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UZBEKISTAN: New controls on access to religious websites

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Access to two more foreign-based websites that carry news on religious developments in Uzbekistan has been barred by the authorities, Forum 18 News Service has discovered while using the Internet in Uzbekistan. One of those now barred is the US-based Islamic radical site, www.muslimuzbekistan.com, which aims to inform "about the true situation of Muslims of this region, on the many thousands of tortures which they undergo for their steadfast faithfulness to their religion". One Internet cafe owner in Tashkent told Forum 18 that he is obliged to check that his customers do not look at "forbidden" information, in accordance with instructions from the National Security Service (the former KGB). He said any customer looking at "forbidden" websites he reports to the NSS would be arrested and fined about 46 US dollars.

Forum 18 News Service has discovered while using the Internet through various Internet service providers that access to a US-based Islamic radical site, www.muslimuzbekistan.com, is now barred in Uzbekistan. Describing itself as "the site of the Muslims of Uzbekistan" and published in four languages, Uzbek, Arabic, Russian and English, the site contains Muslim and general news. "This website informs about the true situation of Muslims of this region, on the many thousands of tortures which they undergo for their steadfast faithfulness to their religion," the site's owners declare. It includes information for example on "Campaign launch: Uzbekistan - the west's murderous ally against Islam". Also now barred is access to a Russian-based news site that often reports on religious issues in the region, www.centrasia.ru.

The apparently new bar on access to these sites is in addition to the long-standing bar on the hizb-ut-tahrir.org website, the British-based site of the radical Islamist party, which is banned in Uzbekistan, which was in place at the time of Forum 18's April investigation into censorship of the Internet in Central Asia (see F18News 22 April 2003).

In its earlier investigation, Forum 18 concluded that despite authoritarian rule, high levels of censorship of the local media and periodic barring of access to foreign-based political opposition websites, Central Asia's governments had so far only enacted limited censorship over access to religious websites based outside the region. Despite Uzbekistan's permanent bar on access to the London-based Hizb ut-Tahrir website, the party's Pakistan-related site is not barred. In several Uzbek Internet cafes, Forum 18 even came across the notice: "Viewing of religious and pornographic sites is forbidden". But with low Internet use in Central Asia and a population too poor to be able to afford access, Central Asia's governments - which to a greater or lesser extent try to control all religious activity - may believe they do not need to impose religious censorship on the Internet.

However, wholly unexpectedly Forum 18 gained new insight into the behind-the-scenes controls. On 13 June, Forum 18's correspondent visited an Internet cafe in the Uzbek capital Tashkent to print out articles from Forum 18's website. The owner of the Internet cafe asked whether the correspondent was printing out "banned literature". When Forum 18 asked what he classified as "banned literature", the owner explained that this included documents critical of the Uzbek president and also "religious literature with extremist content".

The talkative Internet cafe owner explained that he himself did not know which Internet sites were banned, but that he was obliged to check that his customers did not look at "forbidden" information, in accordance with instructions from the National Security Service (NSS, the former KGB). Moreover, if he told the NSS about a customer who was looking at clearly forbidden websites - for example, the Hizb ut-Tahrir website - NSS officers would arrest the customer and fine him 45,000 soms (320 Norwegian kroner, 39 Euros or 46 US dollars).

The Internet cafe owner told Forum 18 that sometimes NSS officers posed as customers and looked at "untrustworthy" documents. If the Internet cafe staff did not react to this they could expect serious consequences, possibly even imprisonment. "If a suspicious customer comes who seems likely to be a Muslim fundamentalist, then in order to secure my own future I need not only to see what documents he is looking at, but also to monitor his emails," the cafe owner complained.

The authorities have also intensified their battle against Internet cafe owners who illegally use satellite connections to access Chinese and Kazakh providers, because they are much cheaper than Uzbek providers. The authorities are worried that websites that are banned in Uzbekistan are accessible on these countries' providers. However, in practice these attempts at blocking access have only limited success, as it is possible to open banned websites using other countries' search engines.

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