FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

17 April 2020

UZBEKISTAN: Despite coronavirus lockdown officials continue literature raids

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

The authorities are using a new March Criminal Code Article 244-5 ("Dissemination of knowingly false information about an infectious disease") against a surgeon in Karakalpakstan because he had Muslim religious texts on his computer. Many Islamic texts face a new ban, raids for religious literature continue, and import bans on non-Muslim texts continue.

Despite a coronavirus lockdown, officials are continuing raids to find and confiscate religious texts. Also, the authorities are using a new 26 March Criminal Code Article 244-5 ("Dissemination of knowingly false information about an infectious disease") against a trauma surgeon who had Muslim religious texts on his computer.

On 31 March Dr Alimardon Sultonov, a trauma surgeon at Ellikkala Central State Hospital in the north-western Karakalpakstan Region, called the local medical emergency service to ask whether there were any coronavirus cases in Karakalpakstan. Five officials then came to the hospital to question Dr Sultonov, who is known for publicly discussing Muslims' freedom of religion and belief. They claimed to his colleagues they were checking enforcement of the coronavirus lockdown – despite the risks of coronavirus infection they exposed staff and patients to by coming to the hospital (see below).

The officials questioned Dr Sultonov about if he had any religious texts. He said he had Muslim texts on his computer, so officials confiscated it. A criminal case was then opened against him for allegedly spreading false information on lockdown measures under the new Criminal Code Article 244-5 ("Dissemination of knowingly false information about an infectious disease") (see below).

At the moment Dr Sultonov is not being subjected to further police questioning or other investigation. "I am not detained, and I continue my work without interference at the moment," he told Forum 18. However, he fears the authorities may bring more serious charges for alleged "religious extremism" (see below).

Police and SSS secret police in Margilan raided the home of a retired school teacher who taught the Koran to female students. Arabic-language Korans and Arabic and Islamic textbooks published in Uzbekistan were confiscated from her and her students, and police have opened a case against her (see below).

After Uzbekistan initiated a coronavirus lockdown in March and madrassah classes stopped, madrassah students in Bukhara asked for textbooks confiscated from them by plain clothes officials (who did not identify the state agency they were from) to be returned so they could study privately at home. Madrassah administrators told students that the plain clothes officials who confiscated the books stated: "This is not possible as students may violate lockdown rules and attend madrassah courses during the coronavirus lockdown". Local Muslims pointed out to Forum 18 that this was "clearly just an excuse, as students will in any case have to stay at home during the lockdown" (see below).

On 25 December 2019 the Religious Affairs Committee harshened the existing severe state censorship system for all religious texts by approving an updated list banning a wide range of Islamic texts. Around 200 texts from a very wide range of Muslim backgrounds are now banned, including all texts by the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi and texts by Ahmadi Muslims. A wide range of other Islamic authors are also banned (see below).

"Religious texts which were not included in this list are not authorised but are subject to further expert analysis," the document adds. "The list of banned books will be regularly updated. Texts in the list and their translations into other [non-Uzbek] languages as well as their electronic copies are also banned." Among the very imprecise reasons given for the wide-ranging bans is "inviting children and youths under 18 to religious activity" (see below).

The latest bans are "like in the old Soviet Union", one Muslim told Forum 18. "Instead of Uzbek Muslim scholars deciding issues of theology, the secret police decides what can be read and what not. And they do it by way of bans. It puts Muslims in a dangerous place. They want to read about their faith, but the authorities ban religious texts" (see below).

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2020

Human rights defender Bahodyr Eliboyev from Fergana Region told Forum 18 that "We as Muslims are not able to read the books of our Imams explaining the foundations of our faith. Many Muslims in Uzbekistan nowadays do not even know of the existence of such books, since we cannot even find electronic versions of such works because they are blocked by the authorities" (see below).

The regime continues as of April 2020 to maintain blocks on a wide range of websites it dislikes, including Forum 18's and religious communities the regime dislikes such as Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

The regime also continues to impose severe restrictions on imported non-Muslim texts, banning for example Jehovah's Witness texts and restricting their use to within the building of the only permitted Jehovah's Witness community in the country, in Chirchik (see below).

Similarly, Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 that the import of their books into Uzbekistan remains banned. The latest confiscations of their imported literature took place in July and November 2019. The July confiscation also resulted in a large fine imposed on the German Baptist who was carrying 44 copies of a "Learn the Bible" book in Uzbek (see below).

In 2 April 2020 Concluding Observations, the UN Human Rights Committee criticised Uzbekistan's human rights record. "The Committee remains concerned at .. b) the censorship of religious material and restrictions on its use". The Human Rights Committee stated that Uzbekistan should "Guarantee the freedom of religion and belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief and refrain from any action that may restrict such freedoms beyond the narrow restrictions permitted in article 18 of the Covenant" (see below).

Surgeon asks about coronavirus, officials open criminal case against him

On 31 March Dr Alimardon Sultonov, a trauma surgeon at Ellikkala Central State Hospital in the north-western Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, called the local medical emergency service to ask whether there were any coronavirus cases in Karakalpakstan.

"I left my phone number with the emergency service," Dr Sultonov told Forum 18, "and on 2 April five officials came from the regional capital Nukus to see me at my work in the hospital." The five officials included Lieutenant Colonel Nemat Abdullayev from the police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department", Karakalpakstan Interior Ministry officials, and State Security Service (SSS) secret police officers, he told Forum 18 on 14 April.

"As well as being a truama surgeon, I am also known in the area for talking publicly about the freedom of religion and belief of Muslims," Dr Sultonov added. "The authorities know this very well."

The five officials asked Dr Sultonov in front of his colleagues why he called the authorities on the coronavirus issue. The officials originally said the reason for their coming to the hospital was checking enforcement of the coronavirus lockdown – despite the risks of coronavirus infection they exposed staff and patients to by coming to the hospital.

"Then the officials asked others to leave the room, and when I was alone with them they asked whether I have any religious texts," Dr Sultonov told Forum 18. "When I told them that on my computer I have some writings and sermons of Imam Muhammad al-Bukhari, Obid Nazarov and others, which are not officially allowed in Uzbekistan, they confiscated the computer and took it with them."

Ninth century Islamic scholar Imam Muhammad al-Bukhari's book "Sahih al-Bukhari" is a collection of hadiths which Sunni Muslims regard as the most authentic compilation. It is banned in Uzbekistan under the regime's strict censorship system (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). Imam Obid Nazarov is an exiled critic of the regime who has political asylum in Sweden, where he was the target of an assassination attempt in 2012.

Lieutenant Colonel Abdullayev told Forum 18 on 15 April 2020 that the criminal investigation against Sultonov "was suspended for a time". Forum 18 asked why, and whether police found allegedly "extremist" texts on his computer. Abdullayev did not answer but stated that "Sultonov is a normal fellow, and we will soon return his computer." He did not want to talk more to Forum 18.

On 4 April Dr Sultonov was summoned to the office of Captain Umar Miriyev, Chief Criminal Investigator of Ellikkala District Police. There he was given a written notice that police have opened a criminal case against him for allegedly spreading false information on lockdown measures under the new Criminal Code Article 244-5 ("Dissemination of knowingly false information about an infectious disease"), signed into law by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on 26 March 2020.

Sultonov is also under investigation under Criminal Code Article 155-2, Part 2 (“Recruitment of individuals for the purpose of undergoing training for carrying out terrorist activity or for the purpose of going abroad through the territory of Uzbekistan to participate in terrorist activity”).

Captain Miriyev on 15 April categorically refused to answer any of Forum 18 questions. "I cannot talk to you on this case unless the Interior Ministry allows me to," he claimed. He also refused to say what action in the case will follow and when.

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2020

Officials did not discuss the coronavirus risks they exposed hospital staff and patients to by travelling from Nukus to visit the hospital, and summoning Dr Sultonov to Ellikkala District Police offices.

New Criminal Code Article 244-5

This new Criminal Code article punishes the dissemination of allegedly false information about the spread of infections dangerous to humans and the lockdown. The punishments imposed are:

a fine of up to 200 times the monthly minimum salary;

or compulsory community service for up to 300 hours;

or correctional labour for up to two years.

The dissemination of allegedly false information in a printed or similar form, or online, is punishable by:

a fine of between 200 and 400 times the monthly minimum salary;

or compulsory community service of between 300 to 360 hours;

or correctional labour for between two to three years;

or restrictions on liberty for up to three years;

or imprisonment for up to 3 years.

Doctor able to continue work "without interference at the moment"

At the moment Dr Sultonov is not being subjected to further police questioning or other investigation. "I am not detained, and I continue my work without interference at the moment," he told Forum 18. "However, I think that the authorities may bring more serious charges for alleged 'religious extremism'."

Fergana raid

Police and SSS secret police in Margilan in the eastern Fergana Region raided the home of a retired school teacher on 4 March. They confiscated from her and her female students of the Koran both Arabic-language Korans and Arabic and Islamic textbooks published in Uzbekistan, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 9 April.

The regime is hostile to teaching any beliefs to children and young people, and official imams have complained that they cannot teach Islam to children. Non-state controlled religious education is forbidden, and those who teach the Koran to school-age children have been prosecuted and parents who brought children to Islamic religious lessons fined (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Police have opened a case against the teacher under Administrative Code 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") (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). "She understands that she cannot leave her home while the coronavirus lockdown continues," human rights defenders told Forum 18.

Elyor Tashmatov, Chief of Fergana Police regional Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 15 April. He also refused to explain why the regime punishes the private teaching of the Koran and Arabic.

Bukhara raid

On 12 February in the southern Bukhara Region, administrators of a local madrassah with plain clothes officials (who did not identify the state agency they were from) confiscated officially published Islamic textbooks from madrassah students, local Muslims who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 8 April.

Madrassahs are Islamic religious colleges for training potential imams. The SSS secret police maintains informers in madrassahs, and they are like other public manifestations of Islam controlled by the state. The regime maintains a strict censorship system for religious texts, and has often confiscated even texts that have passed state censorship (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2020 - Page 3/6

After Uzbekistan initiated a coronavirus lockdown in March and madrassah classes stopped, students asked for the textbooks to be returned so they could study privately at home. Madrassah administrators told students that the plain clothes officials who confiscated the books stated: "This is not possible as students may violate lockdown rules and attend madrassah courses during the coronavirus lockdown."

Local Muslims pointed out to Forum 18 that this was "clearly just an excuse, as students will in any case have to stay at home during the lockdown".

Bukhara Muslims told Forum 18: "We are not sure which officials of which agencies were involved in the raid, because they did not show their identification documents. But the officials were led by madrassah administrators to the students."

Major Khojimurat Sharipov, Chief of Bukhara Regional police Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department, adamantly denied to Forum 18 on 15 April that police were involved in confiscating the textbooks. "As far as I can remember we have not been to the madrassah or its students for the last two years. We have not confiscated any of the religious books."

Despite lockdown police continue raids, searches for religious texts

Despite the coronavirus lockdown, police continued to endanger people by raiding the homes of Muslims hunting for religious literature, human rights defenders who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals have told Forum 18.

Similarly, exiled Imam Fazliddin Parpiyev who had to flee the country in 2018 after protesting at freedom of religion and belief violations (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2451) told Forum 18 on 8 April that "even during the lockdown I have heard of police across Uzbekistan making such raids". Those targeted by raids wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals.

Such raids on homes hunting for religious texts of all faiths have often happened (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Religious Affairs Committee bans more Muslim texts

On 25 December 2019 the Religious Affairs Committee harshened the existing severe state censorship system for all religious texts (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314) by approving an updated list of a wide range of banned Islamic texts.

Around 200 texts from a very wide range of Muslim backgrounds are now banned, including all texts by the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi (readers of whom have in the past been jailed (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2341)), and all texts by adherents of the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary group, as well as texts by Ahmadi Muslims. A wide range of other Islamic authors are also banned.

(On 26 September 2016, Uzbekistan’s Supreme Court included Nurchilar (Nursi followers) and the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat among 22 organisations it banned as “terrorist”. Other organisations banned in the same decision included the terrorist groups Al-Qaida and Islamic State.)

Apparently to allow officials the maximum flexibility in imposing arbitrary bans the documents states: "Religious texts which were not included in this list are not authorised, but are subject to further expert analysis. The list of banned books will be regularly updated. Texts in the list and their translations into other [non-Uzbek] languages as well as their electronic copies are also banned."

Among the very imprecise reasons given for the wide-ranging bans are "violation of the constitutional order and of security", "incitement of religious enmity and insulting religious feelings", "teaching of religious separatism and sectarianism", "inviting children and youths under 18 to religious activity", and "texts by banned Muslim religious movements".

Among the banned books is a Lahore Ahmadi Movement for the Propagation of Islam translation into Russian of the Koran and commentaries by Maulana Muhammad Ali. (The Lahore Movement was founded in 1914, and is an offshoot of the main Ahmadi movement.) The Religious Affairs Committee document states: "Because the Ahmadi movement's teaching is contrary to traditional Islam, all its religious texts are banned".

State tests of belief and reasons such as banning people under 18 from the exercise of freedom of religion and belief violate Uzbekistan's binding international human rights law obligations on freedom of religion and belief (http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Standards.aspx).

Neither Abdugofur Akhmedov (Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee), nor Dilshod Eshnayev (Deputy Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee), nor Begzod Saipov (Chief Specialist for "expert analysis" of religious literature), nor Begzod Kadyrov (Chief Specialist of the Religious Affairs Committee) answered their telephones on 15 and 16 April. Muzaffar Jalilov of the International Relations Section on 15 April refused to explain why the Religious Affairs Committee bans texts, and would not explain why his colleagues did not answer their telephones. Nor would the Religious Affairs Committee reception.

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2020 - Page 4/6

"Like in the old Soviet Union"

The latest bans are "like in the old Soviet Union", one Muslim from Tashkent, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. "Instead of Uzbek Muslim scholars deciding issues of theology, the secret police decides what can be read and what not. And they do it by way of bans. It puts Muslims in a dangerous place. They want to read about their faith, but the authorities ban religious texts. Muslims will be punished as in the past for reading or carrying religious texts on their electronic devices (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)."

"We as Muslims are not able to read the books of our Imams explaining the foundations of our faith," human rights defender Bahodyr Eliboyev from Fergana Region told Forum 18 on 16 April. "Many Muslims in Uzbekistan nowadays do not even know of the existence of such books, since we cannot even find electronic versions of such works because they are blocked by the authorities."

Website blocks continue

The regime continues to maintain blocks on a wide range of websites it dislikes, including Forum 18's (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). Human rights defenders in a variety of different regions across Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 16 April that blocks on such sites, including Forum 18's and religious communities the regime dislikes such as Jehovah's Witnesses, still continue as of April 2020.

Attempts to access blocked sites produce a notice in Uzbek, Russian and English stating that "access to the information resource was restricted according to Cabinet of Ministers decree No. 707 from 5 September 2018 on 'Measures of improvement of information security in World-Wide Web – Internet'."

Non-Muslim texts continue to be banned from import

Included within the regime's severe censorship system are stringent restrictions on the import of religious texts, including non-Muslim texts (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314). Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, told Forum 18 on 14 April that "as of April 2020 Jehovah's Witnesses religious literature cannot be imported into Uzbekistan".

Jehovah's Witnesses added that individuals are able to bring into the country some religious literature on their person, but these publications can only be distributed within the confines of the building of the only officially allowed Jehovah's Witness community in the country, in Chirchik (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2527) north-east of the capital Tashkent.

"The use of the Bible or even the mere possession of it outside the registered religious building in Chirchik is considered to be a violation of the Administrative Code (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)."

Bans on religious believers reading their own religious texts in their own homes have been applied to people of all faiths (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314).

Similarly, Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 15 April that "there is still there is a ban on the import of our books into Uzbekistan." The latest confiscations of their imported literature took place in July and November 2019.

(Council of Churches Baptists meet for worship without seeking state permission, as is their right under international human rights law although this has long been banned in Uzbekistan (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)).

July 2019 import ban

On 6 July 2019 Tashkent International Airport customs officials stopped Viktor Klassen, a visiting Baptist from Germany, and confiscated 44 copies of a "Learn the Bible" book in Uzbek language from him.

After being questioned at the Airport for several hours, Klassen was given a Religious Affairs Committee "expert analysis" stating that the books are "banned from import, storage and use in the territory of Uzbekistan as they are intended for missionary work".

Klassen was allowed to leave the airport on condition that he paid a fine of 4,054,600 Soms (4,175 Norwegian Kroner, 370 Euros, or 400 US Dollars). He paid the fine, but a local Baptist told Forum 18 on 8 April 2020 that "we don't know what they did with the books, as they did not send them back to Germany".

Farhod Jurayev from the International Relations section of Tashkent International Airport's Customs Service told Forum 18 on 16 April that the books were given to the Religious Affairs Committee. Asked why the books were not given to the Baptist Church, or given to Klassen to take back to Germany, he did not answer. He instead referred Forum 18 to the Customs Services' Investigations Division. They did not answer phone calls on 16 April.

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2020

November 2019 import ban

On 24 November 2019, Uzbek border officials stopped a group of six Baptists who had crossed from Kazakhstan into Uzbekistan. Customs officials, one of whom gave his name as Davron, questioned the Baptists for four hours about who gave them 10 copies of "Learn the Bible" they were carrying. After confiscating the books, customs officials released the Baptists.

UN Human Rights Committee criticism

In its Concluding Observations on Uzbekistan's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR/C/UZB/CO/5 (http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/UZB/CCPR_C_UZB_CO_5_41917_E.pdf)), adopted on 27 March and made public on 2 April, the UN Human Rights Committee criticised the country's human rights record.

Among a number of criticisms of the country's record on freedom of religion and belief, the Committee said it "remains concerned at .. b) the censorship of religious material and restrictions on its use; c) the strict State control over religious education.."

Among its observations, the Human Rights Committee stated that Uzbekistan should "Guarantee the freedom of religion and belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief and refrain from any action that may restrict such freedoms beyond the narrow restrictions permitted in article 18 of the Covenant". (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33)

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2314)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (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