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UZBEKISTAN: Targeted for being a devout Muslim woman

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

Officials are harassing an 18-year-old Muslim from Tashkent who wears the hijab. The family complained to the President and others about her being added to the Preventative Register. Police told neighbours that the authorities do not like her and warned them not to associate with her. Muslim men who have had their beards forcibly shaved have also been added to the Preventative Register. "Muslims are indignant that the state is attacking their beards and hijab, which is a very private matter for each individual," one Muslim told Forum 18. After anti-beard and –hijab talks in colleges, a Higher Education Ministry official claimed that "students will not be punished for a beard or hijab".

In 2020, a then-17-year-old Muslim woman began wearing a hijab to her secondary school in the capital Tashkent. Officers then summoned her to Yunusabad District Police Station, where they made her write a statement about why she wore a hijab to school, the family told Forum 18. "She stopped wearing it until after she finished school, and began wearing it after she reached her 18th birthday."

In December 2021 the family learned that Yunusabad District Police had added the name of the then-18-year-old Muslim woman to the regime's Preventative Register. The family think it is "because our 18-year-old relative wears the hijab, and recently began studying the Arabic language."

The young woman is being followed in the street and had photos taken of her without her consent. Police told neighbours that the authorities do not like her, and warned them not to associate with her. Relatives commented that "this additionally puts pressure on us, as we would like normal relations with our neighbours" (see below).

The family has repeatedly asked for explanations and complained to the local police, the President, the SSS secret police, Yunusabad District Hokimiyat (Administration), the District Administration's Women's Committee, and the Interior Ministry. After the family complained to the State Security Service (SSS) secret police and the Interior Ministry, unknown people started calling and threatening the 18-year-old woman. They asked why she was complaining and claimed that the SSS know "everything about her" and can have her punished (see below).

The Presidential Administration referred the complaint to Yunusabad Police, and Inspector Inomjon Tajiyev "spoke to the family members rudely. He did not answer the family's questions but asked why we complained to the President," the family told Forum 18. "Inspector Tajiyev took photos of the 18-year-old-woman and her relative without warning," the family said. "Asked why he is doing this, the Inspector answered that he needs to close this case and report to the Presidential Administration" (see below).

An SSS secret police officer (who refused to give his name) refused to answer Forum 18's questions. "Some of the calls come from mentally disturbed people," he claimed, "and when we investigate we find that their complaint was baseless." Forum 18 insisted that the woman was not mentally disturbed and that the SSS should answer the family's questions (see below).

On 4 January 2022 several plain-clothes officials visited the 18-year-old woman's Arabic Course and spoke to her teacher, without giving their identity. "They showed the teacher photos of the 18-year-old woman taken on the street, questioned and warned the teacher about her," relatives told Forum 18. The authorities "refuse to explain to us why they are putting pressure on our family and our female relative. So far none of them have answered us and no one is ready to listen to our complaints" (see below).

From September 2021, police nationwide detained on the street men with long beards and forcibly shaved them.

One such man, who lives in Yangiyul in Tashkent Region, had his beard forcibly shaved twice in a police station between September and November. Some men were put on the Preventative Register after they were detained in November 2021, the man told Forum 18 on 10 January 2022. "I am keeping my beard very short so I do not get into trouble with the police again. I know many men who are either not growing beards or keeping them very short for fear of punishment such as the humiliation of being taken to a police station for warnings and forcible shaving" (see below).

One Muslim, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, commented to Forum 18 that "Muslims are indignant that

the state is attacking their beards and hijab, which is a very private matter for each individual." Muslim human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime appears to have stopped the beard shaving campaign at the end of December 2021 (see below).

Various higher education institutions arranged meetings in mid-December 2021 where they threatened students with unspecified punishments if they wore a hijab or beards to classes. No action has yet been taken against students, and Forum 18 was told that the meetings were held on the orders of the Higher and Secondary Specialised Education Ministry. The Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that it had not ordered the warnings and that the Institutes all independently decided at the same time to issue warnings (see below).

Still in detention

Muslim prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhoyev is still in detention awaiting a criminal trial date, Forum 18 was told on 17 January 2022. He was initially detained in June 2021 after criticising a regime-appointed imam (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2704). Officials have repeatedly tortured him and denied him medical care for his poor health.

In July 2021, a Tashkent court handed 47-year-old Odilbek Khojabekov a five year labour camp sentence in absentia to punish him for returning from haj pilgrimage with Islamic literature (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2688). A first trial gave him a suspended sentence which was later removed for good probation behaviour. The SSS secret police then pressured ordinary police, prosecutors, and others into giving what the family insists is false testimony at a second hearing which ordered him jailed.

Khojabekov is in hiding fearing for his safety. The Supreme Court received his appeal on 12 December 2021 and must hear the appeal within six months from then, his family told Forum 18 on 17 January 2022.

Placed on Preventative Register

In 2020, a then-17-year-old Muslim woman began wearing a hijab to her secondary school in Tashkent. Police officers then summoned her to Yunusabad District Police Station, where they made her write a statement about why she wore a hijab to school, the family told Forum 18. "She stopped wearing it until after she finished school, and began wearing it after she reached her 18th birthday."

From 15 August 2018, a government decision imposed a secular dress code in all educational institutions. This meant a de facto ban on female students covering their heads by wearing a hijab (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2472).

In December 2021 the family learned that Yunusabad District Police had added the name of the then-18-year-old Muslim woman to the regime's Preventative Register. The family think it is "because our 18-year-old relative wears the hijab, and recently began studying the Arabic language".

The Koran is written in Arabic, and this Arabic text is the only text used in Islamic worship. So many Muslims consider that a knowledge of Arabic is essential to understand Islam.

The regime adds Muslims who regularly attend mosques and who are thought to be influential to the Preventative Register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). This subjects people to a variety of "preventative measures" including: preventative talks; official warnings; "social rehabilitation"; referral for compulsory treatment; and administrative supervision.

Followed in the street, photos taken, neighbours told "not to associate"

"Our 18-year-old female relative noticed that, after she began attending an Arabic course, unknown individuals followed her on the street and photographed her without her consent," the family told Forum 18.

Neighbours in Tashkent's Yunusabad District told the family that local police officer Parakhat Bekmuradov has "gone around our neighbours warning them about our family and our 18-year-old female relative".

"We are afraid that the authorities are collecting false evidence on her to punish her," the family said. "This has put psychological pressure on our family. Police told our neighbours in the mahalla [local district] that the authorities do not like our 18-year-old relative, and warned them not to associate with her." Relatives commented that "this additionally puts pressure on us, as we would like normal relations with our neighbours".

Why?

On 23 December 2021, the family called local police officer Bekmuradov, asking him why police are following their female relative and why they included her in the Preventative Register. Officer Bekmuradov "spoke very rudely over the phone and told us that we need to come and write a statement why we are complaining about police. He threatened that they will open an administrative case against us."

On 25 December a relative wrote a complaint via President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's website, asking why the family has not been warned that their female relative was included in the Preventative Register, why the police put pressure on the neighbours not to associate with the family, and why their female relative has been followed and had photos taken of her without her consent.

The Presidential Administration referred the complaint to Yunusabad Police, who told local police officer Bekmuradov to "talk to us". Officer Bekmuradov called a family member on 25 December and invited them for a talk in his office. "The relative told him that they do not trust him, and will only talk to his Chief."

Complaint to President targeted, more photos taken

On 29 December 2021, Inspector Inomjon Tajiyev of Yunusabad District Police Station No. 2, to whom Officer Bekmuradov reports, by phone invited the 18-year-old-woman and a relative to his office.

"Inspector Tajiyev adamantly defended Officer Bekmuradov, and spoke to the family members rudely. He did not answer the family's questions but asked why we complained to the President," the family told Forum 18. "Inspector Tajiyev took photos of the 18-year-old-woman and her relative without warning. Asked why he is doing this, the Inspector answered that he needs to close this case and report to the Presidential Administration."

SSS secret police behind phone harassment campaign?

Later on 29 December 2021, the family called the State Security Service (SSS) secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) to ask them to investigate the case and police inaction. The SSS called back the same day and asked why the family complained to the President. "They did not ask what happened to us, but kept asking why we wrote a complaint," relatives said.

"An unknown woman began disturbing our 18-year-old female relative immediately after this. The unknown woman calls from an unidentified number, and calls our relative names and uses obscene words about her and her Arabic teacher," the family stated. The unknown woman told the 18-year-old woman that a relative working for the SSS secret police knows everything about her. The caller also said that she can have the 18-year-old woman punished, without specifying what punishment.

"The unknown woman keeps calling, sending audio or text messages almost every night. She demands that the 18-year-old woman must stop wearing the hijab and attending Arabic courses." The family think that the unknown caller might be an SSS secret police agent.

The duty officer (who refused to give his name) who answered the phone at SSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent refused to answer Forum 18's questions, or put it through to any responsible officials.

"Your words are just words, and we receive so many calls during the day," the duty officer told Forum 18 on 12 January 2022. "Some of the calls come from mentally disturbed people, and when we investigate we find that their complaint was baseless." Forum 18 insisted that the woman was not mentally disturbed and that the SSS should answer the family's questions. The officer then refused to talk more.

Arabic teachers questioned

On 4 January 2022, several plain-clothes officials visited the 18-year-old woman's Arabic Course and spoke to her teacher, without giving their identity. "They showed the teacher photos of the 18-year-old woman taken on the street, questioned and warned the teacher about her," relatives told Forum 18.

"She decided not to apply for a university as we cannot pay for it, but decided to take two different Arabic courses," relatives explained. "The 18-year-old woman's teachers in both places were visited by officials." The teachers were asked what she does in her spare time, who her friends are, and whether she studies the Koran.

Inspector Tajiyev on 12 January claimed to Forum 18 that "neither Bekmuradov nor I were rude to her". Tajiyev claimed that the 18-year-old woman's name is not included in the Preventative Register, and denied that police visited the 18-year-old woman's Arabic teachers and questioned them about her. "I do not know of such facts," he claimed.

Asked why the police will not investigate the 18-year-old woman's case properly to find those who follow and make threats to her, Inspector Tajiyev replied "Let her complain to us in writing." When Forum 18 pointed out that the family had complained to the Presidential Administration which had referred her complaint to him at Yunusabad Police, he replied: "I am not obliged to explain to you everything over the phone. She can complain about it."

Interior Ministry behind more harassing phone calls?

On 6 January 2022, relatives submitted in person written complaints to President Mirziyoyev's Office, Tashkent Police, Yunusabad District Hokimiyat (Administration), and the District Administration's Women's Committee, the family told Forum 18.

As these complaints were not even acknowledged, on 9 January the family made a written complaint to the Interior Ministry's Crime Prevention Department, which oversees the work of the local police officers. An official of the Department called Anvar (who refused to give his full name) told a relative that within 10 days they would receive an answer.

"The very next day on 10 and on 11 January several unknown male and female individuals called our 18-year-old relative," the family said. The callers did not give their names and asked her why she keeps complaining about the authorities. When other family members answered the phone the callers immediately ended the calls.

An Interior Ministry official (who refused to give his name) put the phone down when Forum 18 asked on 12 January to speak to Anvar of the Crime Prevention Department or another responsible official. All subsequent calls to them on the same day went unanswered.

The authorities "refuse to explain to us why they are putting pressure on our family and our female relative", the family stated. "So far none of them have answered us and no one is ready to listen to our complaints."

Nationwide anti-hijab and anti-beard campaign

The regime is hostile to independent expressions of Islam (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699), including wearing a beard or the hijab. From September 2021 police nationwide detained on the street men with long beards and forcibly shaved them. One such man, who lives in Yangiyul in Tashkent Region, had his beard forcibly shaved twice in a police station between September and November.

Police put some men on the Preventative Register (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) after they detained them in November 2021, the man told Forum 18 on 10 January 2022. "In January 2022 police came to one friend's home to make sure he lived at the same address he had given the police when he was detained in November. The police put his name on the Preventative Register." He did not name the man or give other details for fear of state reprisals.

The man himself told Forum 18 that "I am keeping my beard very short so I do not get into trouble with the police again. I know many men who are either not growing beards or keeping them very short for fear of punishment such as the humiliation of being taken to a police station for warnings and forcible shaving."

Major Jamol Akhmedov, Deputy Chief of Yangiyul Police, refused like other officers to explain to Forum 18 on 13 January why police detained men and forcibly shaved their beards.

While the anti-hijab and anti-beard campaign was taking place, state-controlled Zor TV on 14 December 2021 broadcast a concert where it blurred the heads of women in hijabs and men wearing beards. The TV station publicly claimed that blurring the concert footage was an internal decision, but Zor employees (who refused to give their names) refused to comment on the issue to Forum 18 on 17 January 2022.

One Muslim, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, commented to Forum 18 that "Muslims are indignant that the state is attacking their beards and hijab, which is a very private matter for each individual."

Muslim human rights defenders have told Forum 18 that the regime appears to have stopped the beard shaving campaign at the end of December 2021.

"Not a warning but a discussion"?

The State Pedagogical Institutes in Jizzakh, Kokand and Navoi regions, as well as Samarkand State University, arranged meetings in mid-December 2021 where they threatened students with unspecified punishments if they wore a hijab or beards to classes.

In one video of a meeting, Bakhtiyor Urinov, Navoi State Pedagogical Institute's Deputy Dean of Youth Affairs of the Natural Sciences Faculty, on 16 December 2021 is heard claiming that "those who wear longer beards look like a monkey (..), their beards are a breeding place for viruses and microbes (..)" He also warned the male students that they "may end up in prison as an extremist (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2704)."

Urinov also told female students not to wear hijabs to classes. "From next Monday, all of you come to the classes without beards and hijabs," he stated.

"It was not my decision to talk to the students but it is the decision of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education,"

Urinov told Forum 18 on 13 January. Asked why he called male students with longer beards monkeys, he claimed: "I got nervous and could not control what I said." He refused to discuss his comments further.

Sarvar Nazargosimov, Vice-Rector for Youth Affairs of Jizzakh State Pedagogical Institute, claimed to Forum 18 on 13 January that warnings about beards and hijabs were "not a warning but a discussion". He refused to explain why the Institute decided to "discuss" the issue with students, or who had ordered the "discussion".

Human rights defenders told Forum 18 that no action has been taken between 16 December 2021 and 18 January 2022 against students who wore the hijab or beards. No students are known to have been intimidated into not wearing a hijab or beard.

All independently decided at the same time to issue warnings?

The Higher and Secondary Specialised Education Ministry referred Forum 18 on 13 January to Shukhrat Urumbayev, Head of the International Section. He insisted that the Ministry had not ordered the warnings and that the Institutes all independently decided at the same time to issue warnings. He would not explain why so many made the same decision at the same time, or why institutions had told Forum 18 it was done on the orders of the Ministry.

Urumbayev then claimed that "our Minister said that hijab or beards cannot be banned. We can only recommend to our female students to tie a head cover around the neck in a different style, but it is their decision whether or not to follow it." He also claimed that whether or not male students grow a beard "is their individual decision". He then claimed that "students will not be punished for a beard or hijab". (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=33>).

For background information, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699).

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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