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UZBEKISTAN: Another Muslim "extremist" jailed

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Khabibulo Khadmarov, a devout Muslim from the Fergana [Farghona] Valley, has been sentenced to six years in jail. The main accusation was that he was a member of Tabligh and that a manuscript found on him contained "extremist" sentiments. However, one human rights activist, Akhmajon Madmarov, described it to Forum 18 News Service as "a standard work of theology". The staff of the local university philosophy department, who analysed the manuscript, were described to Forum 18 by Madmarov as "the same as those who worked there in Soviet times. In other words, the people who are today acting as experts on Islam are the same as those who previously used to demonstrate the harmfulness and anti-scientific nature of religion." Tabligh members in Central Asia insist on their commitment to the group's original avowedly apolitical foundation.

On 14 June, Khabibulo Khadmarov, a devout Muslim, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in the town of Margelan, a satellite town near the city of Fergana [Farghona] in the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley, after the judge agreed a manuscript found when he was searched was "extremist". "The main accusation against Khadmarov was that he was a member of the Tabligh international Islamic organisation," local human rights activist Akhmajon Madmarov told Forum 18 News Service on 17 June in Margelan. "He was arrested on 7 April and therefore it seems likely that he is a victim of the campaign against Muslims that began in Uzbekistan after the recent terrorist attacks." (See F18News 4 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=334).

Judge Burkhan Usmanov of Margelan's criminal court sentenced Khadmarov under article 159 (undermining the constitutional basis) and Article 244 (2) (establishment of, leadership of or participation in religious extremist organisations) of the criminal code.

Usmanov admitted to Forum 18 that membership of Tabligh was one of the main accusations against Khadmarov and that the only substantial evidence that he had engaged in "extremist" activity was that a manuscript was found in his possession during a search. "We sent it for analysis to the Department of Philosophy at the Fergana Polytechnic Institute," Usmanov told Forum 18 on 18 June in Margelan. "Academics there concluded that the manuscript advocated Islamic radicalism and a return to the times of the caliphate."

The judge gave Forum 18 a quote from the manuscript which he said illustrated his view that it contained extremist sentiments: "People's ailments stem from the fact that they have departed from Islam and are not striving for spiritual improvement. Humanity can only be saved through the teachings of Islam."

Madmarov rejected this description of the manuscript that Khadmarov was found with, describing it as "a standard work of theology". "It's also significant that staff at the philosophy department, which in Soviet times was called the department of scientific atheism, are acting as experts on Islam," he told Forum 18. "The teachers at the department are the same as those who worked there in Soviet times. In other words, the people who are today acting as experts on Islam are the same as those who previously used to demonstrate the harmfulness and anti-scientific nature of religion."

He said that unlike members of the banned Islamic group Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which advocates the establishment of a worldwide caliphate ruled by Sharia law, members of Tabligh "emphatically distance themselves from politics". "Their only aim is to preach Islam. Their activity is very like the work of Protestant preachers, who are very active in disseminating their views in Central Asia." Madmarov pointed out that in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Tabligh functions completely freely, adding that until recently the Uzbek authorities had closed their eyes to Tabligh's activity.

Madmarov told Forum 18 that only one legal case has been recorded against Tabligh members: on 13 March the criminal court for Fergana region sentenced 14 members from Kokand, a town in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana valley, to lengthy prison terms, but shortly afterwards they were all released under an amnesty. The valley is well-known for the high proportion of devout Muslims in its population.

Maulana Ilyas founded the Tabligh Jama'at in India in about 1927 as a missionary movement aimed at bringing Muslims back to the faith of the time of the prophet Mohammed and promoting Muslim unity. He advocated the separation of Muslims from religious believers of other faiths.

In other parts of the world, such as Zanzibar, groups with the name Tabligh have been associated with radical Islamists. However there does not appear to be a connection between radical Islamists and the Tabligh in Central Asia, and its members in the region insist on their commitment to the group's original avowedly apolitical foundation.

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

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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