

Uzbek State Holds Muslim Teaching in Check

Author: [IWPR staff](#)

Government stops any sign of Islamic fervour outside the officially-sanctioned channels through which it manages religion.

Friday prayers in Kokand are an important part of life, in a city which remains the historical capital of the Fergana Valley in many people's minds. In this eastern part of Uzbekistan where Islamic practice is especially strong, the Chorsu mosque draws a large congregation from the city itself and from neighbouring villages on a Friday.

Once the mosque hall is close to bursting point, the imam or prayer leader starts off by thanking God for the opportunity to practice his faith in such a calm and prosperous country. He would be in trouble if he didn't, because every aspect of overt Islamic practice is carefully monitored by a government that seems to live in fear of Muslim radicals.

Much of this weekly event has an undercurrent of tension. As old men with white beards and wearing the traditional Uzbek robes hurry to see if there is any room left inside, the police stationed outside examine every new arrival carefully.

With no criticism of the authorities allowed, and no openly functioning opposition parties, Islamic sentiment grew in the Nineties and became a vehicle for expressing discontent about poverty and repression. The Fergana Valley has seen various Islamic groups over the years, from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which conducted guerrilla raids in 1999-2001 to the widespread underground network of the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

The authorities have reacted with ever more repressive measures, arresting thousands and mounting a series of show trials to demonstrate the threat they say fundamentalists pose to the state. They even see Islamic radicals where there are none. Human rights groups say many innocent people have been detained, tortured, and thrown in jail for years.

Last year's May 13 protest rally in the Fergana Valley city of Andijan - which security forces dispersed with live fire, killing hundreds - was similarly characterised as a plot instigated by religious extremists, though independent observers present at the scene suggest this was not the case.

As the witch-hunt continues, people say they are being victimised for simply trying to gain a better understanding of their faith. Young people are being warned off attending informal religious lessons, because as far as the authorities are concerned, theology is the preserve of "state Islam" - a curious institution inherited from the Soviet Union where the secular government appoints the clergy through a Spiritual Directorate headed by the chief mufti, and defines what can and cannot be said in the mosque.

"In a country where most of the population are Muslims, there's no official body that does regular teaching of Islamic ethics for young people," complained one mullah from Margilan, another Fergana Valley city. "The city education department is always checking to see that children are not attending the mosque in school time. The schools themselves don't run special classes on the principles of Islam. Any other institution is not recognised by the state, and is totally banned."

According to this mullah, who did not want to be named for reasons of security, "One gets the impression that there is a specific policy to separate young people from religion."

At grassroots level, the state keeps tabs on Islamic activity by means of its eyes and ears in the mahalla committees - originally informal community councils, transformed into the lowest tier of local government by President Islam Karimov.

"When the mullah in our mahalla [neighbourhood] was accused of illegally teaching religion to children, people from the mahalla committee came round and told me that my son was among the kids involved," said a woman who works as a seamstress in Margilan. "When I asked what was wrong with that, they began making indirect threats saying that they [mullahs] might be teaching extremism and not just Islam there, and that unless I filled out a statement they might accuse me of that.

"So I had to write a statement saying I didn't know what was being taught there and that in future I wouldn't allow my children to go to extracurricular lessons."

Explaining that she and her husband had to work too hard to find the time to teach their children about Islam, this woman said, "It's such a pity we can't send them to a mullah whom we all respect, and whom our parents before us respected."

A taxi driver from Margilan described how such warnings can quickly translate into severe measures.

"In January the police burst into the home of a respected mullah while he was teaching children how to perform prayers. They accused him of teaching without permission and of being an extremist. But it 's unheard of for a mullah to get a permit to teach children... in the end he wrote a signed statement and promised not to do it again, " he said.

According to this man, "The whole problem is that our people are afraid to demand the right to education from the government. Acquiring knowledge about Islam is a human rights, too."

Uzbekistan has two main official institutions that provide courses in Islam - the Islamic University in the capital Tashkent, and a centuries-old madrassa in the western city of Bukhara. However, both are geared towards full-time academic students - in the case of the madrassah, future clerics - and the course content is heavily controlled by the government.

Attempts to set up independent schools offering the basics of Islam are frowned upon. Residents of Margilan organised a collection to pay for a madrassa - the city had one before the 1917 Russian Revolution - but last year, when construction was just about finished, the authorities moved in and took over. They removed cupola characteristic of Islamic architecture, and re-designated the facility as an ordinary college, which is expected to open later this year offering medical courses.

"We all feel insulted," said an elderly resident of the city. "This building was created with our money. We all gathered funds so that a madrassa could start up and the light of Islamic education would shine in our old city.

"But last year they suddenly placed it under the control of the regional education department. At the time everyone was reeling from the events in Andijan, so no one dared voice their dissatisfaction openly. It got so bad that they [the authorities] started asking who gave how much to build the madrassa, and where the

money had come from."

Staff at the Spiritual Directorate and in the official clerical hierarchy are quick to praise government policies and claim freedom of religious expression is better protected than ever.

"Thank the Lord, our state has created all the conditions for our faith to flourish," said a Kokand imam. "The number of believers is growing day by day and their faith is growing stronger."

The Margilan mullah commented, "The official religious leaders are continually paying homage to the government."

So tight are the controls on preaching that a mullah is supposed to get permission from the local authorities if he has been invited to preside over a wedding or other celebration where he will make some remarks about Islam.

One Margilan resident recounted how he invited the local mullah to his son's circumcision celebration, "But he refused to read the 'amr-i-maruf' prayer, saying they imposed fines of up to 300,000 soms [about 250 US dollars] for doing that these days. I got upset and talked about how this was our tradition and we'd always done things that way. But the mullah....said that's the way things are these days; the authorities are afraid that the amr-i-maruf will be used to spread anti-government ideas."

In the absence of live voices, entrepreneurs have moved into the recorded sermon market. A few years ago, such recordings circulated on tape, but now they are released on CD.

"Previously I wouldn't have thought CDs on religious subjects would have sold so well, either," said a trader at a market in Kokand. "But they're even more popular than Indian films and Russian blockbusters."

"However, selling them is dangerous - they can accuse you of distributing extremist material at any moment. And who knows whether there's extremist information or innocent Islamic sermons on the hundreds of CDs we sell?"

Location: Uzbekistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbek-state-holds-muslim-teaching-check>