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UZBEKISTAN: Demands to reopen, not demolish, church and mosque

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

Urgench Council of Churches Baptist Church and Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District Imam al-Bukhari Mosque are being simultaneously demolished. The Baptist Church is being demolished by the Bailiff's Department, and the Mosque by an unknown person or company with the full co-operation of the regime. By 5 December most of the roof, walls, and floors of the Baptist Church were destroyed, and most of the walls, roof, and dome of the Mosque were destroyed. Baptists and Muslims in both cities insist to Forum 18 that they want the demolitions stopped and their buildings returned, so they can use them to meet for worship.

On 25 April 2024, two buildings under construction belonging to Urgench Council of Churches Baptists were ordered to be destroyed and were partially demolished. The demolition was halted after protests, but the Baptists were not permitted to repair the damage or complete the construction of the buildings. Regime officials stated, though, that they are "determined to complete the demolition sooner or later". This threat is now being carried out.

On 4 December, Bailiffs came with police and demolition vehicles and equipment to destroy the buildings. By 5 December most of the roof, walls, and floors of the Baptist Church were destroyed. The regime is "intent on tearing down the second building after finishing the destruction of the first building", Baptists said (see below).

On 2 December, the person Baptists bought the land for their Church from received a letter from Dovron Aitov of Urgench Bailiffs Department that the Department will demolish the buildings, Baptists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. None of the other owners of buildings on adjoining land bought from him are being threatened with demolition (see below).

Local Baptists told Forum 18 that both the buildings, one of which was close to completion for use as a church, are one-storey buildings which are each about 270 square meters (2,900 square feet) in area. Local Baptists insist to Forum 18 that they want the demolition stopped and their buildings restored, so they can use them to meet for worship (see below).

Neither Bailiff Aitov, nor Khorasm Regional Bailiffs Department, nor the Land Cadastre Department answered their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 5 and 6 December (see below).

Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District's Muhammad Ismoil Mosque, known locally as the Imam al-Bukhari Mosque, is also being demolished at the same time as the Urgench Baptist Church. The building is being demolished by an unknown company or person with the full co-operation of the regime, Muslims who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Sometimes the Mosque had as many as 2,000 Muslims coming to worship before it was closed, local Muslims told Forum 18. The Mosque is a roughly 25 metre (27 yard) high brick building, which is about 900 meters (9,700 square feet) in area, local Muslims said. Demolition of the Mosque began on 27 November, witnesses told Forum 18.

By 5 December almost half of the Mosque building - including most of the walls, roof, and dome - had been demolished. Local Muslims have insisted to Forum 18 that they want the demolition stopped and their Mosque restored, so they can use it to meet for worship (see below).

The Imam al-Bukhari Mosque was opened in 1995 but forcibly closed by the regime in 2009. Police "without giving any explanation came one day and told the Imam that the Mosque will be closed down." One of the Muslims stated that "we were not happy, but local police falsely told local residents that the Mosque will reopen soon." Another Muslim told Forum 18 that "we all were very unhappy our Mosque was closed down in 2009, and we made many official complaints to the authorities." Local police visited the mahalla several times after the complaints to talk to residents. "Each time they promised that it would reopen. Just be patient, they told us. But they were lying" (see below).

Tashkent Administration in 2016 transferred the mosque and its land to a car wash company, which in 2022 sold it on to an

unknown person or company. Demolition workers in December 2024 also refused to reveal the identity of the new owner to local residents, but said that a business centre will be built on the land (see below).

The new owner also attempted to demolish the Mosque in 2023, but did not do this after local residents wrote many complaints to local prosecutors and the Prosecutor General's Office (see below).

A human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, linked the demolition of Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District Imam al-Bukhari Mosque to Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov's June 2024 statement threatening to confiscate mosques for business use. "This could have encouraged the owner to demolish the Mosque now," the human rights defender told Forum 18 on 5 December. Muslims, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, have told Forum 18 that they have observed that the demolition is being carried out with the full co-operation of the police (see below).

No official answered their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 5 and 6 December.

A wide range of religious communities continue to be blocked from using or repairing their own buildings, forcibly closed, gaining state registration, or having their grounds seized without compensation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2944).

Urgench Baptist Church's buildings being demolished

On 25 April 2024, two buildings under construction belonging to Urgench Council of Churches Baptists were ordered to be destroyed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926) and were partially demolished. The demolition was halted after protests, but they are not being permitted to repair the damage (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2944) or complete the construction of the buildings, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 21 November.

Regime officials stated, though, that they are "determined to complete the demolition sooner or later" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926). This threat is now being carried out (see below).

Local Baptists told Forum 18 that both the buildings, one of which was close to completion for use as a church, are one-storey buildings which are each about 270 square meters (2,900 square feet) in area.

Khorezm Regional Administration officials, and Zafarbek Khojaniyazov of the Land Cadastre Department (who is responsible for dealing with complaints), did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 contacted them between 21 and 25 November. So Forum 18 was not able to ask them why they are refusing to give permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2944) for the Baptists to repair the damage the regime has caused and complete the construction work.

The Baptists bought a plot of land from local resident Atajan Kurbanov in Shakkasholikor village of Urgench District on the southern edge of the city's airport in early 2023. Kurbanov sold part of the land to the Baptists and the rest to other people. Many of the purchasers then constructed buildings on their newly-acquired land. Baptists bought the land and constructed the buildings with donations from fellow believers. "We have all the legal papers that we can construct the buildings on the land," local Baptist Konstantin Kim told Forum 18 in August 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2926).

Yet, on 2 December, Kurbanov received a letter from Dovron Aitov of Urgench Bailiffs Department that the Department will demolish the buildings, Baptists who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 5 December. None of the other owners of buildings on adjoining land bought from Kurbanov are being threatened with demolition. On 4 December, Bailiffs came with police and demolition vehicles and equipment to destroy the building.

By 5 December most of the roof, walls, and floors of the Baptist Church were destroyed. The regime is "intent on tearing down the second building after finishing the destruction of the first building", Baptists added.

Local Baptists insist to Forum 18 that they want the demolition stopped and their buildings restored, so they can use them to meet for worship.

Neither Bailiff Aitov nor Khorezm Regional Bailiffs Department answered their phones whenever Forum 18 rang between 5 and 6 December.

Khojaniyazov of the Land Cadastre Department (who is responsible for dealing with complaints) also did not answer his phone whenever Forum 18 called between 5 and 6 December.

Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District's Imam al-Bukhari Mosque also being demolished

Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District's Imam al-Bukhari Mosque, on the inner ring road to the west of the city centre, is being demolished by an unknown company or person with the full co-operation of the regime, Muslims who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Demolition of the Muhammad Ismoil Mosque, known locally as the Imam al-Bukhari Mosque, began on 27 November, witnesses told Forum 18. By 5 December almost half of the Mosque building including most of the walls, roof, and dome had been demolished.

Local Muslims insist to Forum 18 that they want the demolition stopped and their Mosque restored, so they can use it to meet for worship.

Mosque opened in 1995, forcibly closed in 2009

The Muhammad Ismoil (Imam al-Bukhari) Mosque was recognised by the state-controlled Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) on 5 June 1995, and the Tashkent Justice Department registered the Mosque on 15 April 1999. The Religious Affairs Committee appointed an imam for the Mosque in 1995, Imam Muhammad Rakhmonov who was from the same mahalla (local district) as the Mosque.

"Respected elders of our mahalla spent their own money to buy the land in 1991 and paid for the construction of the Mosque," local Muslims, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 4 December 2024. They stated that sometimes the Mosque had as many as 2,000 Muslims coming to worship. The Mosque is a roughly 25 metre (27 yard) high L-shaped brick building, on a 900 square meters (9,700 square feet) site, local Muslims said.

However, in 2009 the regime forcibly closed the Mosque. Police "without giving any explanation came one day and told the Imam that the Mosque will be closed down". One of the Muslims stated that "we were not happy, but local police falsely told local residents that the Mosque will reopen soon." Another Muslim told Forum 18 that "we all were very unhappy our Mosque was closed down in 2009, and we made many official complaints to the authorities."

Local police visited the mahalla several times after the complaints to talk to residents. "Each time they promised that it would reopen. Just be patient, they told us. But they were lying."

Transfer to car wash company, then sold on to unknown owner

Tashkent Administration on 23 September 2016 transferred the mosque and its land to a car wash company. The owner of the company told Forum 18 on 4 December that in 2022 he sold the land and Mosque to another person. When Forum 18 asked the car wash company's owner how Tashkent Administration could give him the Mosque and its land, and who the person he sold it to is, he did not answer and put the phone down.

Local residents told Forum 18 that they know of this 2022 sale, but do not know the identity of the new owner. Demolition workers in December 2024 also refused to reveal the identity of the new owner to local residents, but said that a business centre will be built on the land.

The new owner also attempted to demolish the Mosque in 2023, but did not do this after local residents wrote many complaints to local prosecutors and the Prosecutor General's Office.

In written 2023 replies (which Forum 18 has seen), both Tashkent Deputy Prosecutor, E. Inamjanov and City Prosecutor Erkin Yuldashev claimed that Tashkent Administration's decisions are lawful as no claims were made about the ownership of the land and building in due time. Both Prosecutors stated that Shaykhontohur Inter-District Civil Court on 14 February 2011 confiscated the land and the Mosque building for the state.

Neither the Prosecutor General's Office, nor Tashkent Prosecutor's Office, answered their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 5 and 6 December 2024.

Abdurakhim Kadyrov of the Religious Affairs Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699)'s section responsible for work with Mosques confirmed to Forum 18 on 29 November that the Mosque was registered until 2009, when its registration was revoked. He would not explain why the Committee has done nothing to help the Mosque or stop the demolition. "Those decisions were made not by us but by Tashkent Administration. You need to talk to them," he claimed.

Neither Tashkent Administration nor Shaykhontohur District Administration answered their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 3 and 6 December.

In another Tashkent place of worship demolition case, 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. 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.

Corruption has long been endemic (<https://www.uzbekforum.org/category/our-programs/corruption/>) in the country, including in relation to freedom of religion or belief violations (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699). 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>).

Prime Minister orders mosques to be seized, demolished, handed over to business use

On 24 June 2024, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov ordered the seizure and possible demolition (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927) of more than 400 unregistered mosques and houses, built by residents but not registered with the Justice Ministry. Some of the buildings to be seized were to be given to entrepreneurs for commercial use.

In mid-July, a State Security Service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699) (SSS) secret police 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927), it will be handed over for business use. A local Muslim linked the move to the Prime Minister's reported 24 June order that unregistered Mosques should be demolished or handed over for business use.

Abu Zar Mosque, built with state permission, functioned from the 1990s. The regime closed the mosque in 2007 and it has not functioned since then, despite campaigns by local Muslims to reopen it (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2752).

When Forum 18 in April pointed out to Jakhongir Azomkhanov, Tashkent Regional Administration's official overseeing freedom of religion or belief issues, that the Abu Zar Mosque was built by the mosque community who would like to pray every day in their own mosque, and that travel to other mosques can be difficult, Azomkhanov did not address those points. On 21 November he refused to speak to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2927) about the continued forced closure of the Mosque.

Why is Imam al-Bukhari Mosque being demolished now?

A human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, linked the demolition of Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District Imam al-Bukhari Mosque to Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov's latest statement about confiscating mosques for business use. "This could have encouraged the owner to demolish the Mosque now," they told Forum 18 on 5 December.

Muslims, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that they have observed that the demolition is being carried out with the full co-operation of the police.

Prime Minister Aripov's Office did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called between 5 December and 6 December.

Local Muslims have insisted to Forum 18 that they want the demolition stopped and their Mosque restored, so they can use it to meet for worship. (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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