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UZBEKISTAN: Government tries to deny religious freedom reality

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Uzbekistan increasingly claims that it is a country of religious tolerance, where religious freedom is respected, Forum 18 News Service notes. This is despite the state TV company's attacks on religious tolerance and religious freedom, the persecution of independent Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, and tight restrictions on members of other communities. In an echo of Soviet-era practice, religious leaders have increasingly been co-opted to support false claims of religious freedom. A "non-governmental" opinion poll centre has claimed that it has carried out a poll proving that "only" 3.9 percent of respondents had said their religious rights are restricted in Uzbekistan. Marat Hajimuhamedov, who was involved in the survey, laughed and declined to comment when Forum 18 asked him how the survey accorded with religious believers' experience of police raids, fines, imprisonment and harassment of religious communities.

While independent Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses face persecution and members of other religious communities face tight government-imposed restrictions, the Uzbek authorities are stepping up efforts to promote their spurious claims that Uzbekistan has a religiously-tolerant government that respects religious freedom. Forum 18 News Service notes that - in an echo of Soviet-era practice - religious leaders have increasingly been brought in by the government to help promote this message.

These efforts come against a backdrop of increasing government control over all aspects of religious life. Among recent developments, the authorities in the Andijan [Andijon] region have instituted a new ban on the Muslim call to prayer from mosques, another court has ordered confiscated Christian literature to be burned and the government's Religious Affairs Committee has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from importing Bibles (see F18News 20 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=892).

To help promote the government's image of a country that respects religious freedom, the results of an opinion poll allegedly carried out across Uzbekistan by the Ijtimoiy Fikr (Social Opinion) centre were widely distributed in the official media on 13 December under the headline "Religious rights in Uzbekistan are respected – poll". The report was carried by the websites of various Uzbek embassies, such as those in Germany and Israel. Ijtimoiy Fikr is a government-founded "non-governmental" opinion poll centre in the capital Tashkent led by Rano Ubaidullaeva, a member of the Academy of Sciences.

Close observers of the polling agency's work over recent years – who asked not to be named – pointed out to Forum 18 that the agency is not independent. They report that the alleged results of polls the agency publishes do not always accurately reflect the results the agency gets and on occasion the published "results" – particularly over sensitive issues - have been fabricated.

The alleged results of the opinion poll on religion were released less than two weeks after Uzbek national state television broadcast an anti-Protestant and anti-Jehovah's Witness programme entitled "Hypocrisy". The programme accused these groups of promoting drug addiction, turning converts into zombies and wanting to promote fights between people of different faiths. The programme interviewed a Russian Orthodox and a Jewish representative, who both claimed that Uzbekistan guarantees full religious freedom (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890).

The Tashkent-based Armenian priest Fr Gevorg Vardanyan and two ethnic Armenian leaders have also defended the Uzbek government's record. They described the designation of Uzbekistan by the US State Department in November as a "Country of Particular Concern" for its violations of religious freedom as "an injustice to which we cannot be indifferent". "To consider Uzbekistan as a state where there are no religious freedoms," they assert, "is a crude political demarche insulting above all those who avail themselves of these freedoms, the ordinary believers of our country, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or representatives of other faiths."

The comments by the three Armenians came in their article in the government's Russian-language paper Narodnoe Slovo on 16 December reporting on a service in Tashkent to commemorate the victims of the 1988 Armenian earthquake. They said nothing about the then very recent imposition of massive fines on six Baptists, and the order by a court that Christian literature, including copies of the Bible, should be burnt (see F18News 27 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=877).

On 8 December, Narodnoe Slovo had also published what it said was a letter to Uzbek President Islam Karimov from a group of

Uzbek citizens now living in Saudi Arabia – including a mullah - praising the president's wise leadership and condemning the US government's designation of Uzbekistan as a violator of religious freedom.

In her 13 December report of the Ijtimoiy Fikr opinion poll results, Ubaidullaeva claimed on the Ijtimoiy Fikr website that "only" 3.9 percent of respondents had said their religious rights are restricted in Uzbekistan. It claimed that 82 percent had said they are not, while the remaining 14.1 percent were unable to answer.

On the website, Ijtimoiy Fikr gave no information about how many people had been polled, where they lived or how they had been selected to ensure they represented the wider population. Forum 18 notes that fear of responding on a sensitive issue would also have hindered accurate polling.

However, Marat Hajimuhamedov, who heads the sociological monitoring department at Ijtimoiy Fikr and who was involved in the survey, told Forum 18 that more than 1,700 adults were surveyed in face-to-face interviews across Uzbekistan at the end of November and the beginning of December. "Everything was done according to international survey standards," he insisted to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 December. He said the sample was weighted for age and geographical location.

Hajimuhamedov told Forum 18 that respondents did not give their names but had to give their addresses to allow verification of the results. He insisted that his centre guarantees the secrecy of responses and that respondents would therefore have no reason not to give accurate answers. He did not explain how this matches the reports of a wide range of respected human rights and media organisations, including Forum 18, which point to a pattern of widespread control and repression used by the Uzbek government against its own citizens.

He insisted to Forum 18 that the results of the question as to whether respondents are able to practice their faith freely are accurate. "The rights of believers are respected here in Uzbekistan," he maintained. "The overwhelming majority of the population - more than 90 percent - will tell you that." Asked how that accords with religious believers' experience of police raids, fines, imprisonment and harassment of religious communities, he laughed and declined any comment.

On its website, the polling group also claimed that 22 percent of Muslims have been able to make the haj pilgrimage to Mecca in the fifteen years since Uzbekistan became independent, an unlikely claim given that in recent years the government has allowed only about 4,000 Muslims to conduct the haj each year. For this year's haj which is about to begin, the Uzbek government has allowed only 5,000 pilgrims to travel compared to Uzbekistan's quota from the Saudi authorities of some 25,000 (see F18News 7 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=884).

However, Hajimuhamedov told Forum 18 that the question – put only to the 90 percent or so of respondents who identified themselves as Muslim – actually asked whether they or members of their immediate family had been on the haj. He was unable to explain why an inaccurate impression had been given in the website report or how even then such a high percentage could respond positively, given the tight government restrictions on pilgrim numbers.

Forum 18 notes that, in what has become customary practice, the widely-distributed report of Ijtimoiy Fikr's alleged findings and the "Hypocrisy" television programmes both spoke repeatedly of religious freedom and religious extremism and violence in the same breath, establishing in viewers' and readers' minds that religion is a dangerous force that the government is right to control and restrict.

One Tashkent-based Protestant – who declined to be identified for fear of reprisals - regards the "Hypocrisy" programme as part of an increased anti-Protestant and anti-Jehovah's Witness campaign that began in 2005. The Protestant cited the instructions from the Tashkent city mayor's office in December 2005 to check up on all aspects of religious communities' life (see F18News 11 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=714). "Commissions from the architect's office, fire department and all manner of agencies came to each church," the Protestant recalled. "Sometimes officials came openly, sometimes secretly." The Deputy Head of the city administration at that time claimed to Forum 18 that "there is no campaign against religious believers".

Also part of the campaign were orders to heads of schools and institutes in spring 2006 to investigate the religious affiliation and practice of staff and students, a campaign stepped up in the new academic year in September. Yet again, Uzbekistan repeated its claim that members of religious faiths "freely practice their faith." Forum 18 has itself been accused of trying "at every opportunity to accuse Uzbekistan without foundation of repressing believers." (see F18News 28 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=878).

The Protestant said the campaign was stepped up in summer and autumn of this year, with police raids, the closure of churches and the expulsion of foreigners connected with or accused of being connected with religious communities (see F18News 10 October 2006

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=852). The latest foreign humanitarian aid group to be accused of being a front for missionaries is the US-based Northwest Medical Teams International. The government press-uz.info website accused the group on 28 November of tax-evasion and cooperating with aid groups that have been fined or closed down for allegedly proselytising among

the population.

Unlike foreign Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses who have faced deportation for working with local religious communities at their invitation (see eg. F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838), the Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian Apostolic and Jewish faiths can use foreign clergy.

Andrei Kuraev, a Moscow-based deacon of the Russian Orthodox Church, says he has faced no problems visiting Uzbekistan twice this year and speaking in churches and the Orthodox seminary in Tashkent, as well as in universities and other institutions. "The only conditions came not from Uzbek officials but from our bishop [Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim) of Tashkent], who said I should not use the word 'mission' and should not criticise Islam," he told Forum 18 on 18 December. "I gave all my lectures wearing my vestments. Of course I had to inform the authorities in advance where I was going and what I would say."

Deacon Kuraev believes it was a "political decision" to allow him to come to Uzbekistan and speak, while Russian, Ukrainian, American and Korean Protestants have been expelled for doing the same. (END)

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.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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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