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Of all the states of Central Asia, the government of Uzbekistan has gone the furthest in deploying force against religious believers as part of its system of control over all religious activity. Religious worship and other religious meetings are at risk of raids by the security police, the National Security Service (NSS), ordinary police, and local administrative officials, as well as by members of the local *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees, which are used as an instrument of social control. Detained religious believers are routinely beaten in custody and some women have reported being raped or sexually abused by officers or threatened with such abuse. One female Jehovah's Witness minor was sexually abused in police custody in Samarkand in 2008. Such sexual assaults, or even rumours of such assaults, have a double impact on women in such a conservative society where conventions of 'honour' are deeply ingrained. Religious believers given long prison terms for practising their faith, as well as other prisoners in Uzbekistan, continue to face torture and ill-treatment once in prison or labour camp. The UN Committee against Torture found in November 2007 that the use of torture by Uzbek state officials is 'routine'.

While the state-backed Muftiate is under complete government control, with the state appointing the chief mufti and all clerics, Islamic groups which choose to practise their faith outside this structure face intense state pressure. *Mahalla* committees maintain lists of active religious believers in their district, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and many independent Muslims have been imprisoned. In late 2008, a fierce campaign was unleashed against followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi; in 2009, according to Forum 18's calculations, at least 47 adherents had received prison sentences totalling some 380 years, with the possibility that other trials of Nursi adherents went unreported. Al put the number of Nursi prisoners at over 68. At the end of 2009, one Protestant pastor and three Jehovah's Witnesses remained in prison serving long sentences. Also in 2009, Forum 18 knew of 21 religious minority believers (Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is) who received prison terms of between 5 and 15 days to punish them for their religious activity. Fines are routinely handed down for various religious 'offences', such as religious meetings in private homes, with fines often 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

Uzbekistan's highly restrictive 1998 religion law bans all unregistered religious activity, and penalties are imposed through the administrative and criminal codes. Gaining state registration for new communities – especially for independent Muslim communities, non-Muslim communities led or made up largely of ethnic Uzbeks or others deemed to be of Muslim background – is all but impossible. Also banned and punishable in law is any form of religious education without specific state approval, as well as the sharing of one's faith. Religious literature is censored by the government; specific permission is required to print or import any religious publication, with quantities to be determined by officials.

While the law lays down strict limits on 'permissible' religious activity, many of the restrictions imposed by officials are arbitrary and go far beyond what the law declares. Religious communities – whether Muslim or of other faiths – are not able to buy, build or open places of worship freely. Some places of worship have been confiscated. Open as well as covert surveillance of religious believers and communities by the security police is widespread. The NSS has sent agents to monitor worship, recruited spies within communities and even hidden microphones in places of worship.

Mosques have on occasion been arbitrarily banned from allowing women or children to attend, while night prayers in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan have been banned in places. Non-Muslim communities complain that they are banned from holding religious services in Uzbek, being forced to use Russian. Religious books or recordings, whether or not they have been specifically banned, are routinely seized during police raids on religious communities. Courts frequently order such confiscated literature, including Christian Bibles, to be burned.

Numbers of *hajj* pilgrims are restricted by the government to about 5,000, which is about a fifth of the pilgrim quota granted by Saudi Arabia. All pilgrims need approval from their local authorities, the NSS and the Hajj Commission, which is controlled by the state Religious Affairs Committee and the Muftiate. Active religious believers of a variety of faiths have had the required two-year exit permission withheld, preventing them from travelling abroad even if they have a valid passport. Foreign citizens legally resident in Uzbekistan have been expelled to punish them for religious activity. Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov was expelled in May 2009, one day after the end of his two-year prison sentence; Khamidov had lived in the country for some years. Before being deported to his native Tajikistan, he was allowed to see his two-year-old son for the first time for one night only.

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