as the only available option, despite widespread reservations about an Islamic regime. But as long as Islam and other faiths remain restricted and tightly controlled, fundamentalist Islam is going to be seen as a valid alternative to the current political structure.

While religious minorities have cause to fear a future Islamic regime – which might even remove the few rights they have now – they too suffer from current restrictions. The government is determined that no independent political or social entities, including religious communities, will be allowed to flourish. Uzbekistan's future looks bleak.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths 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=777 and Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222

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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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY