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UZBEKISTAN: What is known about Akramia and the uprising?

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Akramia was at the centre of May's uprising, but it is still unclear if it is a bona fide peaceful religious group, or if it is violent. Their origins date from the founder, Akram Yuldashev, writing an Islamic theological pamphlet in Uzbek, Yimonga Yul (Path to faith), which he states did not touch on political issues, but rather on general moral themes. Those close to group members have insisted on this point to Forum 18 News Service, as does the Russian-language translation. The only indirect evidence that Akramia was pressing for violence prior to the uprising is a so-called supplement to Yimonga Yul; it is unknown both who wrote the supplement and whose ideas it contains. The main source of Akramia support in the uprising's centre, Andijan, seems to have been their "Islamic socialist" employment practices. Much is unclear about both Akramia and the events leading to the Andijan massacre, but calls for a credible thorough independent investigation have been rejected by the Uzbek government.

The Akramia group was at the centre of May's uprising in Uzbekistan's Fergana [Farghona] Valley. Among respected observers it remains unclear how far this group was a bona fide peaceful religious group, or if it is violent. This is a key question in assessing the religious freedom implications of the Uzbek authorities' treatment of the group and their allegations of Akramia links with Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The history of the Akramia group goes back to 1992, when Akram Yuldashev, a 29-year-old maths teacher from Andijan [Andijon], wrote a theological pamphlet in Uzbek, Yimonga Yul (Path to faith). In the pamphlet he did not touch on political issues, but considered general moral themes, arguing for the superiority of Islamic philosophy. A circle of sympathisers formed around him, who tried to follow his view of Islam in their own lives. The name "Akramia" was derived by an Uzbek court in 1999 from Yuldashev's first name.

Uzbekistan's former chief Mufti, Muhammad Sadyk Muhammad Yusuf, told Forum 18 that he believes that it is far removed from politics. "Akramia has nothing in common with Hizb ut-Tahrir, and other radical political Islamic organisations," he declared. "It is for entirely different reasons that I consider Akram Yuldashev's teaching a heresy." He claims that Yuldashev teaches that it is not necessary for a Muslim to pray five times a day and to fast during Ramadan (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567).

In 1998 the authorities planted drugs on Yuldashev and sentenced him to two and a half years' jail, then releasing him in December 1998 under an amnesty. However, he was re-arrested the day after the bomb attacks in February 1999 in Tashkent and was sentenced to 17 years in prison. No proof was offered in court that he had organised the Tashkent attacks. He was also found guilty of forming an extremist religious organisation, Akramia, whose aim was supposedly to form an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. According to the court, Yuldashev's pamphlet Yimonga Yul called for the forcible establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan and for the current political leadership to be removed.

But, according to the Russian translation of the pamphlet published on 25 August 2004 on the centrasia.ru website, Yuldashev does not call for the forcible overthrow of the authorities. Yuldashev himself has repeatedly claimed that he is not interested in politics and that he has never called for the creation of an Islamic state (see F18News 14 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508).

The pamphlet was originally written in the Uzbek language. Yuldashev and his supporters deny having any links with Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist group known for openly anti-Semitic and anti-western views that wants to rule the world under an Islamic caliphate. An outline of Hizb ut-Tahrir views can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.

Hizb ut-Tahrir itself denies any involvement in the May uprising. Indeed, some of its members in the Kyrgyz part of Karasu told Forum 18 they believed the uprising was instigated by Uzbek president Islam Karimov himself to justify to the world his repression of Islamic radicals.

Yuldashev was a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir at the beginning of the 1990s, but left for ideological reasons, Forum 18 was told by numerous sources in Andijan. Sadykjan Makhmudov, leader of the Osh-based human rights organisation Luchi Solomona in southern Kyrgyzstan, who is closely connected with members of Akramia, also confirmed this to Forum 18 on 2 June. So it seems

doubtful whether Yuldashev really did press for armed conflict.

Bakhrom Shakirov, father of one of the 23 men on trial Shokurjon Shakirov, insisted earlier this year that the group had purely religious and charitable aims. "In the early 1990s I and my sons made friends with Akram Yuldashev. The word 'Akramia' was applied to us by the authorities, but we call our circle of people with a similar outlook 'Birodar'," he told Forum 18 back in February, citing the Uzbek and Farsi word for "brotherhood". Shakirov said Yuldashev emphatically distanced himself from politics and never called for the formation of an Islamic state. "Yuldashev's main idea was that every Muslim should aspire to personal perfection and that then the world would gradually change for the better," he explained (see F18News 14 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=508).

In fact, the only indirect evidence that members of Akramia were pressing for armed conflict prior to the Andijan uprising is the so-called supplement to the Yimonga Yul pamphlet cited in 1999 by the Uzbek orientalist, Professor Bakhtior Babajanov. He wrote then that this supplement divides Akramia activity into five stages:

- 1.) "Sirli" (hidden, underground) – the recruitment and education of future members of the group in special groups ("khalka"), where they will be taught the "original Islamic rituals". Having successfully negotiated this stage, a new recruit ("mushrif") undergoes a special "mysterious" ritual, swearing on the Koran to be true to the other brothers ("buradars").
- 2.) "Moddi" (financial) – setting up a financial base for the community through the efforts of all its members. The new recruits set to work at voluntary industrial organisations where other "brothers" already work, or at small manufacturing or agricultural companies set up by members of the group. Each group member gives one fifth of his salary to the general "bait al-mal" (coffers).
- 3.) "Manavi" (spiritual) – constant "spiritual contact" with a strictly defined circle of brothers (in the interest of secrecy). Discussions and group prayers are led by the "naiby" (deputies) to the head of the local group.
- 4.) "Uzvi maidon" (organic infusion, unification) – the effective "legalisation" of the community with the agencies of authority by means of the "spiritual recruitment" of officials, or by infiltration with their own people. This stage is seen as absolutely crucial in the expansion and legalisation of the community's status.
- 5.) "Okhirat" (culminating, final). Group members believe that at this stage the "true Islamicisation" of society should occur and the "natural transfer" of authority to leaders of the group.

It is unknown who wrote this supplement and whose ideas they contain. "The prosecutor's office referred this supplement to our Institute of Oriental Studies for expert analysis in 1999, just before the second court case against Akram Yuldashev," Professor Babajanov told Forum 18 on 13 June from Tashkent. "As was demonstrated in this paper, they provided an outline of Yuldashev's teachings to his pupils. It is simply impossible to establish whether this outline accurately reflected Yuldashev's views. The Yimonga Yul pamphlet is a purely theological, if not very academic, tract. It is true that it contains nothing about politics and or a call for the forcible overthrow of authority."

Nevertheless, it is clear that the latest uprising in Andijan occurred with Akramia's direct participation. All 23 members of the Akramia movement under arrest were influential Andijan businessmen who were trying to establish a unique model of "Islamic socialism" in the town. They used money from a mutual support fund that they had set up to engage in charitable work, and regularly transferred savings to children's homes and schools. A general social welfare system had been set up at the companies run by the businessmen. An employee of one of these companies was given substantial aid for a wedding (staff were frequently even given an apartment) and illness (the company paid in full for all necessary medicines and sick leave).

These Islamic businessmen had calculated the actual minimum living wage in Andijan (which turned out to be equivalent to 50 US dollars, or almost ten times the official minimum wage) and had agreed to pay their employees a higher wage than that. Uzbekistan's standard of living is among the lowest even among Central Asian republics, including neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Although data on salaries is kept strictly secret, it is certain that the average monthly wage is under half the wage that the businessmen paid.

As far as Forum 18 could ascertain from speaking between 31 May and 7 June to eyewitnesses in Andijan and refugees in Kyrgyzstan, virtually all those gathered on the square were employees of the detained businessmen. Interestingly, the businessmen had promised to pay staff who attended the meeting as if it were a working day. Moreover, Forum 18 established that the businessmen's relatives had organised transport to bring those unhappy with Karimov's regime from outlying areas. The first demand of the insurgents after they seized Andijan's prison and military headquarters was for the release of Yuldashev from prison.

But the Andijan uprising would not have involved so many people, were it not for the catastrophically low standard of living in Uzbekistan. It simply would not have been possible to assemble the mass meetings in Andijan in support of Akramia, which preceded the uprising, were the economy stronger.

According to eye-witnesses, Akramia members who had acquired weapons did not prevent free movement out of the square by those

gathered there, but their attitude to the hostages did not meet international standards for the treatment of prisoners of war. Forum 18 learnt that several hostages received severe beatings. The hostages had wire tied round their necks and were placed at the perimeter of the square as human shields. Therefore the first to die from the shots fired by Uzbek government forces were the hostages.

While the uprising in Andijan does have a religious connection, even if this was not the sole motivation, the revolt in Karasu was motivated purely by economic issues. The Karasu uprising's leader, Bakhtior Rakhimov, told a meeting in Karasu that residents of the city wanted to live according to Islamic law and the Koran. But all those who spoke to Forum 18 in Karasu said that Rakhimov's remarks were simply spurred by emotion. Pazyl Rakhimov, Bakhtior's brother, told Forum 18 in Karasu on 1 June that "it's true that in the years of independence, Bakhtior has started to take an interest in Islam, but still you can't say he's a really devout person."

Pazyl Rakhimov also categorically denied that there was any link between the protestors in Andijan and those in Karasu. "The events in Karasu aren't linked to those in Andijan in any way," he told Forum 18. "People from our city simply wanted to rebuild the bridge so that they could find work."

Much remains unclear about both Akramia and what happened during the uprising. With Yuldashev in prison, many of the Andijan Akramia protagonists dead or dispersed and intense government secrecy, much may never be fully explained.

It is however clear that, as Forum 18 found in Andijan, there were a very large number of casualties in the city caused by the Uzbek government's forces. Virtually all those Forum 18 spoke to in Andijan were in shock that government forces had shot at the protestors, including women and children. All those questioned by Forum 18 stated that soldiers from a unit called Bars, trained by American military instructors, fired on people indiscriminately. Eye-witnesses told Forum 18 that the Bars unit opened fire on the windows of nearby residential blocks to get rid of unwanted witnesses.

Following the Uzbek government's refusal to allow a credible, independent and international investigation into the events in Andijan, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) launched its own investigation. The OSCE "Preliminary findings on the events in Andijan" is at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/15653>. It considers that a realistic estimate of deaths is that between 300 to 500 people were killed either in Andijan or fleeing from the town during the 13-14 May 2005. The OSCE also observed the trial in Uzbekistan of some alleged participants in the Andijan events and its "Report from the OSCE/ODIHR trial monitoring in Uzbekistan, September/October 2005" may be found at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/18840>. Both OSCE reports were categorically rejected by the Uzbek Government.

Forum 18 has been told by Uzbek residents across the country that government repression is now (June 2005) worsening the already bad religious freedom and general human rights situation. International calls for a credible thorough independent investigation of the uprising have been rejected by the Uzbek government, despite the lack of complete clarity about what really happened and why. Without a radical change of Uzbek government policy, many in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that they fear for the future.

For an outline of the repression immediately following the Andijan uprising, see F18News 23 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567 and for recent developments see F18News 15 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=585

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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