

14 April 2015

UZBEKISTAN: "She fears police brutality during interrogation and short-term jailing"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Nearly three years after Uzbekistan fired her from her job as a teacher for insisting on wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf), Gulchohra Norbayeva still faces police summonses, a house search for religious literature, accusations she was teaching the Koran "illegally", and pressure to sign statements incriminating Muslim men she did not know. "At the moment they have left me alone. I don't know if the police opened a case," she told Forum 18 News Service. An Anti-Terrorism Police Officer who took part in a raid on her home insisted to Forum 18 that the search was for religious literature and that the case is closed. But police told Norbayeva that, whether or not she wears the hijab, she is on the Preventative Register. This allows police "preventative measures" such as someone being fired from their job. Also, police have renewed their hunt for Guljahon Kuzebayeva, a Protestant in the southern Kashkadarya Region who has been in hiding since July 2014, for allegedly talking to family members about her Christian faith. "She fears police brutality during interrogation and also possible short-term jailing," fellow Protestants told Forum 18. The use of informal physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan.

In recent months Uzbekistan's police are known to have renewed their targeting of two women for exercising their freedom of religion or belief – Gulchohra Norbayeva, a Muslim in Tashkent Region, and Guljahon Kuzebayeva, a Protestant in the southern Kashkadarya Region, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Two more Muslim women were sacked from their jobs in Karshi for insisting on wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Norbayeva – who lost her job as a teacher in 2012 for refusing to give up wearing the hijab – faced police summonses, a house search for religious literature, accusations she was teaching the Koran "illegally", and pressure to sign statements incriminating Muslim men she did not know.

Asked whether the police or other authorities are still harassing her or whether she knows if a case has been opened against her, Norbayeva told Forum 18 on 7 April: "At the moment they have left me alone. I don't know if the police opened a case." An Anti-Terrorism Police officer who took part in a February 2015 raid on Norbayeva's home insisted to Forum 18 that the search was to hunt for religious literature and that the case is now closed. Severe censorship of such literature, including house searches, is imposed by the state (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Kuzebayeva – who went into hiding in July 2014 following a raid on her home - faces possible prosecution for allegedly talking to family members about her Christian faith. "She fears police brutality during interrogation and also possible short-term jailing," fellow Protestants told Forum 18.

The use of physical violence and torture, or threats of this, by the authorities is widespread in Uzbekistan. Most victims are, for extremely good reasons, unwilling to publicly discuss their experiences and women are often particularly targeted by male officials (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1862).

Protestants told Forum 18 that they think that police opened a case against Kuzebayeva under Administrative Code Article 240, Part 1 ("Violation of the Religion Law") and Article 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"). But the police "could not bring her before a court as she is hiding for fear of short-term jailing."

Punishments under these Articles are fines or short-term jailing for up to 15 days (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

Police are known to detain people who actively exercise their freedom of religion or belief after having opened an administrative case against them. Police then bring such people quickly before the courts without proper investigation or due legal process, resulting in punishments for exercising human rights. If the police's victims are given a short term in jail, they are immediately taken to prison (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

"Preventative Register of Muslims to be watched"

Norbayeva told Forum 18 that during one recent interrogation, police officers told her that "it does not matter now if I wear the hijab or abandon it. They said that I will still be in their Preventative Register of Muslims to be watched."

People who actively exercise their freedom of religion or belief – both Muslims and those with other beliefs – are known to be on lists for special scrutiny, held by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police, ordinary police and Mahalla (local district) Committee officials. Wearing the hijab or going to the mosque or other place of worship frequently is enough to be listed (see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1862).

The Preventative Register Norbayeva referred to was formalised in 2014. A very wide range of state agencies, from courts to health care and nature protection agencies, can put people on this Register. This subjects them to a variety of police "preventative measures" for one year or more. These "preventative measures" can include someone being fired from their job and there are many possibilities for officials to arbitrarily keep people on the Register for many years (see F18News 4 July 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1974).

Muslim women fired for exercising their freedom of religion or belief

Norbayeva approached the Human Rights Alliance, an independent human rights organisation in Tashkent. "We studied her case, and it is a gross violation of her freedom of religion or belief and other human rights," Yelena Uralyeva of the Alliance told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 April. She said her organisation is calling on the international community to "support and protect" Norbayeva, as well as on Uzbekistan's authorities to "restore her to her work" as a teacher.

A source from Kashkadarya, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 13 April that they know of at least two Muslim women from Karshi who were dismissed from their jobs recently for wearing the hijab. The women were also subjected to police interrogation and harassment for their exercise of freedom of religion or belief. The source did not wish to identify the two for fear of state reprisals.

Officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, including Press Secretary Shovkat Hamdamov, refused to comment on the cases to Forum 18 on 13 April.

Pressure to abandon the hijab

Trouble began for Norbayeva, a Muslim resident of Parkent in Tashkent Region, in 2008, when she heard rumours that her husband had died in Afghanistan. "He left me and our seven-month-old baby in 2000 and went abroad, I don't know where," she told Forum 18. During this period, police questioned her several times over the whereabouts of her husband. "Officers also warned me not to wear the hijab." In 2008 Norbayeva filed for divorce, and was granted it.

In 2012 the Administration of Secondary School No. 8, where she worked as an English teacher, warned Norbayeva not to wear the hijab. "School officials told me in front of all the staff that either I must stop wearing the hijab - as the government does not want teachers to wear hijabs - or I must leave my job," she told Forum 18. "Otherwise I'd be in trouble. I chose leaving my job instead of stopping wearing the hijab." She signed a letter voluntarily resigning her job at the school.

Norbayeva has been without a full-time job since 2012, surviving by giving English lessons privately. "And I still wear my hijab," she added.

Sadriddin Abullayev, Director of School No. 8, adamantly denied that he or other school officials pressured Norbayeva to resign her job. "She left the job for health reasons," he claimed to Forum 18 on 7 April. However, he affirmed that teachers "cannot wear the hijab to school since an Education Ministry Decree on the official dress code for teachers does not allow the hijab or any other religious apparel." Asked why teachers cannot wear clothes that accord with their religious beliefs, he did not answer. He did not wish to talk to Forum 18 further.

Harassment continues

For some time after 2012, police left Norbayeva alone. "But they began harassing me again in August 2014," she told Forum 18. "They would summon me and pressure me to sign statements against two Muslim men and their alleged illegal actions. I didn't even know them." She told Forum 18 that she knew the men's wives by sight. "We got acquainted through common friends in the bazaar. We greet each other occasionally on the street, but our relationship has not gone beyond these greetings."

At 6 am on 23 February 2015, about 14 police officers raided Norbayeva's Parkent home. The raid was organised by Yukori-Chirchik District's Yangibazar City Police in cooperation with the Police from Parkent. Officers showed her a search warrant from the Yukori-Chirchik District Prosecutor's Office. However, some of the officers hurried Norbayeva away to the Yangibazar Police Station, while others searched the flat in the presence of her brother and some neighbours.

Why the search?

Yangibazar Anti-Terrorism Police Officer Mirvoli Mirboboyev told Forum 18 the search was conducted "because we were tipped off by the Religious Affairs Committee that Norbayeva has religious books in her flat". He added that "books were seized from her flat and sent for expert analysis to the Committee in Tashkent".

However, Norbayeva denied this. "I counted my books when I returned home, and all the books were in place." She pointed out that the Prosecutor's warrant said that the search in her flat was in connection with a Muslim man (whose name she did not remember) who was in custody, and who allegedly testified that he knew her. The police had pressured the man's wife to sign a pre-written statement which claimed that "Norbayeva lived like a vagabond, and she taught Koran lessons illegally."

Asked on 9 April why Norbayeva's home was searched and why she was questioned by the Police, Yukori-Chirchik District Prosecutor Otabek Abdullayev refused to discuss the case. "You need to talk to higher authorities, if they allow us then we'll talk to you," he told Forum 18. Asked who exactly it should speak to, the Prosecutor put the phone down.

Officer Mirboboyev adamantly denied that Norbayeva is being targeted by the police. Asked why officers pressured her to sign statements against the Muslim men, he told Forum 18: "We only conducted a search in her home." Asked why then on 23 February she was taken to Yangibazar Police Station for interrogation, he did not answer. "The case is over, there is no need to worry," he insisted.

Asked why he thinks the case is over, Officer Mirboboyev responded: "The Religious Affairs Committee sent us an expert analysis that the books found in her home are the Koran and Hadith [collections of sayings attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad], which are legally allowed in Uzbekistan."

Local police officer Aziz Bekmirzayev, who led the officers to Norbayeva's flat and who participated in her detention and the search, refused to discuss the case. "I cannot discuss this case with you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 8 April. Asked why, he said: "It's a secret." He also refused to tell Forum 18 whether a case was opened against Norbayeva or any other details of the Police investigation.

12-hour interrogation, 11 days of heart treatment

After being taken to Yangibazar Police early on 23 February, Norbayeva was questioned there for almost 12 hours with only a short break, she complained to Forum 18. Officers were able to compel another Muslim woman to sign a statement that "I allegedly gave her private Koran lessons, which I never did. It is this woman's husband who in February was given 15 days in jail in Yangibazar, and against whom I was asked to sign a statement," Norbayeva said. She said that later the man "was freed."

At about 7 pm, she and the Muslim woman who testified against her were taken to Yukori-Chirchik Prosecutor's Office for the police to "complete some formalities for about 15 minutes" and where they were not questioned. They were then returned to the police station. "After that we sat on chairs in the police station hallway until 11 pm without being fed or given water, and then we were released."

The woman "admitted to me she had to sign the statement against me, because police then released her husband as promised," Norbayeva told Forum 18. "She was very sorry, and apologised to me that she had to do this to save her husband."

The police officers, one of whose name is Olim (last name not known), "verbally abused me during the interrogation and threatened to put me in a psychiatric ward if I did not sign false statements, one of which was against me." Despite the police pressure, Norbayeva refused to sign the statements.

Officer Olim seized Norbayeva's mobile phone and her passport on 23 February. They were not returned until late March, Norbayeva said.

Norbayeva told Forum 18 that "after that interrogation I suffered heart pain and palpitations for many days." On 9 March she was accepted as an outpatient by Tashkent City hospital No. 7 with a diagnosis of tachycardia, she said. She attended the hospital daily for treatment until 20 March.

Police target Protestant in Kashkadarya

Meanwhile, trouble began for Kuzebayeva on 11 July 2014, when police searched her flat in Karshi in her absence, "hoping that they could find Christian books there to punish her," Protestants told Forum 18. However, officers "found nothing illegal."

Soon after, police brought Kuzebayeva's brother and his wife and their 19 year-old son to a police station. "There they were made to sign statements that Kuzebayeva illegally shared her Christian beliefs with them." After this police began hunting for her to punish

her under the Administrative Code for teaching religion without state permission.

The officers who searched Kuzebayeva's home and searched for her in the beginning were Olim Gulomov, Bakhtiyor Babayev, and Zhavlon Sharipov of Karshi Police, Protestants told Forum 18. Later Karshi Criminal Police officers Iskandar Zhahongirov, Ilhom Zhabbarov and Chief of Criminal Police Alisher Mahmudov searched for Kuzebayeva and "made her relatives sign statements."

Attempted arrest

The latest attempt to bring Kuzebayeva before the police was made by Aziz Haydarov, Chief of Karshi's Passport Regime Department. On 12 February 2015 he signed a summons for Kuzebayeva to appear before the Department with her passport, as well as a letter from the local Mahalla Committee about her character. The letter reached her address in Karshi on 23 February, Protestants told Forum 18. However, Kuzebayeva did "not appear before the police, and is still hiding."

Officer Zhabborov came to her home at 11 pm on 24 February to "arrest her but could not find her."

Asked on 13 April why the Criminal Police is searching for Kuzebayeva and why her relatives were summoned and compelled to sign statements against her, Police Inspector Timur Hakverdiyev from Karshi Criminal Police responded: "I need to look into the case." Asked whether a criminal or an administrative case has been opened against Kuzebayeva, Inspector Hakverdiyev did not answer. After consulting his supervisors, he told Forum 18: "I cannot say anything." He referred Forum 18 to Aziz Haydarov, Chief of the Passport Regime Department, and refused to talk further.

Haydarov of the Passport Department also was reluctant to comment on why police are searching for Kuzebayeva. "She needs to come to us herself, and we will explain to her," he told Forum 18 on 13 April. Asked why Kuzebayeva cannot peacefully practice her religion or why she cannot share her beliefs with her relatives, Haydarov did not answer. He repeated his previous answer. (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.

Follow us on Twitter @Forum_18 (http://twitter.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (<http://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService>)

All Forum 18 text may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY