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UZBEKISTAN: Why can't places of worship reopen?

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

A secret police officer and religious affairs official visited Abu Zar Mosque in Yangiyul District, saying it would be handed over for business use. "They just came, brazenly told us this and said that no one from the mahalla should get angry," said a Muslim. Officials refuse Bukhara's Baptist Church permission to rebuild its church, which they sealed after water damage in 2021. "Last year at least they were listening to us," Baptists say. "Now some officials tell us directly to our face: Leave my office and get lost!"

In mid-July, a State Security Service (SSS) officer and an official of the local Administration's Religious Affairs Department came to Abu Zar Mosque in Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. They said that as the Mosque is not functioning, it will be handed over for business use. A local Muslim linked the move to the Prime Minister's reported order at a government meeting on 24 June that unregistered Mosques should be demolished or handed over for business use.

"They just came, brazenly told us this and said that no one from the mahalla should get angry about it," a local Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The mosque community has tried in vain to register it again since 2017 (see below).

The SSS secret police officer and the religious affairs official did not answer their phones each time Forum 18 called. The Assistant to Zokirjon Khidoyatov, Deputy Head of Tashkent Regional Administration who has responsibility for religious affairs, promised that Khidoyatov would respond to Forum 18 as to why the authorities will not allow Abu Zar Mosque to reopen for worshippers, and why the authorities are planning to hand over the Mosque for business use. He has not responded (see below).

As of mid-August, officials do not appear to have yet handed over Abu Zar Mosque for business use, a local Muslim told Forum 18 (see below).

According to Radio Liberty's source familiar with the details of the 24 June government meeting, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov explained his order to demolish or hand over unregistered mosques for business use with the "newly introduced concept of secular statehood". At the same time, he stressed the importance in this process of "taking people's feelings into account, carrying out explanatory work aimed at preventing possible conflicts among the population" (see below).

Muslims told Forum 18 in early August that they are not aware of closures of Mosques since Prime Minister Aripov's 24 June remarks. However, they know of at least five Mosques closed down in Navoi and Fergana Regions in 2018 and 2019 which were handed to individuals for various uses (see below).

The registered Baptist Union Church in the historic part of the south-western city of Bukhara has not been able to meet publicly for worship since May 2021 because the authorities sealed the Church building after a broken water pipe caused damage. Baptists told Forum 18 that they wanted to rebuild the Church building, but were told that they cannot do this as the regime's Cultural Heritage Agency will allow repair work to be done only by a specialised state company (see below).

"We asked the authorities to allow us to repair the new building, since they are not doing anything with it now, or allow us to construct a new building in the place of our sealed building," Baptists told Forum 18. "But they refused both our proposals" (see below).

Sukhrob Ochilov, Head of the Heritage Department's Bukhara regional division, wrote to the Church's pastor in July, saying the Department was not competent to remove the church building from the heritage register to allow it to be rebuilt. Ochilov declined to talk to Forum 18 (see below).

Officials appear to have changed their attitude to church members. "Last year at least they were listening to us and promising that they will help us. Now some officials tell us directly to our face: Leave my office and get lost!" local Baptists told Forum 18. They did not want to identify these officials, for fear of state reprisals (see below).

On 30 July, officials began demolishing two Baptist-owned buildings under construction in Urgench in north-western Khorezm

Region. The local congregation intended to use one as its new place of worship. The destruction followed a 25 April court hearing that the Baptists were not informed about. Regime officials have either given contradictory explanations to Forum 18 for the demolition, or refused to explain it (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926).

The regime's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent would not put Forum 18 through to Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov (see below).

Yangiyul: Authorities will not permit Abu Zar Mosque to reopen

On 18 July, officials came to Abu Zar Mosque in a mahalla (the smallest residential area in Uzbekistan) in Yangiyul District of Tashkent Region. Officials have not allowed the Mosque to function since 2007. A State Security Service (SSS) secret police officer Nodir Kalandarov and a Religious Affairs Department official of the local Administration Shukhrat Jabbarov announced that as the Mosque is not functioning, it will be handed over for business use.

"They just came, brazenly told us this and said that no one from the mahalla should get angry about it," a local Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The Muslim linked the move to the Prime Minister's reported announcement at a government meeting on 24 June that unregistered Mosques should be demolished or handed over for business use (see below).

As of mid-August, officials do not appear to have yet handed over the Mosque, a Muslim told Forum 18.

Abu Zar Mosque, built with state permission, functioned from the 1990s to 2007. "How much hard work and money mahalla residents put into building the mosque," the Muslim noted.

Officials closed the mosque in 2007 during the presidency of Islam Karimov and it has not functioned since then, despite campaigns by local Muslims (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2752) to reopen it. "Mahalla residents have actively tried to register it since 2017, going to all state agencies," the Muslim said. "Finally, in 2022 officials promised us that it would soon be re-opened. A full-scale renovation then took place. Now they are acting like this – I don't even know what to call it."

Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, defended the regime's blocking of the Abu Zar Mosque community's registration attempts. "There are very large mosques in the areas where Muslims can pray, and they can attend those," he claimed to Forum 18 in April 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2905). "Those Mosques also have convenient parking places for private cars. Why don't they just attend those Mosques?"

Secret police officer Kalandarov did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called between 20 July and 15 August. Nor did he respond to a written question to his mobile phone as to why the Mosque cannot reopen for worship. Yangiyul Administration's Jabbarov also did not answer his phone between 20 July and 15 August.

The Assistant (who did not give his name) to Zokirjon Khidoyatov, Deputy Head of Tashkent Regional Administration who has responsibility for religious affairs, on 15 August wrote down Forum 18's questions why the authorities will not allow Abu Zar Mosque to reopen for worshippers, and why the authorities are planning to hand over the Mosque for business use. He then said that Khidoyatov was busy "and will write back to you soon". He could not specify when.

The official (who did not give his name) at the reception of the regime's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent on 15 August took down Forum 18's name and asked to wait on the line promising that he would put it through to Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov. A few minutes later the call was cut off. No one answered further calls on the same day to the only number that the State Committee now has for calls.

Corruption remains endemic (<https://www.uzbekforum.org/category/our-programs/corruption/>), including within business life and the ties of influential business figures with the regime. Many are reluctant to discuss corruption as a factor in the human rights violations they experience, yet there appears to be a strong connection between human rights violations and corruption (<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/sites/default/files/ertdocs/Defying%20Exclusion%202021.pdf>).

It was suggested confidentially to Forum 18 that corruption may have been a factor in a long-threatened demolition by a private company of Tashkent's Ashkenazi Synagogue and 2020 claim for "compensation" from the Jewish community. As the Jewish community could demonstrate that it had owned the land and synagogue since 1973, it is unclear why a court in 2017 gave the company a building permit to demolish the synagogue. No official was willing to explain how a company could be handed property that belongs to a religious organisation whose ownership is recorded on the State Land Registry. The threat to the synagogue was only withdrawn in August 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) after the case attracted international attention.

Prime Minister orders mosque demolitions or seizures

On 24 June, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov ordered the seizure and possible demolition of more than 400 unregistered mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) and houses, built by residents but not registered with the Justice Ministry, Radio Liberty's Uzbek Service noted on 26 June (<https://www.ozodlik.org/a/bosh-vazir-aripov-ro-yxatdan-o-tmagan-masjidlarni-buzish-yoki-tadbirkorga-berishni-topshirdi---manbal-ar/33011335.html>). Some of the buildings to be seized were to be given to entrepreneurs for commercial use.

Prime Minister Aripov was speaking at a government meeting he was chairing, which was also attended by the heads of the Interior and Foreign Ministries.

According to Radio Liberty's source familiar with the details of the meeting, Aripov explained this decision with the "newly introduced concept of secular statehood". At the same time, he stressed the importance in this process of "taking people's feelings into account, carrying out explanatory work aimed at preventing possible conflicts among the population".

Prime Minister Aripov has long been hostile – like the regime – to Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief. In September 2023, he is reported to have warned state officials not to attend mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2864). "Officials should either choose religion or work in the state," he was quoted as stating, saying police would step up controls.

The numbers at the Office of Prime Minister Aripov and Justice Minister Akbar Tashkulov went unanswered on 15 August.

The reception official (he did not give his name) of Culture Minister Ozodbek Nazarbekov refused to put Forum 18 through to any official responsible for religious affairs. "Everyone is busy with an international event that will take place on 25 August," he responded when Forum 18 asked who it could talk on the Prime Minister's instructions to turn Mosques into businesses, markets, housing and local administration buildings.

The official (who did not give his name) at the reception of the regime's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent on 15 August took down Forum 18's name and asked to wait on the line promising that he would put it through to Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov. A few minutes later the call was cut off. No one answered further calls on the same day to the only number that the State Committee now has for calls.

Mosques handed over earlier for other uses

Muslims told Forum 18 in early August that they are not aware of closures of Mosques since Prime Minister Aripov's 24 June remarks. However, they know of at least five Mosques closed down in Navoi and Fergana Regions in 2018 and 2019 which were handed to individuals for other use.

One Muslim from Navoi told Forum 18 that they know a Mosque in the centre of Khatirchi District of Navoi Region, which was demolished in 2018. The authorities then "handed the land on which it had stood to an entrepreneur, who opened a market in place of the Mosque".

In 2018 and 2019, the authorities handed four Mosque buildings in Buvaydu District of Fergana Region to individuals to use for different purposes, another Muslim told Forum 18. The Mosques were then used as a house, a shop for sewing clothes, a local mahalla administration, and a cafe.

The Muslims did not want to reveal their identity or more specific details of the Mosques for fear of state reprisals.

Eliyor Mardonov, Deputy Head of Navoi Administration, on 15 August was adamant that "no Mosques were closed down in Navoi." Told that Prime Minister Aripov officially announced that more than 400 Mosques across Uzbekistan were closed down and that they will be given to entrepreneurs for commercial use and asked whether the local Navoi Muslims are not telling the truth, "We have nothing to do with these issues. We do not open or close Mosques."

Mardonov refused to tell Forum 18 who it should talk to in the Regional Administration or other Regional authorities about the issue. He declined to talk further.

The official (who did not give her name) who answered the phone at the reception of Fergana Regional Administration on 15 August referred Forum 18 to Burkhanjan Kuldashov, Deputy Head of Administration on religious affairs, when asked why Mosques were closed down from 2018 on in Fergana Region, and why they were given for commercial and other use to various individuals.

Saidakbar (who refused to give his last name) who answered Kuldashov's phone, and who introduced himself as Kuldashov's Assistant, brushed it off when Forum 18 repeated the question. "Who tells you this kind of information? These are all lies. No

mosques were closed down in Uzbekistan."

Told that Prime Minister Aripov, speaking on 24 June, confirmed the government's intentions to hand over closed Mosques for commercial use, Saidakbar told Forum 18 in an angry tone: "Where do you get such information? The Prime Minister has not said such things." He then declined to talk further or put it through to Kuldashov or other officials at the Administration.

Bukhara: Baptist Church closed, not able to meet publicly

The registered Baptist Union Church in the south-western city of Bukhara has not been able to meet publicly for worship since May 2021 because the authorities sealed the Church building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888), church members told Forum 18 on 12 August. The Church had been meeting for worship in its church building – located in a historic part of the city – since 1971.

The authorities sealed the building a few days after a break in public water pipes which caused major damage. Officials told the Baptists that they cannot use their building as it could collapse at any moment. A neighbour's house collapsed, but local authorities allowed them to rebuild their own house (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888). This work is finished. Baptists told Forum 18 that they wanted to rebuild the Church building, but were told that they cannot do this as the regime's Cultural Heritage Agency will allow repair work to be done only by a specialised state company.

In early 2023, Bukhara Regional Administration officials showed Baptists a derelict storage building, which they said would be given to the church as its official place of worship.

In January 2024, the authorities employed unskilled workers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888) to repair the derelict storage building. However in May 2024 the repair works stopped after the Baptists complained to the authorities that they were afraid they will inherit a new building with a risk of collapse.

"We asked the authorities to allow us to repair the new building, since they are not doing anything with it now, or allow us to construct a new building in the place of our sealed building," Baptists told Forum 18. "But they refused both our proposals."

Baptists pointed out that they are meeting in the homes of their members. "We cannot fit all our people in one place for a worship meeting, and we are afraid that at any time the authorities can punish us for doing so since religious activity in private homes is banned by the Law."

Meetings for worship without state approval and in unapproved venues are punishable (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699).

Bukhara: "Officials tell us directly to our face: Leave my office and get lost!"

The Church's Pastor, Shukhrat Safarov, wrote on 29 June to the regional division of the Cultural Heritage Department asking it to exclude the building from the special Register of buildings of Cultural Heritage. He also asked it to permit the Church to carry out construction of a new building to replace the old building, given its state of disrepair.

Sukhrob Ochilov, Head of the Heritage Department's Bukhara regional division, responded to Pastor Safarov in a 4 July letter (seen by Forum 18). He said that the Bukhara division is "not competent to do so" and that the Baptists "must ask the central government's Cabinet of Ministers, since only it can exclude the building from the special Register".

"The authorities are refusing to take responsibility for their actions, and are not taking us seriously," Baptists told Forum 18. "Last year at least they were listening to us and promising that they will help us. Now some officials tell us directly to our face: Leave my office and get lost!" Local Baptists did not want to identify these officials, for fear of state reprisals.

Officials at the City Administration and Regional Administration (who did not give names) refused to tell Forum 18 on 29 July why the authorities have not provided the Baptist Church with an appropriate building fit for their worship services and other religious activity. They also refused to put Forum 18 through to the Heads of the Administrations.

Ochilov of the Cultural Heritage Department also declined to answer why his Department refuses to assist the Church in excluding the building from the register and permitting it to build a new building. "My assistant Kamol Salamov will explain to you," he told Forum 18 on 29 July.

"We know that the building is a property of the Baptist Church, and are also aware that a UNESCO expert group evaluated that the building is in a state of disrepair," Assistant Salamov told Forum 18 on 29 July. "However, we cannot do anything about it since it is in the competence of the Cabinet of Ministers to exclude it from the list of the protected buildings."

Salamov did not answer the question why his Department will not initiate the process to the Government to permit the Baptists to

construct a new building. He then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

The reception official (who did not give his name) of Culture Minister Ozodbek Nazarbekov refused to put Forum 18 through to any official responsible for religious affairs. "Everyone is busy with an international event that will take place on 25 August," the official responded from Tashkent when Forum 18 asked who it could talk to about the Baptist Church building in Bukhara.

The official (who did not give his name) at the reception of the regime's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent on 15 August took down Forum 18's name and asked to wait on the line promising that he would put it through to Chief Specialist Begzod Kadyrov. A few minutes later the call was cut off. No one answered further calls on the same day to the only number that the State Committee now has for calls.

Bukhara: Foreign group evaluated sealed church building?

On 13 June, an international group visited Bukhara, of which the historic centre is a World Heritage Site. The Baptist church is located in the historic quarter of the city.

The group allegedly evaluated the sealed church building. "We were there to watch what they would do and what conclusions they would reach," Baptists told Forum 18. "We heard them speaking a foreign language and we understood that it is impossible to restore that building."

Bukhara Regional Administration officials told the Church that the group was from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Sara Noshadi, UNESCO Representative in Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 14 August that "no UNESCO mission has been dispatched to visit, monitor or advise on Bukhara heritage sites from January 2024". She added that "the government has not consulted us regarding the [Bukhara Baptist] church, and we have not made an assessment of it either".

Kamol Salamov of the Cultural Heritage Department promised to give Forum 18 contacts for the group he claimed was from UNESCO. He did not do so.

After the response from Noshadi of UNESCO on 14 August, Forum 18 wrote to Salamov on 15 August asking why the authorities apparently attempted to mislead the Baptists and Forum 18 that the visiting group was from UNESCO. It repeated the question why the Heritage Department has not requested the Government to permit the Baptists to construct a new building on the site. Kalamov saw the message but did not respond as of the end of the working day in Uzbekistan of 15 August.

Muslim prayer rooms closed down across the country

Many prayer rooms have been closed across the country (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888) in the past year. Employees of restaurants and petrol stations told Forum 18 and local human rights defenders that the Interior Ministry claimed in December 2023 that prayer rooms were closed as "some criminals who escaped from a prison in November may use them".

Human rights defenders who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals commented to Forum 18 that "this is not a serious reason to close prayer rooms. The Interior Ministry has used different excuses to close prayer rooms in different parts of the country."

A state-owned Uzbekistan Railways official (who refused to give her name) told Forum 18 from Tashkent in January 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2888) that railway station prayer rooms "do not function". However, she refused to tell Forum 18 when and why they were closed, or say which official was responsible for overseeing the closures. An Uzbekistan Railways official in a major regional railway station told Forum 18 that "this station's prayer room was closed in 2022". They then refused to discuss the issue further.

In summer 2024, Tashkent's Grand Mir Hotel closed its prayer room, a Muslim who had visited the hotel told Forum 18. (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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