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TAJIKISTAN: Independent imam jailed again

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Independent imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov, who was also jailed in 2010, was jailed in February for five and a half years along with an unknown number of others. Conscientious objector Rustamjon Norov's appeal against a three and a half year jail sentence is due on 11 March, and a judge has refused to explain why he allowed a Russian Orthodox nun with no connection to the case to testify for the prosecution.

On 12 February, a court in the capital Dushanbe jailed Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (widely known as Mullo Sirojiddin) for five years and six months, along with an unknown number of others. The arrests followed a November 2020 National Security Committee (NSC) secret police raid on Imam Abdurahmonov's Dushanbe flat when he was teaching a small group about Islam. The NSC also confiscated the Imam's religious books and computer.

The regime had previously jailed Imam Abdurahmonov in 2010 (see below).

Imam Abdurahmonov had in 2020 posted videos on the Sadoi Umed (Voice of Hope) YouTube channel, dealing with a wide variety of topics on how to live as a Muslim. Muslims and human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, unanimously stated that the imam is a moderate preacher who did not criticise the regime and in some respects supported its policies.

One human rights defender suggested that "the main purpose of arresting Imam Abdurahmanov was to allow only state-appointed and approved imams to speak publicly. Most independent imams are now afraid to speak publicly. The regime is struggling for the hearts and minds of people" (see below).

Neither the NSC nor the judge was prepared to explain the reasons for prisoner of conscience Abdurahmanov's jailing, or who else was jailed (see below).

The appeal of prisoner of conscience Rustamjon Norov against his jail term of three and a half years for conscientious objection to military service is due to be heard by a military judge on 11 March.

The court which jailed the 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness allowed a "witness" with no connection to the case to support the prosecution. Russian Orthodox Sister Feodora Vlasova, who runs the social care department of the Orthodox cathedral, claimed to the court "using the Bible that it is the sacred duty of Christians to serve in the Armed Forces of their country".

Vlasova refused to tell Forum 18 why she participated in the hearing, why she made her controversial claims to jail a prisoner of conscience, or why her personal views have any bearing on a case she has no connection with (see below).

Prisoner of conscience Norov is still being held in an investigation prison. In defiance of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3), his Bible has been confiscated from him, he is not allowed to pray openly, and he is not allowed pastoral visits from his fellow-Jehovah's Witnesses (see below).

In February 2021, the NSC secret police summoned Linguattech Director Kholmakhmad Rajabov to question him about a translation of the New Testament into Tajik, local Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Rajabov himself told Forum 18 that "the conversation was just to make sure that everything is according to the law".

The NSC summons appears to have been sparked by a complaint from a former Bible Society employee who runs a state-registered organisation, and who is said to have complained to the NSC that the Linguattech translations was allegedly "erroneous". The NSC has refused to explain why it responded to this complaint (see below).

Raid and arrests

On 12 November 2020 the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police raided the Dushanbe flat of Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (widely known as Mullo Sirojiddin), who is in his fifties. Abdurahmonov and several others, whose names are not

known, were arrested while the imam was teaching them about Islam, Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service noted on 13 November 2020. The NSC also confiscated the Imam's religious books and computer.

"The regime is struggling for the hearts and minds of people"

Imam Abdurahmonov had in 2020 posted videos on the Sadoi Umed (Voice of Hope) YouTube channel, dealing with a wide variety of topics on how to live as a Muslim. Muslims and human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state, unanimously stated that the imam is a moderate preacher who did not criticise the regime and in some respects supported its policies.

However, one told Forum 18 that "his arrest may be because he publicly criticised some state-controlled imams (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) and their interpretation of Islam". Another suggested that "the regime did not like the fact that he was again becoming popular and influential through his sermons and discussions on YouTube. So they wanted to stop this."

Another human rights defender suggested that "the main purpose of arresting Imam Abdurahmanov was to allow only state-appointed and approved imams to speak publicly. Most independent imams are now afraid to speak publicly. The regime is struggling for the hearts and minds of people."

The regime severely restricts everyone's freedom of religion and belief, along with interlinked freedoms of expression, association and assembly (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625), and imposes total state control on the limited public expressions of Islam it allows.

Jailed for five years, 6 months

On 12 February 2021, the capital Dushanbe's Ismoili Somoni District Court jailed Imam Abdurahmonov for five years and six months, under Criminal Code Article 307-3, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity"). It was claimed in court that Mullo Sirojiddin allegedly organised the activity of the banned Salafi Muslim school of thought.

Judge Sarfarozi Kabirzoda, Deputy Chair of the Court, on 4 March refused to comment on the case to Forum 18. He also refused to state who else had been arrested or what punishments they were given. "I am not authorised to tell you that," he insisted, before claiming that all questions must go to the Supreme Court.

Prisoner of conscience Abdurahmonov is not known to have appealed against his jailing.

"He was arrested before"

The NSC secret police department dealing with repressing freedom of religion and belief refused on 4 March to explain why it had arrested prisoner of conscience Abdurahmonov and others in November 2020. One official who refused to give his name evaded the precise question, commenting that "he was arrested before for religious extremism, and then pardoned".

The official then claimed that all questions must be sent in writing to the Foreign Ministry.

2010 jailing as "his way of praying was different .. this was dangerous and divisive"

On 25 January 2010 Imam Abdurahmonov (Mullo Sirojiddin) was jailed for seven years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1446), along with six other Muslims, under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Prisoner of conscience Mullo Sirojiddin was identified as a leader of Salafi Muslims, a school of Islamic thought which the Supreme Court banned in January 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) – even though an official admitted to Forum 18 that adherents of this school of thought have committed no crimes.

After the banning ruling, Court Deputy Chair Makhmudjon Ashurov refused to state how the regime would identify a person as a Salafi. The State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals' then-Deputy Head Mavlon Mukhtarov claimed to Forum 18 that Salafis are "extremist" because they "attend Tajik Sunni mosques and pray differently, and they also argue with Mosque attendees about the teachings of Islam".

Relatives of Mullo Sirojiddin told Forum 18 in May 2010 that "The Court concluded that his way of praying was different from the one usually accepted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1446) in Tajikistan." The Court jailed him as "this was dangerous and divisive among the population of Tajikistan." Relatives noted that nowhere in the law is praying in a different way prohibited.

In June 2013, Imam Abdurahmonov was released from prison under amnesty.

"Witness" in conscientious objector case with no connection to case

On 7 January 2021 Khujand Military Court jailed conscientious objector Rustamjon Batyrovich Norov (born 27 October 1998) for three and a half years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2629), the longest known sentence for this "crime". The court claimed he had falsified his medical history to evade compulsory military service, charges he denies. While held in a military unit in October 2020, he was threatened with torture if he did not put on a military uniform.

Fariza Norova, prisoner of conscience Norov's mother, told Forum 18 on 9 January that in the first hearing the court ignored testimony that Norov refused to serve in the military because of his religious beliefs, but would willing do an alternative civilian service in a hospital or other non-military institution.

However, the court allowed a "witness" with no connection to the case to support the prosecution. Russian Orthodox Sister Feodora Vlasova, who runs the social care department of the Orthodox cathedral, claimed to the court "using the Bible that it is the sacred duty of Christians to serve in the Armed Forces of their country".

Norova told Forum 18 that "we do not understand why the Court invited a member of the Orthodox Church, which has nothing to do with Jehovah's Witnesses. We also do not understand why she agreed to participate and speak against our son." His parents told Forum 18 that Rustamjon "is a peaceful person who wants to live according to the norms of love, kindness, and peace".

Sister Feodora is also responsible for the public relations of the Russian Orthodox Church in Dushanbe. On 11 January she refused to tell Forum 18 why she participated in the hearing, why she made her controversial claims to jail a prisoner of conscience, or why her personal views have any bearing on a case she has no connection with.

Judge Bakhtiyor Bobojonzoda of Khujand Military Court, who jailed Norov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2629), refused to answer when asked why he jailed him, and why he allowed a "witness" with no connection to the case from another religious community to testify for the prosecution. "You need to wait for the decision of the Supreme Court," he told Forum 18 on 4 March before refusing to speak further.

Military judge to hear conscientious objector's appeal

On 15 January, prisoner of conscience Norov filed two appeals: a cassation appeal against his jailing under the Criminal Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2629); and a new appeal in a civil case against the decision of the conscription commission to conscript him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2615).

On 4 March, Judge Abdukahhor Tagozoda of the Military Chamber of the Supreme Court rejected the civil appeal against his original enforced conscription, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. (Civil appeals concerning conscientious objection are heard by the Military Chamber.) The rejection of the civil appeal is final. The Judge did not answer his phone when Forum 18 called that day or on 5 March.

On 11 January 2018, Judge Tagozoda without a hearing rejected an appeal by prisoner of conscience Daniil Islamov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2357) against a six-month jail term for refusing compulsory military service. In October 2017 the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that Islamov should be released "immediately" as well as compensated for his jailing against the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Prisoner of conscience Norov's appeal against his 7 January conviction is due to be heard by the Military Chamber of the Supreme Court on 11 March.

Prisoner of conscience Norov is still being held in an investigation prison. In defiance of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3 (https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)), officials have confiscated his Bible from him, banned him from praying openly, and banned him from receiving pastoral visits from his fellow-Jehovah's Witnesses.

Norov's address is:

Ya/T 9/2 Investigation Prison

Khujand

Sugd Region

Tajikistan

NSC secret police questions Bible translators

Between August 2019 and January 2020, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) fined leaders of four Protestant churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2553) each between 7,000 and 11,000 Somonis.

"These are huge fines, as an average monthly collection of offerings in some of these churches is around 500 Somonis," a local Protestant who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "They were fined for arranging a translation of the Bible into modern Tajik."

In autumn 2019, SCRA officials with police visited the Linguattech centre for translation of religious texts in Dushanbe (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2553), to question the firm about its activities and finances. Linguattech was providing the Bible translation.

In February 2021, the NSC secret police summoned Linguattech Director Kholmakhmad Rajabov to question him about the translation of the New Testament, local Protestants who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Rajabov himself told Forum 18 that "the conversation was just to make sure that everything is according to the law".

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that the NSC summons was sparked by a complaint from a former Bible Society employee, not working for any church, Olga Pilkevich. She runs a state-registered organisation called the Society of Christians of Tajikistan, although it is unclear who if anyone may belong to it and no churches appear to belong to it. Pilkevich is said to have complained to the NSC that the Linguattech translations was allegedly "erroneous".

Questioning Linguattech is "a normal state of affairs and no criminal case was opened," an NSC secret police officer told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 4 March. Asked why the NSC responded to Pilkevich's claims, he asked Forum 18 to send all questions to the Foreign Ministry and refused to talk further. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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