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KYRGYZSTAN: Reform Adventist Pastor's 3-year jail term plus deportation

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

In November 2024 the NSC secret police arrested and tortured True and Free Reform Adventist Pastor Pavel Shreider, placing him in pre-trial detention. In March 2025 a court banned his Church as "extremist". On 10 July a Bishkek court jailed the 65-year-old for 3 years on charges of "incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals", charges he denied. Judge Ubaydulla Satimkulov ordered his post-prison deportation. Officials brought Pastor Shreider to court in handcuffs.

On 10 July, nearly three months after the criminal trial began, Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court in the capital Bishkek convicted True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church Pastor Pavel Shreider on charges of "incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals". Judge Ubaydulla Satimkulov jailed the 65-year-old Pastor for three years. The Judge ordered his deportation at the end of the prison term.

The prosecution was led in court by Madaliyev of Birinchi May District Prosecutor's Office. He demanded the maximum 7-year jail term but not deportation. The deportation order appears to have been the initiative of the Judge. Pastor Shreider was born in Talas district of Kyrgyzstan in the Soviet period and lives with his family in Bishkek. But he holds a Russian passport (see below).

Pastor Shreider was brought in in handcuffs and was held in the defendant's cage in the court room during each hearing. "We were not allowed to approach him in the cage to talk to him," one of those present at the trial complained. They said people are used to seeing defendants in criminal cases being held in a cage in the court room (see below).

Pastor Shreider rejected all the charges and is preparing to appeal, his lawyer told Forum 18 after the hearing (see below).

"No evidence was provided [of incitement to enmity] and was not proven at the trial," one of those present told Forum 18. "One single disc, as the judge read out when passing the sentence, formed evidence of guilt for the crime, but during viewing in the courtroom it was empty. The judge did not cite anything else that proved any guilt. Yet the sentence was handed down" (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Judge Satimkulov on 14 July (see below).

The Deputy Director of the National Agency for Religious Affairs and Interethnic Relations, Kanatbek Midin uuly, defended the right of any country to enforce its own laws in the area of religion. "When these laws are violated, punishment is envisaged," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Pastor Shreider's lawyer Akmat Alagushev earlier rejected the accusations. "There is not a single reference in the indictment to the persons in collusion with whom Shreider allegedly committed the mentioned crimes, and no references to any specific names," he told Forum 18 in May. "Also there is no concrete evidence of illegal actions Shreider allegedly committed in the media, on the internet or publicly or otherwise" (see below).

Officials from the Office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Jamilya Jamanbayeva have visited Pastor Shreider in prison and listened to relatives' concerns, but have concluded that no violations have taken place and they need only to monitor the case. The Ombudsperson's Office has not responded to Forum 18's question as to what further action it is intending (see below).

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pastor Shreider in Bishkek in November 2024. Officers searched his home and those of about 10 other church members. They seized thousands of books, including Bibles, as well as cash and mobile phones (see below).

The NSC secret police have now returned most of the 2,196 books they confiscated during the November 2024 raids. "About 20 per cent are still with the NSC and have not been returned," one individual told Forum 18 (see below).

NSC secret police officers tortured Pastor Shreider and another detained church member Igor Tsoy during interrogations. "I was given blows on my head, chest and given kicks in my spine from behind by five officers," Pastor Shreider wrote in a November 2024 complaint to the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Bishkek. Officers "hit me with an iron pipe to force me to confess that I committed crimes" (see below).

NSC secret police officers used a stun gun to try to coerce Tsoy to write a statement against Pastor Shreider, causing multiple injuries. However, Tsoy refused to do so (see below).

The National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment claimed that the torture cannot be corroborated. Officials who participated in the arrest and investigation of Pastor Shreider deny that officers tortured Pastor Shreider and church member Tsoy (see below).

On 19 March, in a civil case opened by the NSC secret police and brought to court by Chuy Regional Prosecutor's Office, Alamudun District Court declared the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church an "extremist" religious organisation and banned its activity throughout the country. The community has appealed against the ban to the Supreme Court, but no date has yet been set for the hearing (see below).

Indira Aslanova, Senior Expert of the Centre for Religious Studies, an independent organisation in Bishkek, had earlier described accusing the True and Free Adventists of "extremism" as "absurd". "I sincerely hope that this time the judge will demonstrate greater objectivity, review the case fairly, and take into account the alternative expert assessment," she told Forum 18 (see below).

Aslanova noted Pastor Shreider's criminal conviction. "I'm not a lawyer but I believe the problem won't be resolved until the organisation is removed from the list of banned extremist organisations," Aslanova added. "As long as it remains on that list, the relevant articles of the Criminal Code will automatically apply to its members" (see below).

The regime has jailed others for exercising freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2948). The 36-year-old Muslim prisoner of conscience Asadullo Madraimov has been jailed since October 2023 for criticising the authorities for closing Kara-Suu District's Al-Sarakhsi Mosque. Another member of the community, Mamirzhan Tashmatov, was freed from prison in May 2024. In July 2023, a court jailed Protestant Aytbek Tynaliyev for 6 months for allegedly "inciting religious enmity" for social media posts sharing his faith.

Three-year jail term plus subsequent deportation

Eight months after the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pavel Davidovich Shreider (born 10 January 1960), Pastor of the True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Bishkek court has ordered his jailing.

On 10 July, Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court convicted Pastor Shreider under Criminal Code Article 330, Part 2, Point 3. This punishes "Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals". Punishment is a 5 to 7 year jail term.

Judge Ubaydulla Satimkulov jailed Pastor Shreider for 3 years. The Judge ordered his deportation at the end of the prison term. The written verdict is expected by 18 July.

The prosecution was led in court by Madaliyev of Birinchi May District Prosecutor's Office. He demanded the maximum 7-year jail term but not deportation, Pastor Shreider's lawyer Akmat Alagushev told Forum 18 on 14 July. The deportation order appears to have been the initiative of the Judge.

Pastor Shreider rejected all the charges and is preparing to appeal to Bishkek City Court, his lawyer told Forum 18 after the hearing.

"No evidence was provided under Article 330 and was not proven at the trial," one of those present told Forum 18. "One single disc, as the judge read out when passing the sentence, formed evidence of guilt for the crime, but during viewing in the courtroom it was empty. The judge did not cite anything else that proved any guilt. Yet the sentence was handed down."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Judge Satimkulov on 14 July. His assistant did not answer the phone or respond to written messages.

Forum 18 was also unable to reach Madaliyev of Birinchi May District Prosecutor's Office. Officials did not answer any of the phones on 14 July or respond to a written message.

Pastor Shreider's trial began with a preliminary hearing on 17 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978). Pastor Shreider was brought in in handcuffs and was held in the defendant's cage in the court room during each hearing. "We were not allowed to approach him in the cage to talk to him," one of those present complained. They said people are used to seeing defendants in criminal cases being held in a cage in the court room.

"Hearings were open and church members attended to support Pavel Shreider," one of those present told Forum 18. "About 20 attended the final session to hear the verdict, with several more outside unable to fit into the court room."

A journalist attended the final hearing on 10 July, but court officials banned him from filming the reading of the verdict, one of those present added.

The Deputy Director of the National Agency for Religious Affairs and Interethnic Relations, Kanatbek Midin uuly, told Forum 18 on 11 July that he was on holiday. He defended the right of any country to enforce its own laws in the area of religion. "When these laws are violated, punishment is envisaged," he told Forum 18. Officials at the National Agency in Bishkek did not answer the phone on 11 or 14 July.

Pastor Shreider to remain in pre-trial detention

Since his arrest on 13 November 2024, Pastor Pavel Shreider has been kept for more than 8 months under NSC secret police supervision at an Interior Ministry Investigation Prison in Bishkek.

"Pavel Shreider will stay in the Investigation Prison until at least the appeal is heard," one of those present at the trial told Forum 18. "We are able to visit him. His conditions there are OK. He can read his own books we have brought, including the Bible."

Pastor Shreider's address in Investigation Prison:

720005 Bishkek,

Oktyabr District,

Geologicheskii pereulok 2,

Uchrezhdenie No. 21 Ispolneniya Nakazaniy,

Pavel Davidovich Shreider

Family appeal to regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson

Family members appealed to the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Jamilya Jamanbayeva in April about the criminal prosecution of Pastor Pavel Shreider. They were able to meet several staff to raise concerns about his case.

"Officials monitored several hearings of the trial and visited him in Investigation Prison," family members told Forum 18. "However, they noted that no serious violations had occurred and they will simply monitor the case."

Telephones at the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Bishkek went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 14 July. Forum 18 asked in writing what further action the Ombudsperson is planning to take in response to the family's appeal. Forum 18 received no immediate response.

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) has found that the Human Rights Ombudsperson does not comply with the Paris Principles (<https://ganhri.org/accreditation/>) for national human rights institutions, as among other problems it is not independent of the regime.

The authorities "since 2022 were looking into closing our Church and seeking any excuses"

The True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kyrgyzstan is part of a reform movement within Adventism that emerged during the Soviet period. (It is separate from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its headquarters in the United States.) One of its leaders, prisoner of conscience Vladimir Shelkov, died in a Soviet labour camp in 1980 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Shelkov).

The Church – which is led by Pastor Pavel Shreider - chooses not to seek state registration. Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state registration is illegal and punishable (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961).

The authorities "since 2022 were looking into closing our Church and seeking any excuses", church members, who asked not to give their names for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in May 2025. They noted a case brought in 2021 against two church members. "Allegedly under instructions of Pastor Shreider, they manipulated an old woman, another member of the Church, into selling them a house she owned."

Supreme Court appeal against church banning

On 19 March, in a civil case opened by the NSC secret police and brought to court by Chuy Regional Prosecutor's Office, Judge Ayke Musayeva of Alamudun District Court declared the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church an "extremist" religious organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2979) and banned its activity throughout the country.

On 28 March, the NSC secret police announced the raids and criminal case (without identifying Pastor Pavel Shreider) and the ban on the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church on its Instagram page.

On 17 June, the community appealed against the ban to the Supreme Court in Bishkek. Its Civil and Economic Judicial College is due to hear the appeal. No date has yet been set for the hearing, the lawyer Akmat Alagushev told Forum 18 on 14 July.

"Although the ban has entered into force, our Church has not been listed publicly as banned," a church member told Forum 18. They expect the Supreme Court hearing in about 3 or 4 months' time.

Indira Aslanova, Senior Expert of the Centre for Religious Studies, an independent organisation in Bishkek, had earlier described accusing the True and Free Adventists of "extremism" as "absurd" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2979).

"The ban on the organisation is based on highly questionable expert assessments, in which the experts overstepped the boundaries of their professional competence," Aslanova told Forum 18 on 14 July. "I sincerely hope that this time the judge will demonstrate greater objectivity, review the case fairly, and take into account the alternative expert assessment."

Aslanova added that although she is not a lawyer, "I believe the problem won't be resolved until the organisation is removed from the list of banned extremist organisations," she said. "As long as it remains on that list, the relevant articles of the Criminal Code will automatically apply to its members."

Other criminal prosecutions planned?

Officials have not said whether they have launched or are expecting to launch any other criminal cases against True and Free Adventists. "Officially, no one else is in the frame," one of those present in court told Forum 18 on 14 July. "Officials want, plan and threaten to launch further cases. But so far it is only words."

The Pastor's daughter Vera Shreider lamented to Forum 18 in May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) that the NSC secret police officers threatened her father and Pavel Yantsen, who owns the house where the Church met for worship, that their homes will be confiscated. "We will make sure that you lose everything," officers told them.

Pastor Shreider's arrest, multiple house searches

Officers of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pastor Pavel Shreider (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) of the True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church at his home in Bishkek on 13 November 2024.

Also on 13 November 2024, officers searched Shreider's Bishkek home. They then took him handcuffed to the village of Lenin in Alamudun District of Chuy Region, just north of the city, to the church's place of worship. There they conducted another search. The home belongs to Pavel Yantsen, Shreider's relative and a citizen of Kyrgyzstan.

The officers on the same day conducted searches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) in the homes of nine other church members in Bishkek. They confiscated in total more than 2,000 books, including nearly 200 by Ellen White, a founder of the Adventist faith, as well as more than 50 Bibles. Also confiscated were computers and other technical equipment, as well as cash and mobile phones, and the ownership documentation for five homes and two cars.

NSC secret police tortures Adventists

Members of the True and Free Reform Adventist Church told Forum 18 that NSC secret police officers tortured Pastor Pavel Shreider and church member Igor Tsoy (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) during interrogations.

On 13 November 2024, the day of his arrest, officers took Pastor Shreider to the NSC secret police building in Bishkek. "I was given blows on my head, chest and given kicks in my spine from behind by five officers," Pastor Shreider wrote in a 20 November 2024 complaint (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) to the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Bishkek, seen by Forum 18. Officers also kicked him in the stomach and "hit me with an iron pipe to force me to confess that I committed crimes".

On 13 November 2024, NSC secret police officers used a stun gun (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) to try to coerce church member Tsoy to write a statement against Pastor Shreider, causing multiple injuries on his body. However, Tsoy

refused to do so. He was released in the early hours of the following day.

"During the interrogation, the investigator called several operatives who started beating me with their hands," Tsoy told Forum 18 in May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978). "Then they took me to another office, where they put a bag over my head and beat me with their hands, used a stun gun and choked me. All this was accompanied by swear words and threats to make things even worse for me and even to abuse me. They threatened to bring a gun."

Kyrgyzstan is a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

(<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>). This defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."

Under the Convention, Kyrgyzstan is obliged both to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed, instigated or acquiesced to torture "or take other legal measures to ensure his [sic] presence", and also to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

An official (who did not give her name) of the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment claimed to Forum 18 in May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) that the Centre responded in writing on 8 January to Pastor Shreider's complaint both to him in the prison and to his Lawyer Aybek Omurov. (Akmat Alagushev took over as Pastor Shreider's lawyer in February.)

Asked what the official answer was and whether the Centre conducted its own investigation, the official declined to discuss this with Forum 18. "You can send us an email," she responded (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978).

Officials told a family member (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) who visited the Centre in early January that "it forwarded the complaint to Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office and that it received an answer that the claims of Shreider [about the torture] could not be corroborated".

Interior Ministry official Azim Kurmanbekov, who participated in the arrest of Pastor Shreider, refused to comment on the case in May 2025. "I only accompanied the NSC officers in their operation. They arrested and questioned him," he told Forum 18. "I am not aware of it," he claimed when asked why Pastor Shreider and church member Igor Tsoy were tortured during interrogations.

Operative Kurmanbekov appears to have lied to Forum 18 since the Indictment includes in the list of evidence the records of questioning by him of Shreider and other Church members. When confronted, Kurmanbekov declined to talk further to Forum 18. "Please, talk to the NSC," he said.

Siymyk Bolotov, Investigator of Bishkek City Division of the NSC secret police, adamantly denied to Forum 18 in May that he or other officers tortured Pastor Shreider and church member Tsoy during the investigations.

The Officer who answered the phone of the NSC secret police headquarters in Bishkek on 15 May refused to answer Forum 18's questions or put it through to any officials.

NSC secret police opens criminal case

The National Security Service (NSC) secret police opened the criminal case against Pavel Shreider on 1 November 2024 and investigated it. It brought charges against the pastor under Criminal Code Article 330, Part 2, Point 3. This punishes "Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals". Punishment is a five to seven year jail term.

Kanat Birimkulov, Deputy Prosecutor of Bishkek, endorsed the charges on 25 December 2024 before the case was handed to the city's Birinchi May Court. Bishkek City Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Birimkulov in May. Prosecutor Aybek Japarov refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Multiple NSC secret police claims in the indictment

The indictment against Pastor Pavel Shreider (seen by Forum 18) was prepared and signed on 25 December 2024 by Alaibek Nurgaziyev, Chief of the Investigation Department of Bishkek City Division of the NSC secret police, as well the NSC secret police Investigator Siymik Bolotov. It was endorsed by Prosecutor Kanat Birimkulov.

The indictment claims that "Shreider, being a citizen of the Russian Federation, having all the conditions for leading a normal life, being on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic and being obliged to comply with the legislation of the host country, embarked on the path of committing a deliberate grave crime against the foundations of the constitutional order and state security under the following circumstances."

Vera Shreider and her father are indeed citizens of the Russian Federation. "I was born in Russia but we decided to move to Kyrgyzstan in 2013 since my father was born in Talas district of Kyrgyzstan and we as a family liked Kyrgyzstan," she told Forum 18 in May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978). "We thought it was a good place for living and keeping our Christian morals."

The indictment reads that "Shreider, with all his unidentified criminal accomplices, knowing that the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic guarantees the equality of human and civil rights and freedoms regardless of race, nationality, attitude to religion, ethnicity, deliberately encroaching on the honour and dignity of citizens, including representatives of state power, their constitutional rights and freedoms, which they can use and protect regardless of national, ethnic or racial affiliation, conceived of inciting religious hatred to undermine the integrity and security of the state."

Vera Shreider told Forum 18 in May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) that "All they have as their proof are the two false witnesses that they use in this case and some Christian books that we used where there are some critical statements about Islam and other religions." She added that "my father has not done or said anything dishonouring the state authorities."

The indictment continues, "Shreider, being the head of an underground religious society called the 'Reformation Movement of World Union of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists', which conducted its activities based on independent doctrine with categorical religious nature and principles among the population of the Kyrgyz Republic, in particular in the city of Bishkek and Chuy Region, since 2013 to the present time, has illegally organised a religious cell based on the fundamentals of the Protestant Christianity, where he manipulated [church members], as well as through [religious] literature which manifests a negative-aggressive nature in relation to other religions."

"This underground group is not registered in Kyrgyzstan Republic as a religious organisation, and the books of this religious organisation have not been permitted by the State Commission for Religious Affairs," the indictment notes. (All religious literature needs to undergo state censorship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961) before it can be distributed.)

(On 13 April 2025, President Sadyr Japarov renamed the State Commission for Religious Affairs – which controls religious activity (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961) – the National Agency for Religious Affairs and Interethnic Relations.)

"Shreider, together with his associates, determined where his organisation's members should work and who they should marry," the indictment adds. It said that "to convince his associates", Pastor Shreider gathered every Saturday "in an unregistered church" in the village of Lenin in Chuy Region. It noted that the place "is registered with government agencies as a private house where Shreider, together with the unidentified leaders of the underground religious movement, taught religion using the [confiscated] literature."

The indictment adds (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978): "According to the conclusion of the forensic religious and linguistic examination of the Justice Ministry experts, [the literature] promotes superiority, exclusivity of the adherents of the Adventist Church, and vice versa, inferiority, hostility, harmfulness of other religions and confessions, especially the Islamic religion, as well as Buddhism and Judaism."

It concludes: "This literature arbitrarily interprets canonical and ancient religious texts [Bible and Koran]. Shreider by his deliberate actions [usage of these books], committed a crime under Article 330, Part 2, Point 3 of the Criminal Code".

Among the "evidence" against Pastor Shreider are records of police interrogations of two witnesses who wrote statements against him. The testimony is contradictory (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978). (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&country=30>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711)

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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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY