

Uzbekistan: Not the Usual Suspects

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After arresting anyone regarded as an Islamic activist, the authorities appear to be widening the net.

Trials of suspected Islamic radicals have become such a regular occurrence in Uzbekistan that they go almost unreported. But two trials this week stand out as unusual, as the accused seem to have followed Muslim teachings that had little to do with political radicalism.

Rashid Toshmatov and Nurali Umirzakov were each sentenced to six years' imprisonment on February 17. Both men were adherents of Sufism – a philosophical strand within Islam.

They said in court that they were followers of Bahauddin Naqshbandi, a 14th century Muslim thinker from what is now Uzbekistan. The Naqshbandis are a major Sufi order who now have branches around the world.

The Tashkent regional court found both men guilty of undermining the constitutional system of Uzbekistan, and of preparing and distributing materials that are a threat to public order.

The court found that the men were not Sufis but members of the outlawed group Hizb-ut-Tahrir. "They say they're not guilty, but we believe they are," said judge Muhiddin Saifiddinov afterwards.

Toshmatov, 40, said in court that as followers of Naqshbandi's teachings, he and Umirzakov were opposed to religious extremism, and to Hizb-ut-Tahrir in particular.

"We hate Hizb-ut-Tahrir," he said. "We know what sort of organisation it is, and real experts on Islam will never trust Hizb-ut-Tahrir."

It is an assertion that holds water, as Sufis have little in common with fundamentalists – meaning those who want to create a state modelled on the earliest Islamic period. And the radical Islamic groups are often openly hostile to the mystical elements of Naqshbandi belief and ritual, as well as to Central Asian folk traditions of which the Sufis are tolerant.

Because of this, the Uzbek authorities have until now viewed the Sufis quite favourably, and have encouraged the restoration of Bahauddin Naqshbandi's tomb complex in the village of Qasr-i-Arifan near Bukhara.

A key element in the prosecution case was that the accused were said to be in possession of Hizb-ut-Tahrir literature.

After the sentences were read out, the two men called out to relatives and journalists from the cage in which they were held in the courtroom, "We're not guilty - the leaflets were planted on us; it's all lies and slander."

Mehmon Yusupov, the defence lawyer of Umirzakov, said police planted the offending leaflets on him during a search. In any case, the lawyer added, reading such material was "no proof of guilt".

Rashid Toshmatov's father Boborahim, who was in court, was stunned by the severity of the sentences.

"I would be the first to oppose my son if he became a member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir or a Wahhabi [general term for fundamentalists]," he said, adding that unlike Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Sufi principle is not to be involved in politics.

Rahmatullo Alibaev, a human rights activist who observed the trial, alleged that grave breaches of criminal law regulations were committed both during the investigation and in the court proceedings.

Alibaev sees the conviction of Naqshbandis as a natural continuation of the authorities' pursuit of anyone seen as a religious opponent of the state. After jailing thousands of alleged extremists, mostly with Hizb-ut-Tahrir connections, the authorities are running out of people to feed the security machine.

"The war on extremism and terrorism started by the state constantly demands new victims. The real members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir have already been jailed, and now peaceful Muslims – Sufis – are being caught," said Alibaev.

Also this week, 23 men said to be members of a religious movement identified as the "Akramia" went on trial in Andijan, in the Fergana valley of eastern Uzbekistan.

The men – arrested in June-August last year - face an array of charges including setting up and taking part in extremist religious groups, and subversion against the state.

The accused men were by no means on the margins of society - almost all were successful businessmen, and 15 of them ran their own companies. At the initial hearing, one after another maintained he was innocent and said his business activities had been for the greater good of Uzbekistan. The accused said their devout Muslim faith had sustained them and helped them remain ethical.

One of the parents attending the trial said, "Our children acted according to their hearts. I do not think any of them are criminals. They were not involved in unseemly dealings, they avoided anything that was prohibited, and they helped people in need. To accuse them of trying to seize power is nothing less than slander."

The indictment says the men joined the Akramia, a "criminal group" of religious leanings, in 1994, and were personally acquainted with its founder of Akram Yuldashev, whose name the group took.

While most agree that the businessmen sought to behave as good Muslims in their personal lives and commercial activities, it is unclear whether they were part of the Akramia or even whether such a group exists.

Andijan resident Nurullo Maksudov, who was present at the trial, said he did not think the accused had been followers of Akrom Yuldashev, so they could hardly be described as "Akramia members". Instead, they had probably read a book Yuldashev wrote in 1992 called the Way to Truth, and agreed with his views.

Yuldashev is currently in prison. In 1998, he was charged with drug possession and sentenced to two and a

half years in prison, though he was released under amnesty. After explosions in Tashkent in February 1999 which were blamed on Islamic radicals, he was arrested again and given a prison term of 17 years.

According to Saidjahon Zainobuddinov, a lawyer from Andijan familiar with the case, the verdict did not find Yuldoshev guilty of the blasts but identified the Akramia as a criminal group, and depicted “The Path to Faith” as a sort of handbook for Islamic coup-plotters .

“The Path to Faith” is in reality a work of moral philosophy focusing on the inner person rather than society, and suggesting that individuals should take responsibility for their own actions.

Maksudov believes Yuldashev wrote the book so as to prevent young people from joining radical extremist organisations.

The head of the Andijan region of the Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, Lutfulla Shamsutdinov, says the alleged Akramia members are merely ordinary Muslims who ran successful businesses.

“These people were only charged because the law-enforcement bodies need to report to their superiors that they are successfully battling with religious extremism,” said Shamsutdinov.

“They need results.”

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