

27 February 2009

UZBEKISTAN: "You call white black and black white"

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

Uzbekistan imposed harsh prison sentences yesterday (26 February) on five writers for the Islamic periodical Irmoq (Spring), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The verdicts were: Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafoyev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. Uzbek officials have refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. All five were arrested in mid-2008 by the NSS secret police on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi." The Ezgulik human rights society stated that the defendants insisting they had violated no laws. "We want children to know the truth, to be able to tell the difference between black and white," they told the court. "But you call white black and black white." The verdict in a similar case against contributors to the Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) Islamic periodical is awaited. As part of the continuing crackdown on religious literature, pressure also continues on Baptists distributing literature in the street.

Judge Farhod Yigitaliev of Tashkent Criminal Court has imposed harsh prison sentences in the trial of five writers for the Islamic periodical Irmoq (Spring), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The verdicts, imposed on 26 February were: Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafoyev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. All five were found guilty of violating Article 244-1 and Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code, the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 26 February.

Judge Vakhit Sharipov, Deputy Chair of Tashkent City Criminal Court, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 over the telephone on 27 February, or even to say what crime the Irmoq writers had committed. Judge Sharipov has previously denied that Tashkent City Criminal Court tried the Irmoq contributors (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256). The Judge then referred all enquiries to the Foreign Ministry, who also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 27 February.

Irmoq has been closely monitored, and the five contributors arrested by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police in June and August 2008, on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi" (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256). Russian translations of the works of Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi have been banned in Russia, following controversial claims by the authorities that they are "extremist" (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136).

Ibrahimov was the first to be arrested, on 27 June 2008, with the other four being arrested on 16 August, the Ezgulik human rights society told Forum 18.

Ezgulik stated that, in their closing statements on 20 February, the defendants reaffirmed their innocence, insisting they had violated no laws and had done nothing against the country. "We want children to know the truth, to be able to tell the difference between black and white," they told the court. "But you call white black and black white."

The books of Said Nursi were freely available in Uzbek bookshops until 2000, Ezgulik noted, and "any family" could still have copies at home. The import, production and distribution of all religious literature in Uzbekistan is under highly restrictive state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible (see F18News 1 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1153).

The trial of the five Irmoq writers began at Tashkent City Criminal Court on 16 February. The five were accused of violating Article 244-1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes the "dissemination of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction of individuals, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion in purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and of public security". They were also accused of violating Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations".

During the trial, Judge Yigitaliev rejected calls by the defendants for officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee to be summoned to court. The five defendants wanted Religious Affairs Committee officials to testify why they thought the materials published in Irmoq represented a threat under Criminal Code Articles 244-1 and 244-2.

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case on 27 February, also claiming that their Chair was "on a business trip."

In a second similar case, which began on 18 February at Tashkent City Court, Judge Mirzajonov presided over the trial of Davron Tajiev, Shavkat Ismoilov and Muhammadali Shahobiddinov. Tajiev, the editor of the Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) Islamic periodical, and Ismoilov had been arrested on 6 November 2008. Shakhabitdinov had been arrested in August 2008.

Both Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim had begun publication in early 2007 and continued publication – in small print-runs and on the internet – until they were banned in August 2008 as the second wave of arrests began (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256).

Ezgulik noted that another Islamic-inspired journal, Odamlar Orasida (Among People), had been banned by the State Agency of Press and Information in July 2007.

Some commentators have seen the trials as part of an Uzbek government attempt to root out what remains of Nurcular influence in the country. Ezgulik also declared that 12 other followers of the Nur movement led by Fethullah Gulen have been arrested, 11 in Khorezm and one in the capital – Mansurali Arraboev, a teacher at Tashkent's Islamic Institute.

Meanwhile, pressure has continued on Council of Churches Baptists who offer their literature on the streets. On 11 February two Baptists from the city of Fergana were found guilty by an administrative court of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "illegal production, import, storage or distribution of religious literature". Vladimir Andoniu and Vladimir Potekhin were each fined, 485,000 Soms (2,300 Norwegian Kroner, 270 Euros, or 340 US Dollars) and 250,000 Soms (1,185 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 170 US Dollars) respectively, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 22 February.

They note that the cases against two other Baptists – Artur Alpaev and Aleksandr Avdeev – were sent back to prosecutors for them to decide whether they should face administrative or criminal proceedings. The action against the four follows earlier action against Baptists offering their literature in Tashkent (see F18News 17 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1256).

Judge B. Bekzhanova of Nukus District Criminal Court on 11 February fined local Protestant Serik Kubaisinov 569,500 Soms (2,847 Norwegian Kroner, 320 Euros, or 405 US Dollars) under Article 184-2 of the Administrative Code. Two books "New Testament and Psalms," in Russian, a "Khosh Khabar" (New Testament in Karakalpak language), seven videotapes and ten DVDs were confiscated and ordered to be destroyed by the same decision.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the books were planted by the Nukus District Police officers earlier during a search, and did not belong to Kubaisinov. However, Forum 18 was told that the videotapes and DVDs, which were not religious in content, did belong to Kubaisinov.

In a separate case in Nukus, three local Protestants - Vladimir Kim, Ulash Bazarbaeva and Darikhan Toremuratova – have failed to have fines imposed in late 2008 overturned. The Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan on 21 January upheld the fines on each one of 25,040 Soms (120 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18 US Dollars).

In addition to the fines, the court had ordered the confiscation of a Bible, a New Testament in Kazakh and a Christian brochure (see F18News 10 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1252). (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=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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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