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UZBEKISTAN

TV campaign against Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses

TV shows denigrate religious groups; invite groups to stop relatives from converting. Government's real goal is to control all forms of religion, especially Islam, the majority religion.



Tashkent (AsiaNews/F18) – Uzbekistan's government has launched a new campaign of intolerance against a number of religious groups, including Evangelical Christians, Presbyterians, Methodists and Jehovah's Witnesses. The *Forum 18* news agency has criticised the negative coverage of such groups in documentaries and the frequent police operations against their meetings as well as the arrests and expulsions of their members.

On Saturday 17 May state television broadcast in prime time a report describing such groups as a "global problem, along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism, and drug addiction," actively involved in deceiving young people and minors.

The documentary featured Uzbek religious and political experts, state officials as well as representatives of the other religions, all of whom took a critical view of missionaries.

However, for analysts reports like this incite citizens to keep an eye on the activities of such groups.

Jasur Najmiddinov, a theologian from Uzbekistan's Islamic University, was among the many religious experts interviewed. Najmiddinov accused Christian missionary activities, especially by Protestant groups, of becoming a "political tool" and a "part of geopolitical games" carried out by foreign powers.

"We all know representatives of the Protestant movement played a significant role in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine," he said, adding that "missionaries' activities here can lead to disruptions in our society. If a member of an Uzbek family [. . .] changes faith, the family ought not to tolerate it."

The documentary went even further, claiming that Uzbek Christian converts, after the betrayal of their Islamic faith, could easily betray their country.

For *Forum 18* violence accompanies this campaign, especially physical violence. A young female Jehovah's Witness was detained and physically assaulted by a police officer after a raid on a private home in the city of Samarkand in March. In another police raid in Samarkand on 3 April, security forces detained a Christian convert, Bobur Aslamov, who remains missing. Several Protestant church members were beaten during the raid and police seized Christian literature as well as a laptop computer.

Government control of religion is even greater for Muslims, who are the majority of the population.

"People are being fired from their jobs or expelled from universities for merely growing a beard or wearing head scarves. Some people are even sent to prison. People are afraid of following the most basic Islamic requirements," said Imam Obidkhon Qori Nazarov. Indeed the government controls all religious activities; even imams are appointed by authorities. "It's like Soviet times," Nazarov noted when "they all operated under the tightest government control."

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