

Samarkand Muslim to be tried for Shia Telegram chat group?

Amid a crackdown on Shia Muslims in Samarkand, police in May forced a detained Shia to open up his phone. They discovered a Telegram chat group to discuss Shia Islam. Officers arrested 10 men, questioning them for up to 20 hours about why they created an "illegal" religious chat group. After torture, a court jailed four – including 35-year-old Anvar Aliyev - for up to 10 days on "petty hooliganism" charges. On 14 July, Samarkand Police re-arrested Aliyev. The SSS secret police opened a criminal case about materials threatening "public security".

On 14 July, Samarkand City Police arrested 35-year-old Shia Muslim Anvar Aliyev. State Security Service (SSS) secret police investigators then opened a criminal case against him on charges of "Production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order" when carried out by a group. The charges relate to a Telegram group where members discussed their Shia faith. He faces up to 8 years' imprisonment if convicted. Police arrested Aliyev just seven weeks after his release from a 7-day administrative arrest.

Since mid-May, officials in south-western city of Samarkand have been cracking down on members of the local Shia Muslim community, a minority among Uzbekistan's mainly Sunni Muslims (see below).

On 16 May, Police summoned a local Shia Muslim they claimed had been conducting "illegal religious activity". He denied this to the Police. While at the Police station, a police investigator made the man open his mobile phone's Telegram messaging application. They discovered a Telegram group with discussion of Shia Islam (see below).

On 17 May, Police arrested 10 Shia Muslim men who are members of the city's Panjab Mosque Community. Officers held the men at the Police station for several hours, some of them for up to 20 hours, Muslims from Samarkand, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 (see below).

During questioning, investigators asked the Muslim men why they created an "illegal" chat group to discuss religion and why some of the group members are abroad. They particularly asked about Rashid Ibrahimov (fined in 2021 and whose brother was one of those detained) and his whereabouts (see below).

In the group, the men discussed "only religious themes related to the Prophet Muhammad, Imams, and foundations of the Shia Muslim faith", Muslims explained to Forum 18. "They did not discuss political issues or other faiths. No calls to aggression against the state or other faiths were made." The Muslims stressed that there are no official possibilities to study the Shia faith, no learning centre, no schools, and no officially recognised specialists to teach the faith. "This is why these men created the Telegram group" (see below).

Among Muslims, the regime allows only communities subject to the state-controlled Sunni Muslim Muftiate (Muslim Board) to exist (see below).

On 19 May, Samarkand City Criminal Court handed four of the detained men – including Aliyev – short-term jail terms on charges of "Petty hooliganism" and "Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer", according to court records. Court officials put the phone down each time Forum 18 reached them (see below).

Police officers tortured the four Shia men during questioning. "They threatened to put the men in prison for lengthy periods, and hit them in their stomach and on their heads", Muslims complained to Forum 18. The men were "placed in cells with a large number of other detainees, where hygiene

standards were very low, with an open toilet inside the cells," they added. "There were no mattresses or pillows". Police refused to answer Forum 18's questions (see below).

"We are requesting international human rights organisations to give a proper evaluation of the torture to which the four men were subjected," local Muslims told Forum 18 (see below).

Lieutenant Jurobek Murodov, Chief of Samarkand struggle against extremism and terrorism police laughed when Forum 18 asked why his police division raided the homes of the Shia Muslims and why Anvar Aliyev is being prosecuted criminally. He did not answer Forum 18's questions and put the phone down. Samarkand Criminal Police Chief Akobir Kayumov also refused to answer Forum 18's questions about why Aliyev is facing prosecution (see below).

Samarkand City criminal Police and struggle against extremism and terrorism Police launched early morning raids on the homes of six Shia Muslim men on 3 September. They conducted searches without showing search warrants. Officers then detained the Muslims and took them to the police station for questioning. Police released them the same day (see below).

Meanwhile, the regime's campaign against men wearing beards continued over the summer. Asked why officers of Police Station No. 3 under Tashkent's Shaykhontohur District Police called and summoned bearded Muslim men to Suzuk ota Mosque in June, the Officer who answered the phone told Forum 18 that "This campaign did not just take place in our District but also other Districts" (see below).

Banning exercise of freedom of religion or belief

Without state registration, religious communities do not have state permission to exist and it is [illegal for them to exercise freedom of religion and belief collectively](#). Among Muslims, the regime allows only communities subject to the state-controlled Sunni Muslim Muftiate (Muslim Board) to exist.

Officials continue to refuse registration applications from Muslim communities such as Shias and those who wish to operate outside the state-controlled Muftiate (Muslim Board). They also frequently continue to refuse applications from non-Muslim communities, including Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities.

The regime has [blocked Shia Muslims' attempts to reopen mosques in Bukhara](#) - including the Hoji Bahrom Mosque - with property excuses. Eventually officials allowed Hoji Bahrom Mosque to reopen for worship. Shia Muslims in Samarkand have not tried to open their own mosques as "they are afraid of the authorities".

In March 2021, a Samarkand court fined Shia Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov, who fled Uzbekistan and now lives abroad (and a brother of Ibromkhim Ibrahimov who was detained in May 2025 – see below), [for carrying Shia religious material on his mobile phone](#).

Officials [warned Shia Muslims in Bukhara and Samarkand](#) in June 2021 "not to publish religious materials on their social media". One human rights defender stated that "after the warning many deleted their accounts, or deleted religious materials".

Samarkand Police detain Shia Muslims

Since mid-May 2025, officials in south-western city of Samarkand have been cracking down on members of the local Shia Muslim community. On 17 May, Police arrested 10 Shia Muslim men who are members of the city's Panjab Mosque Community. Officers held the men at the Police station for several hours, some of them for up to 20 hours, Muslims from Samarkand, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18.

During questioning, investigators asked the Muslim men why they created an illegal chat group to discuss religion (see below), why some of the group members are abroad, and they particularly asked about Rashid Ibrahimov (fined in 2021 – see above) and his whereabouts.

Police also confiscated the cell phones and international passports of all 10 men, telling them that this was to "prevent them from leaving Uzbekistan".

Police released most of the men after questioning.

Lieutenant Jurobek Murodov, Chief of Samarkand struggle against extremism and terrorism police answered Forum 18's call on 3 September but laughed when it asked why his police division raided the homes of the Shia Muslims (as well as why Anvar Aliyev is being prosecuted criminally – see below). He did not answer Forum 18's questions and put the phone down. He did not answer further calls.

Why the arrests?

The local Police Inspector summoned one of the 10 men, whose family did not want to be identified for fear of state reprisals, to Samarkand City Police Station on 16 May. Police told him that they "suspect that you are involved in illegal religious activity". He denied this to the Police. While at the Police station, a police investigator made the man open his mobile phone's Telegram messaging application.

Police identified a Telegram chat group of Shia Muslims. In the group, some 20 men from Samarkand, some of whom are abroad, had been discussing their faith with a theologian from Azerbaijan. Some of them had met the theologian during their pilgrimage to the Iraqi city of Karbala in August 2024. The group was created at that time and was active until mid-May 2025. During that period, the theologian answered their questions about aspects of the Shia Muslim faith.

In the group, the men discussed "only religious themes related to the Prophet Muhammad, Imams, and foundations of the Shia Muslim faith", Muslims explained to Forum 18. "They did not discuss political issues or other faiths. No calls to aggression against the state or other faiths were made. The only purpose of the discussions was to study the Shia faith and preserve its traditions."

The Muslims pointed out to Forum 18 that "it is important to know that there are no official possibilities to study the Shia faith, no learning centre, no schools, no officially recognised specialists to teach the faith. This is why these men created the Telegram group."

The state-sponsored Muslim Board appointed Botyr Rizayev as Mulla (Imam) to lead Samarkand's Panjab Mosque Community in 2006. "Though he is a Shia by faith, he does not teach our faith but only leads the prayers and gives sermons endorsed by the Muslim Board," local Shia Muslims complained to Forum 18 on 5 September.

(Imams can preach weekly sermons only that are based on Muslim Board-supplied texts.)

Forum 18 asked Mulla Rizayev why the authorities punish Muslims - and particularly Shia Muslims - who discuss their faith publicly, and what sources and opportunities Shia Muslims have to educate themselves about their faith. "Everything, praise be to Allah, is great in Uzbekistan," he responded. When Forum 18 told him that the members of his Community complain that they are not able to educate themselves properly about their faith, and insisted with the question, he declined to discuss it.

Torture in police station

Police officers tortured the four Shia men - Bakhtiyor and Sherzod Rakhimov, Ibrokhim Ibrahimov and Anvar Aliyev - during questioning. "They threatened to put the men in prison for lengthy periods, and hit them in their stomach and on their heads", Muslims complained to Forum 18. The men were "placed in cells with a large number of other detainees, where hygiene standards were very low, with an open toilet inside the cells," they added. "There were no mattresses or pillows."

Police refused to answer Forum 18's questions.

Uzbekistan is a party to the [United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#). 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, Uzbekistan 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".

The families have not complained to the authorities about the torture fearing that it could aggravate their situation.

"We are requesting international human rights organisations to give a proper evaluation of the torture to which the four men were subjected," local Muslims told Forum 18.

Short-term administrative arrests

On 19 May, Judge Mizrob Bakhriyev of Samarkand City Criminal Court found three of the detained men – two brothers, Bakhtiyor and Sherzod Rakhimov, as well as Ibrokhim Ibrahimov - guilty under Administrative Code Article 183 ("Petty hooliganism"), and Article 194, Part 1 ("Failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order"), according to court records.

Judge Bakhriyev handed a 7-day administrative arrest to each of the Rakhimov brothers, who were tried together, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. He also fined each of them 393,750 Soms (several days' average local wage).

Judge Bakhriyev claims in his decision that the Rakhimov brothers committed "petty hooliganism" at 9 am on 17 May. It claimed that it had been established that the brothers had shouted in a public place, on Mirzo Ulugbek Street in Samarkand, disturbing the peace and tranquillity of citizens, and failed to comply with the "lawful demands" of the local Police officer from Samarkand's Police station No. 8 to go with him to the Police station "without good reason".

In a separate hearing the same day, Judge Bakhriyev handed a 10-day administrative arrest to Ibrokhimov on the same charges, Samarkand Muslims told Forum 18.

In a separate case also on the same day, another Judge at the same court, Akmal Tuychiyev, handed an administrative arrest of 7 days to Anvar Aliyev, also on the same charges. The four were released from the detention prison in late May after they served their sentences.

Samarkand City Criminal Court officials put the phone down each time Forum 18 reached them on 3 and 4 September.

The four men did not appeal against their jailing. Officials advised the families not to appeal.

Samarkand Police arrest Aliyev, secret police bring criminal case

On 14 July, about seven weeks after his release from administrative arrest, Samarkand City Police again summoned Anvar Shavkatovich Aliyev (born 6 January 1990). Officers then arrested him. The case was then handed to State Security Service (SSS) secret police investigators.

That month, the SSS secret police opened a criminal case against Aliyev related to the Shia Muslim Telegram group under Criminal Code Article 244-1, Part 3 ("Production, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order" when carried out by a group). Punishment is a jail term of 5 to 8 years.

Officials transferred Aliyev to an Investigation Prison, where he remains. Aliyev's family has hired a lawyer to represent him. Only she has seen Aliyev in prison. Officials have refused to allow his family to visit him.

Lieutenant Jurobek Murodov, Chief of Samarkand struggle against extremism and terrorism police answered Forum 18's call on 3 September but laughed when it asked why Aliyev is being prosecuted criminally (as well as why his police division raided the homes of the Shia Muslims in May – see above). He did not answer Forum 18's questions and put the phone down. He did not answer further calls.

Samarkand Criminal Police Chief Akobir Kayumov also refused to answer Forum 18's questions. He introduced himself to Forum 18 the same day but when asked about Aliyev's case put the phone down. He did not answer further calls the same day.

SSS secret police headquarters in Tashkent also did not answer their phones between 3 and 4 September.

Botyr Rizayev, Mulla of Samarkand's Panjab Mosque, insisted to Forum 18 on 5 September that Aliyev is a "kind-hearted man, and if the authorities ask me about him, I will give only positive testimony about him".

Aliyev has "been under secret police arrest now since that day, and was subjected to torture", Muslims familiar with the case complained to Forum 18 in early September. They called for international support "to help us to free Aliyev from unlawful prosecution and arrest".

Samarkand: September raids

Samarkand City criminal Police and struggle against extremism and terrorism Police raided the homes of six Shia Muslim men at six o'clock in the morning on 3 September. They conducted searches without showing search warrants. Officers then detained the Muslims and took them to the police station for questioning. Police released them the same day, local Muslims told Forum 18.

Three of those the Police detained - Bakhtiyor Rakhimov, his brother Sherzod Rakhimov and Ibrokhim Ibrahimov – had been targeted and jailed in May (see above). The authorities also raided the homes of several other young Shia Muslim men who are at the moment abroad, including Davlat Gulyamov

Muslim men summoned to Mosques, warned to shave beards and faces every day

Meanwhile, the regime's [campaign against men wearing beards](#) continued over the summer.

In early June, Tashkent Police called a Muslim resident and ordered him to come to the Mosque in his Tashkent District on 9 June. He complained to Forum 18 that, when he appeared there on that day, he was lectured and warned that he should shave his beard. He asked not to give his details for fear of state reprisals.

The Police officer did not give his name or position but said he represented Shaykhontohur District Police Station No. 3. "He ordered that I must appear at Suzuk Ota Mosque at 9 am on 9 June," the Muslim told Forum 18.

"There were officials in plain-clothes and one main speaker, who told us that he was a professor of the Islamic Academy, but he did not give his name. I saw 30-35 young bearded men there, who were also called up and ordered to come to the Mosque."

Others who heard about the summonses but did not attend the meetings told Forum 18 that they heard that in Shaykhantohur District the Police summoned the bearded men to Suzuk ota Mosque and in Yakkasaray District to Rakat Mosque. One Muslim man said that he heard that "all bearded men are being called and summoned to Mosques in their districts all over Tashkent".

One Muslim man told Forum 18 that he witnessed another case in June. Police in his neighbourhood in Tashkent came to the home of a Muslim man, who refused to shave off his beard. They handcuffed him, put him in the police car and took him to the police station. He said that he cannot give the details of the man for fear of state reprisals. He said that he does not know whether the police punished the man.

Asked why officers of Police Station No. 3 under Shaykhontohur District Police called and summoned the bearded Muslim men to Suzuk ota Mosque, the Officer who answered the phone on 25 June told Forum 18 that "This campaign did not just take place in our District but also other Districts."

Asked why, he answered, "Because it was commanded to us by our Chief Officer Lieutenant Colonel Tohyr Kosymov. Please talk to him." He declined to answer why the Muslim men cannot wear beards and why the Police threatens them with punishments unless they shave their beards and regularly shave their faces.

Kosymov did not answer his phone between 25 and 26 June.

The duty officer (who did not give his name) of the Interior Ministry's struggle against terrorism and extremism Police refused to put Forum 18 through on 26 June to Mirjamol Miralimov, Deputy Chief of the Police, or any other officials.

Numbers at the state-sponsored Muslim Board also went unanswered between 25 and 26 June.

Salafi Muslims are "viruses among Muslims"

One Muslim man complained to Forum 18 that in early June, a professor of the state-controlled Islamic Academy in Tashkent warned that "a beard is a sign of a Salafi Muslim". The professor described Salafi Muslims as "viruses among Muslims" and "dangerous people". The Muslim explained "And so if we do not want to be identified as Salafi Muslim, then we need to shave our face regularly so we do not any beard."

Ulugbek Kodyrov of the Islamic Academy on 25 June adamantly denied that professors from the

Academy gave lectures to men on beards in early June. "Can you give a name, please," he asked Forum 18. "Asked if men in the Academy are allowed to wear beards, he brushed it off, "We do not recommend beards to our students but also why you asking, it should not concern you. This is our internal matter." He then declined to talk further.

Imams' wives warned over headscarves

In early August in Fergana city, Namangan Regional authorities summoned state-appointed Imams, their deputies and wives. Officials ordered the women not to wear Arabic-style headscarves, insisting that their necks must not be covered. Mosque employees "will be fired from their positions in the Mosques if seen otherwise," Sayora Isakova, the assistant to the Regional Administration's official in charge of religious affairs, warned them. "The Koran does not obligate [women] to wear hijab." Her voice recording was given to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek Service, which [reported this on 20 August](#).

After the meeting, the wives of some of the Imams stopped wearing Arabic-style head scarves, Radio Free Europe added. One deputy Imam on condition of anonymity told RFE that Musakhon Abbosiddinov, Namangan Region's Chief state-appointed Imam, "sacked more than 40 Imams [of various Mosques of the region] and replaced them with [individuals] more loyal [to the government]". (END)