

23 September 2024

UZBEKISTAN: Former prisoner of conscience rearrested, another given 10 more years jail

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

In the first half of June, the regime arrested former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov and about 100 other Muslim men in Kashkadarya Region. It is not known when he will face criminal trial and on what charges. Also, a Tashkent Region court added 10 years, on apparently fabricated charges, to the existing 11 year prison term of existing prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov. His father thinks that "the authorities just want my son to end his years in prison".

In the first half of June, the regime arrested former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov and about 100 other Muslim men in the southern Kashkadarya Region. The 49-year-old Tursunov was arrested on 18 June and is awaiting criminal trial. The arrests were led by State Security Service (SSS) secret police officials from Tashkent, a Muslim who knows the situation and wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 16 September.

The Muslim stated that the arrests in Kashkadarya Region were part of a nationwide campaign. "The authorities have since April been arresting Muslim men for their past or current exercise of freedom of religion or belief, especially if they actively share and discuss their faith with others" (see below).

Prosecutors have opened a criminal case against Tursunov on unknown charges. Until early August, his relatives did not know and were not told either where he was being held from 18 June and when his case will be tried in court. Tursunov's relatives have not been allowed to visit him since his arrest, but are now being allowed to bring food, clothes, and letters for him to the prison (see below).

Asliddin Nomozov of Karshi Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" refused to say why the regime is arresting Muslim men for their past or current exercise of freedom of religion or belief, or to discuss any details of the case against former prisoner of conscience Tursunov. "We have prepared the case and will refer it to Karshi Criminal Court sometime soon," he told Forum 18. Nomozov claimed that he does not know when this will happen (see below).

Karshi Criminal Court told Forum 18 on 19 September that "we are aware of the case, but it has not been referred to us yet" (see below).

On 5 December 2023, Zangiota District Court in Tashkent Region added 10 years to the existing 11 year prison term of existing prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov, who is now 30. Court officials refused to talk to Forum 18. Similar Criminal Code articles were used to jail prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov along with six other prisoners of conscience in November 2020. Their "crime" was to meet in Tashkent to discuss Islam, for which they were given jail terms of between 11 and four years (see below).

Bakhodiy Muratov, Abduvokhidov's father, told Forum 18 that in autumn 2023 "one day, a very short time before inmates were called to line up for a roll call, prison guards ordered Fariduddin [Abduvokhidov] to close the gates." This led to prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov being three minutes late for the roll call. "He tried to explain why he was late," Muratov continued, "but the guards used this as an excuse to begin a case against him. They fabricated a story that he was using his mobile phone to call others to prepare a crime" (see below).

Muratov explained that it is an "accepted practice to provide mobile phones to inmates in prisons. I do not know if this is legal or not but most prisoners use mobile phones to talk to their families." He then asked: "Why do the authorities allow this but then use this to fabricate cases?" (see below).

On 19 October 2023, almost two months before prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov was given his latest sentence, his home mahalla of Uygonish in Tashkent's Mirzo Ulugbek District held a meeting to discuss his "crime". The meeting was called "to provide the population with broad understanding and information on crime prevention" (see below).

While the mahalla meeting was being held, Abduvokhidov had been held from early September 2023 in an SSS secret police investigation prison before the 5 December court hearing which resulted in him being given another 10 year jail sentence. Mahalla Chair Husainov did not state this in the meeting, and claimed prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov regretted his "crime" of meeting others to discuss Islam and had asked to be pardoned. His father denies this. Local police officer Sharipov then told the mahalla committee that they must tell local residents about the meeting and that "if they observe similar crimes they must inform the authorities" (see below).

Mahalla Chair Husainov put the phone down when Forum 18 asked him why false claims were made in the meeting that Abduvokhidov admitted his crimes and asked for a pardon, as well as why the meeting was held (see below).

Prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov's father thinks that "the authorities just want my son to end his years in prison. They are angry at him that he kept his faith even in prison, and never asked for a pardon" (see below).

In spring 2024, Muslim prisoner of conscience Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov was transferred from prison to his home in Bukhara, where he must report to police once a month. He will serve the rest of his term on assigned labour, where he was allocated a specific job and 20 per cent of his wages is taken by the regime (see below).

On 23 June 2023, Tukhtamurodov was jailed for five years one month for participating in a group that met to study the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Judge Akrom Rakhimov told Forum 18 that prisoner of conscience Tukhtamurodov was jailed as: "He not only read literature, but spread his beliefs and met others" (see below).

In December 2023, prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev was given conditional early release and transferred to his home in Tashkent. A Muslim known for his criticisms of the regime's religious policies, he was arrested in June 2021 and jailed for seven and half years at a closed trial in January 2022 (see below).

Former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Tursunov rearrested

In the first half of June, the regime arrested former prisoner of conscience Khayrullo Turdiyevich Tursunov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673) (born 4 April 1975) and about 100 other Muslim men in the southern Kashkadarya Region. Tursunov himself was arrested on 18 June. The arrests were led by State Security Service (SSS) secret police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) officials from Tashkent, a Muslim who knows the situation and wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 16 September.

The Muslim stated that the arrests in Kashkadarya Region were part of a nationwide campaign. "The authorities have since April been arresting Muslim men for their past or current exercise of freedom of religion or belief, especially if they actively share and discuss their faith with others."

In April and June, Interior Ministry and State Secret Service (SSS) secret police officers raided the homes of many Muslim men in Tashkent, Kashkadarya, and Surkhandarya Regions, human rights defenders who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The details of many raids, including the reasons, are unknown. However, several hundred people are thought to have been arrested. Interior Ministry duty officer Ruslan Turganbayev refused on 23 September to explain the arrests to Forum 18, and did not answer later calls.

After illegal extradition from Kazakhstan in 2013, Uzbekistan jailed Tursunov from 2013 until his release in June 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2673).

Former prisoner of conscience Tursunov was among two other former prisoners of conscience and other Muslims in Kashkadarya Region raided and questioned by police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2723) in November 2021. "I think they targeted us during the November campaign specifically to discredit us in front of our neighbours and the general public," Gaybullo Jalilov told Forum 18. "They see that time in prison did not break our determination to continue practising our faith. We still attend mosques regularly, we still wear beards, and we are still respected by our community as examples of good Muslims."

Police tortured Tursunov, and refused to tell Forum 18 why his torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture as the regime's legally-binding human rights obligations require (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699).

Criminal case against former prisoner of conscience Tursunov

Prosecutors have opened a criminal case against Khayrullo Tursunov on unknown charges.

Until early August 2024, Tursunov's relatives did not know and were not told either where he was being held from 18 June and when his case will be tried in court.

Tursunov was first held in an SSS secret police prison, and in mid-September was transferred to either Prison No. 2 or Prison No. 3

in Shaykhali in Kashkadarya Region. Tursunov's relatives have not been allowed to visit him since his June arrest, but are now being allowed to bring to the prison food, clothes and letters for him.

The regime is thus violating the United Nations 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)). Rule 58 states in part: "Prisoners shall be allowed, under necessary supervision, to communicate with their family and friends at regular intervals .. (b) By receiving visits .." Rule 68 states in part: "Every prisoner shall have the right, and shall be given the ability and means, to inform immediately his or her family, or any other person designated as a contact person, about his or her imprisonment, about his or her transfer to another institution .."

Asliddin Nomozov of Karshi Police "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) on 19 September refused to say why the regime is arresting Muslim men for their past or current exercise of freedom of religion or belief, especially if they actively share and discuss their faith with others. He also refused to discuss any details of the case against former prisoner of conscience Tursunov.

"We have prepared the case and will refer it to Karshi Criminal Court sometime soon," Nomozov told Forum 18. He claimed that he does not know when this will happen.

An official (who refused to give his name) of Karshi Criminal Court told Forum 18 on 19 September that "we are aware of the case, but it has not been referred to us yet". He refused to discuss the case.

Prisoner of conscience Tursunov's current prison postal address is:

Qashqadaryo viloyati

201732174 Shayxali qorgoni

Ichki Ishler bulimi

Jazoni ijro etish koloniyasi

Prisoner of conscience given another 10 years prison

On 5 December 2023, Judge Sunnatilla Avlakulov of Zangiota District Court in Tashkent Region added 10 years to the existing 11 year prison term (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2640) of existing prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Bakhodir ogli Abduvokhidov (born 14 June 1994).

Abduvokhidov was convicted again under Criminal Code Article 155-2, Part 1 ("Undergoing training to carry out terrorism"), 155, Part 1 ("Terrorism"), and Article 244-1 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) ("Production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order"), according to court records.

Zangiota District Court officials refused to talk to Forum 18 on 19 September 2024.

Similar Criminal Code articles were used to jail prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2640) along with six other prisoners of conscience in November 2020. Their "crime" was to meet in Tashkent to discuss Islam, for which they were given jail terms of between 11 and four years. Nine men were given restricted freedom sentences.

In this and other related cases of Muslims meeting to discuss Islam there were credible claims of torture and the use of agent provocateurs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2586) to bring false charges.

Bakhodir Muratov, Abduvokhidov's father, told Forum 18 on 9 September 2024 that in autumn 2023 "one day, a very short time before inmates were called to line up for a roll call, prison guards ordered Fariduddin [Abduvokhidov] to close the gates." This led to prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov being three minutes late for the roll call. "He tried to explain why he was late," Muratov continued, "but the guards used this as an excuse to begin a case against him. They fabricated a story that he was using his mobile phone to call others to prepare a crime."

Muratov explained that it is an "accepted practice to provide mobile phones to inmates in prisons. I do not know if this is legal or not but most prisoners use mobile phones to talk to their families." He then asked: "Why do the authorities allow this but then use this to fabricate cases?"

In early August, 26-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov (https://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2930) was put in a punishment cell for two days. He was imprisoned in March 2022 for meeting with other Muslims to discuss Islam, and

was hoping for early release in September 2024. However, prison authorities told his parents he now has no chance for early release because he allegedly violated the prison regime. "The authorities imprisoned him for no crimes and now they are trying to keep him there for longer," his parents told Forum 18.

Why did Abduvokhidov's mahalla recently condemn his "crime" again?

On 19 October 2023, almost two months before prisoner of conscience Fariduddin Abduvokhidov was given his latest sentence on 5 December, his home mahalla of Uygonish in Tashkent's Mirzo Ulugbek District held a meeting to discuss his "crime". Regime-controlled mahalla (local district) committees (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) are used as part of the regime's systematic violations of the human rights of the people it rules.

The meeting was called "to provide the population with broad understanding and information on crime prevention", the minutes of the meeting seen by Forum 18 state. The meeting focused on prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov.

Abrorkhoja Tillayev (Assistant to Mirzo Ulugbek District Administration's mahalla affairs head), local police officer Mirzokhid Sharipov, Mahalla Chair Rustam Husainov, and 12 other mahalla committee members attended the meeting.

Mahalla Chair Husainov briefly outlined the case that led to the jailing of prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2640) along with six other prisoners of conscience in November 2020 for meeting in Tashkent to discuss Islam.

While the mahalla meeting was being held, Abduvokhidov had been held from early September 2023 in an SSS secret police investigation prison before the 5 December court hearing which resulted in him being given another 10 year jail sentence (see above). Mahalla Chair Husainov did not state this in the meeting.

Mahalla Chair Husainov then claimed that "Abduvokhidov expressed his regret for what he had done and wrote a letter to the President [Shavkat Mirziyoyev] asking to be pardoned." Another mahalla committee member then claimed that "Abduvokhidov will not get involved in crime from now on." Prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov's father denied to Forum 18 that his son had expressed regret for meeting other Muslims to discuss Islam, or asked for a pardon for this "crime".

Local police officer Sharipov then told the mahalla committee that they must tell local residents about the meeting and that "if they observe similar crimes they must inform the authorities".

Tillayev (Assistant to Mirzo Ulugbek District Administration's mahalla affairs head) and local police officer Sharipov did not answer their phones when Forum 18 tried to speak to them on 19 September.

Mahalla Chair Husainov put the phone down when Forum 18 asked him on 19 September why false claims were made in the meeting that Abduvokhidov admitted his crimes and asked for a pardon, as well as why the meeting was held.

"The authorities just want my son to end his years in prison"

Forum 18 knows of other recent cases where Muslim prisoners of conscience were in September 2024 put in punishment cells for between two and three days, allegedly for "using mobile phones illegally" to contact their families. As in the case of prisoner of conscience Faryozbek Kobilov, this would stop them from being released on time. Families do not wish to discuss these cases publicly, for fear of state reprisals.

Prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov's father thinks that "the authorities just want my son to end his years in prison. They are angry at him that he kept his faith even in prison, and never asked for a pardon."

Prisoner of conscience Abduvokhidov's prison address is:

Navoiy viloyati,

1712401 Navoiy Shakhri,

Ishchilar shaharchasi,

11-sonli jazoni ijro etish koloniyasi

Abduvokhidov Fariduddin Bakhodir o'g'li

Prisoner of conscience transferred to assigned labour

On 23 June 2023, a court in Bukhara Region jailed Muslim prisoner of conscience Bobirjon Baratovich Tukhtamurodov (born 9 July 1975) for five years one month (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2762) for participating in a group that met to study the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Judge Akrom Rakhimov told Forum 18 that prisoner of conscience Tukhtamurodov was jailed as: "He not only read literature, but spread his beliefs and met others."

In spring 2024, Tukhtamurodov was transferred from prison to his home in Bukhara, where he must report to police once a month. He will serve the rest of his term on assigned labour, where he was allocated a specific job and 20 per cent of his wages is taken by the regime, a Muslim who knows him told Forum 18 on 28 August.

Prisoner of conscience Tukhtamurodov fled Uzbekistan in 2010 after being warned his arrest was likely, after his brother Botir, another reader of Nursi's works, was given a six-year jail sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1289). In February 2022, the Russian authorities refused to extend Tukhtamurodov's leave to remain in Russia, and ordered to him to leave the country. He returned to Uzbekistan in April 2022, after the regime told him he would not be jailed. "He had no place to go other than Uzbekistan," Muslims who know the case told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2740).

Prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev given conditional release

Prisoner of conscience Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev (born 1980), a Muslim known for his criticisms of the regime's religious policies, was given conditional early release and transferred to his home in Tashkent in early December 2023, Abdurahman Tashanov, the head of Ezgulik human rights organisation noted on 6 December 2023. He will serve the rest of his sentence under restrictions.

Police arrested Arifkhojayev on 28 June 2021. At a closed trial on 26 January 2022, Tashkent's Olmazor District Criminal Court jailed him for seven and half years (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2773) in a labour camp. (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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