

4 March 2015

UZBEKISTAN: "Pardoned only after repenting and asking the President for forgiveness"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Uzbekistan in February freed six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. The freed prisoners of conscience include sports journalist Hairulla Hamidov and five other Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed because they met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. The five are: Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown). All six had served most of their long jail terms. Other prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief are known to be still in jail, including other Muslims who met to study Nursi's works and one Protestant. The five amnestied readers of Nursi's works were "pardoned only after repenting and asking the President [Islam Karimov] for forgiveness", a source from Uzbekistan who knows the men and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Uzbekistan in February freed six known Muslim prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Other known freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience were not freed, including one Protestant. The freed prisoners of conscience include Hairulla Hamidov, a journalist and sports commentator, who was known for his popular football and Muslim religious radio talk-shows. Also freed were five other Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed because they met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. These five are: Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown). All six were freed under a Presidential prisoner amnesty declared in December 2014, and had served most of their long jail terms.

There is reliable information that thousands more Muslims are imprisoned, usually on accusations of belonging to terrorist, "extremist" or banned organisations, or on other charges which may appear to relate to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. But the nature of the Uzbek "justice system", in which the planting of evidence and torture by the authorities is often credibly claimed, makes it unlikely that the authorities – or anyone else - knows how many of these prisoners are guilty of involvement in violence or some other crime, are disliked by the authorities or an official for some other reason, or are "guilty" of being devout Muslims who take their faith seriously. Indeed, Forum 18 has spoken to police who arrested people but were unaware of any offence the people arrested had committed. The only reason for such arrests was that a higher official had ordered someone to be arrested without stating why (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Jailed

Rashid Sharipov was jailed in 2010 for seven years along with other Muslims who read Nursi's works (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465). Akmal Abdullayev was like Sharipov tried in Bukhara [Bukhoro] but slightly later in 2010 among a group of nine or ten Muslims who read Nursi's works (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unclear) are thought to have been sentenced around the same time.

Sports journalist Hamidov and 18 others were fined and jailed for up to six years in June 2010 (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1465). In July 2013 six Muslims were prosecuted for allegedly meeting in a local teahouse to listen to sermon recordings, discuss religion, and listen to talks by Hamidov. In what the indictment appears to see as an aggravating "offence", Ravshan Rahmatullayev – who was jailed for six years - is stated to have prayed. The other five Muslims were given two to three year suspended jail sentences. Prisoner of conscience Rahmatullayev is still in jail.

"Pardoned only after repenting"

Sharipov, Abdullayev, Rakhmonov, Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unclear) were "pardoned only after repenting and asking the President [Islam Karimov] for forgiveness", a source from Uzbekistan who knows the men and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 13 February. Some Muslim readers of Nursi's works who have earlier been amnestied are known to have had to promise to the authorities that they will not in future exercise freedom of religion or belief, including associate with other Muslims who read Nursi's works or foreigners.

Oppressive release conditions, including making statements on television supporting the state's repression, have been imposed on other Muslims (see F18News 4 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1717).

Sports journalist Hamidov told Forum 18 on 25 February that in future he will "be engaged in sports journalism rather than covering religious topics". However, "if any media organs ask me to write on religious topics I will be available". He said that to be released he had to write a letter of apology to President Karimov.

Hamidov's ability to move from place to place is limited and he cannot leave Uzbekistan "until all the due process of documentation is completed". He does not know how long this will take.

Hamidov stated that before he was released he was moved from his prison in Navoi [Navoiy] to a prison in Chirchik in Tashkent Region for quarantine purposes. "At least 4 or 5 out of 15 Muslim prisoners, who were amnestied and moved to the same prison, were readers of Nursi's works", he stated. Hamidov said that he could not find out their names as "I was only there for 20 days".

This is not the first occasion Muslim prisoners of conscience who were jailed for reading Nursi's works have been amnestied. For example, Muzaffar Allayorov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov, Yadgar Juraev, Abdukakhkhor Alimov, Mirshod Kakhkharov and Mirzo Allayorov (Muzaffar's brother) were amnestied in late February and early March 2014 (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). Earlier, Alisher Jumaev, Bobomurod Sanoev and Jamshid Ramazonov were amnestied in spring 2012 (see F18News 4 July 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1717).

Some other prisoners of conscience

Among the other prisoners of conscience known to have been jailed for exercising their freedom of religion are two Muslim sisters, Mehriniso and Zulhumor Hamdamova, jailed for running study groups on Islam in their home. Both were arrested in Karshi [Qarshi] in 2009 and with Shahlo Rakhmonova (a relative of the sisters) were sentenced to up to seven years in jail in April 2010. The trial was conducted with many violations of published law, as often happens in Uzbekistan (see F18News 26 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1436).

Relatives inside and outside Uzbekistan have been very concerned about the sisters' health, particularly over Mehriniso Hamdamova diagnosed with a possible cancerous growth called a myoma in 2014 which needs to be removed (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941). In October 2014 relatives told Forum 18: "Their health seems to be a little better now. Mehriniso has not been operated on yet, but she was given some medicines. She said she is feeling a little better at the moment" (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941).

Relatives, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 25 February 2015 that: "Zulhumor is doing well, but Mehriniso is ailing from her myoma although she has not experienced bad pains recently".

The Hamdamova sisters' prison address is:

Uzbekistan

Tashkent Region

Zangiota tumani

Uchr. 64/1

Hamdamova Mehriniso Imomovna

or

Hamdamova Zulhumor Imomovna

Conditions in labour camps such as the one the Hamdamovas are held in can be harsh, with unsanitary and dangerous living and working conditions, beatings by guards, and criminal gangs having a ruthless hold over other prisoners (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=982)

A relative of the sisters, prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov is on a 16-year jail term from June 2013 for following Islam after Kazakhstan illegally extradited him to Uzbekistan. It appears that the Uzbek authorities tried to infect him with the potentially fatal disease of tuberculosis. The authorities have claimed to Forum 18 that he is cured - but if so Forum 18 notes this has taken an unusually short length of time. A relative wondered what the authorities' reasons were. "If he did not have TB why was he moved to the TB prison - and if he did why was he moved back to his original prison in such a short time?", the relative asked (see F18News

18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

Tursunov is still in jail. His prison address is:

Uzbekistan

Bukhara Region

Korovulbazar sh.

Uchr. UYa-64/25

Tursunov Khayrullo Turdiyevich

The only currently known non-Muslim prisoner of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief is a Baptist, Tohar Haydarov. He is serving a 10-year sentence from March 2010 on alleged drugs charges, which his fellow church members insist were fabricated. Appeals against the conviction and sentence to the Supreme Court have been rejected (see F18News 2 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1600).

Fellow Baptists from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 23 February that they have visited him regularly several times a year, and "that he is physically fine". Haydarov appealed to be pardoned in 2014, but this was not granted as according to the prison authorities he had allegedly violated prison regulations. However, Baptists told Forum 18 that they hope that he will be released after he has served half his sentence in 2016. His prison address is:

Uzbekistan

Kashkadarya Region

g. Karshi

pos. Shaikh-Ali

otryad 13

UYa 64/49

Tohar Haydarov

Other Muslims jailed for reading Nursi's works

As noted above many Muslims have been jailed in Uzbekistan, although the reasons for their being jailed are unclear. Sports journalist Hamidov told Forum 18 that in his prison "about 100 or 150 out of the total of 2,000 prisoners were arrested on religious grounds. Some said they were Wahhabis, some Nursi readers, some were named Jihadists."

An expert from Uzbekistan, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum on 26 February that he thinks around 100 Muslim readers of Nursi's works were jailed between about 2007 and 2010. Some of these prisoners of conscience are known to be still in jail, including:

- Ikrom Merajov and Botir Tukhtamurodov jailed for nine years and six years respectively in April 2009 (see F18News 29 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1289);

- Nutfullo Aminov and Ilkhom Rajabov jailed for eight years and seven years respectively in June 2010, along with Kamol Odilov and Anvar Zariopov who were jailed for six years each (see F18News 8 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1465);

- and Abdullo Rasulov jailed in 2010 along with Abdullayev who has now been amnestied (see F18News 24 March 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1941).

No comment

The Deputy for Organisational Issues (who would not give his name) of Erkin Bobokulov, Deputy Head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments in the capital Tashkent, which oversees prisons, told Forum 18 on 26 February Bobokulov is "not available and out of the office". He refused to answer any questions relating to the amnestied prisoners

or other matters.

Officials from the government's Religious Affairs Committee also on 26 February refused to comment on the amnesties. The Press Secretary Shovkat Khamdamov claimed that "I do not have that information" and refused to speak further.

Prayer in one jail possible

Prisoners in labour camps and jails are denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to pray openly, to have religious literature, or to receive visits from religious clergy (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

A source from Uzbekistan, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the released Muslims they know who read Nursi's works could not openly pray, read the Koran or talk about religion with others while in prison. "All that is banned in Uzbekistan's prisons", they stated.

However, sports journalist Hamidov stated that he personally could pray and read religious books in his prison in Navoi. "There were other Muslims arrested on religious grounds in my prison and they could also pray," he said.

Hamidov said that he lived in a barrack with 60 convicts but that there were other rooms for 10-15 convicts. He said that the "food and other conditions were acceptable."

Torture, death

The United Nations (UN) Committee Against Torture found in 2007 that torture in Uzbekistan is "routine". In November 2013 the Committee reiterated its concerns, including over rape threats against the Hamdamova sisters. "The Committee is concerned about numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations that torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement, investigative and prison officials, or at their instigation or with their consent, often to extract confessions or information to be used in criminal proceedings," (see F18News 18 February 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1930).

This may lead to the death of prisoners. For example, it is unclear why Nilufar Rahimjanova died on about 13 September 2014 in the women's labour camp near Tashkent. Relatives say the mother of four was imprisoned for 10 years to punish her Iran-based husband and her Tajikistan-based father, both Muslim theologians the Uzbek authorities do not like. She died three years into her sentence (see F18News 22 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2007).

Women such as the Hamdamova sisters seem to be particularly targeted for torture and threats by male officials (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

One of 29 Uzbek refugees deported back to Uzbekistan by Kazakhstan against their will – and against international law – has told relatives of being tortured in Uzbek prisons. The men were extradited back to Uzbekistan in 2011 and all were detained. Most were given long prison sentences (see F18News 8 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1833).

Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture (ACAT) – which represents the 29 men – noted many are still in detention. In December 2012 ACAT published a translation of letters from relatives documenting forms of torture experienced by prisoners in Uzbekistan (see F18News 8 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1975). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all 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=1862.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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