

*Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*

**Religious Persecution Of Independent Muslims In Uzbekistan  
From September 2001 To July 2002**

August 20, 2002

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For years the government of Uzbekistan has violated the right to freedom of conscience by imprisoning and persecuting independent Muslims—Muslims whose peaceful practice of their faith falls beyond government controls. This briefing paper describes arrests, trials, torture, and other persecution of independent Muslims during the past year, as well as some of the cumulative effects of Uzbekistan’s five-year campaign against them.

Since October 2001, when the U.S. government last reviewed Uzbekistan with reference to the International Religious Freedom Act, the Uzbek government’s campaign to arrest and persecute independent Muslims has been unrelenting. Hundreds more people have been arrested or sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their religious practices and affiliations. Police beat and torture them to coerce testimony. After conviction, prison officials torture religious inmates and compel them daily to renounce their faith and ask the state’s forgiveness. An amnesty announced in August 2001 provided for the release of hundreds of religious prisoners, a small proportion of the country’s estimated 7,000 religious and political prisoners. The government made no progress on legal reform that would improve the climate for religious freedom or strengthen religious detainees’ protection from torture.

Throughout the campaign Uzbek government officials attempted to portray independent Muslims as “extremists,” and after September 11, attempted to justify the continuing arrest campaign as part of the global campaign against terrorism. But in the wake of September 11, as in previous years, victims have been non-violent Muslims whose beliefs, practices, and affiliations do not conform to parameters established by the Uzbek government.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. New arrests**

#### **The arrest, torture, and harassment of independent Muslims in Uzbekistan continued at an unrelenting pace in late 2001 and 2002.**

Uzbek law provides for criminal and administrative penalties against those involved in unregistered religious organizations,<sup>2</sup> private religious education,<sup>3</sup> and the possession or distribution of literature deemed “extremist.”<sup>4</sup> The Uzbek authorities have invoked these penalties to punish Muslims who prayed in unregistered mosques, studied Islam with private teachers, or who were followers of imams who fell out of favor with the government.

Since 2000, Human Rights Watch has, through its Tashkent office, maintained a database of prisoners arrested in the government’s campaign against independent Islam. **One hundred and sixteen of the cases in our database relate to those convicted on religious charges from February through July 2002.**<sup>5</sup> **Human Rights Watch confirmed that at least twenty-four**

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the Uzbek government’s campaign against independent Islam, see Human Rights Watch, “Memorandum to the U.S. Government Regarding Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan,” August 10, 2001. Available at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

<sup>2</sup> Article 216 of the Uzbek criminal code.

<sup>3</sup> Article 9, Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (hereinafter, “religion law”).

<sup>4</sup> Article 244-1 of the criminal code.

<sup>5</sup> As of this writing the Human Rights Watch database contained information on 873 individuals arrested or convicted for their peaceful religious activities or affiliations. Local activists believe there are about 7,000 religious and political prisoners in Uzbekistan.

**others were arrested during the same period and as of this writing are awaiting trial on charges related to their peaceful religious activities.**<sup>6</sup> Those arrested or convicted in 2002 fell into two broad groups that have for years been the targets of government persecution: unaffiliated independent Muslims (fifty-three convictions) and individuals charged with membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), an Islamic organization that is unregistered in Uzbekistan (fifty-one convictions). More recently, Uzbek authorities began to target a third group—individuals who study the works of Bediuzzin Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic scholar (twelve convictions). All 116 individuals convicted received penalties ranging from suspended sentences to seventeen years of imprisonment. This marks a slight decline over previous years, when sentences averaged fifteen years or more, but in no way should be interpreted as progress toward greater tolerance.

### *Unaffiliated independent Muslims*

The fifty-three unaffiliated Muslims arrested between February and July 2002 were accused of “Wahhabism,” a term used in an indiscriminate and derogatory manner in the former Soviet Union to denote “fundamentalism.” They were convicted on a variety of charges, ranging from “religious extremism” to sedition.

In one example of a trial of unaffiliated independent Muslims, in June 2002 a court convicted fourteen men for having been “active members of an organized criminal religious extremist group that follows Wahhabism” on the basis of confessions that, according to the defendants’ testimony, had been coerced under torture.<sup>7</sup> The defendants recanted their confessions in court, but the judge ignored the torture claims and sentenced the men to terms ranging from nine to seventeen years of imprisonment.

Another trial of so-called Wahhabis, in March 2002, illustrated the arbitrariness of the Uzbek government’s interpretation of what constitutes “extremism.” The fourteen defendants in this case were accused of “criticizing Uzbek laws as contradictory to Allah’s law,” as well as “studying extremist literature,” which is a more common accusation. The prosecution, revealing a Soviet-era suspicion of Western media, claimed that the men had “disseminated Islamic extremist literature that they had obtained from foreign media channels such as Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the BBC.”<sup>8</sup>

The defendants claimed that police had planted illegal narcotics or several bullets on their person or in their homes and then tortured them to coerce self-incriminating statements. Although they recanted their coerced confessions at trial, the judge refuted the torture claims without investigating them, and convicted the men on the basis of their recanted confessions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch has unconfirmed information about the arrest of an additional nineteen individuals during the same period.

<sup>7</sup> Citation from the verdict of the Fergana Province Court, June 3, 2002, Judge N. Yakubjanov presiding.

<sup>8</sup> The court said the titles of this “extremist” literature included “The Manual for Possessors of Charity” and “The Month of Generosity Has Come, Hurry the Noble Ones,” the latter being a reference to the holy month of Ramadan. Verdict of the Fergana Province Court, March 23, 2002, Judge V.M. Nazarov presiding.

<sup>9</sup> Verdict of the Fergana Province Court, March 23, 2002. In its verdict, the court acknowledges that the defendants claimed to have been coerced to give false testimony through “physical and moral pressure.” It also stated that while law enforcement agents interrogated the defendants the latter “made use of the services of an attorney, and therefore

On May 24, the police arrested **Yuldash Rasulov**, a human rights defender, and accused him of “Wahhabism.” Rasulov is a member of the Kashkadaria branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU). He reportedly helped to defend people whose religious practices and affiliations fall beyond the confines of state-sponsored Islam. He also is known to be a religious man who prays five times a day. As of this writing, Rasulov remains in pre-trial detention; investigators reportedly told him informally that he will be charged with distribution of “extremist” literature (article 244-1 of the Uzbek criminal code), anti-state activity (article 159-3), and organizing a criminal society (article 242-1).

### *Hizb ut-Tahrir*

In late 2001 and early 2002 the government intensified its persecution against members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a transnational organization that advocates a strict interpretation of the Koran. Members regard it as their religious duty to hold unjust political leaders accountable for their actions and to reestablish the Caliphate, or an Islamic state, in traditionally Muslim lands. Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Uzbekistan and its leadership abroad disavow violence to achieve this goal.

### **Human Rights Watch’s Tashkent office gathered information and legal documents pertaining to fifty-one Hizb ut-Tahrir members—including twelve women— whose trials were under way between February and July 2002.**

Among those convicted in July was “B.B.” (not the man’s true initials), a middle-aged father of three from Tashkent whose arrest and trial typifies Hizb ut-Tahrir cases. Persons close to B.B., who asked that he not be identified by name, reported that the National Security Service agents responsible for his arrest had tortured him, using electric shock, during pre-trial detention.<sup>10</sup> He is an avowed member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, for which the court convicted him on charges of attempting to subvert the constitution of Uzbekistan (article 159) and inciting national, racial, or religious enmity (article 156), and sentenced him to eight years of imprisonment.

Standing trial in March 2002 along with four others for alleged membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, **Hamidulla Abdullaev**, aged twenty, told a Tashkent court he had been beaten for two days at a district police station in the capital and that police officers had threatened: “If you don’t cooperate with us, we’ll make you an invalid.”<sup>11</sup> His was one of dozens of new cases of torture of independent Muslims in pre-trial detention that courts failed to recognize as worthy of investigation. He was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment.

Currently awaiting trial on charges of Hizb ut-Tahrir membership is **Bahodir Tishabaev**, from the Fergana Valley, whom police arrested on June 4, 2002. Tishabaev’s brother is currently serving a seventeen-year sentence for membership in the group.<sup>12</sup>

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law enforcement agents did not use physical or moral pressure. For this reason, the court believes it expedient to consider similar reasoning to be unfounded, as the defendant made use of it to avoid punishment.”

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with an individual close to B.B., Tashkent, July 4, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch unofficial transcript of trial of Hamidulla Abdullaev and four others, March 27, 2002, Tashkent District Court, held in the Shaikhantaurski Court House, Judge Mirgani Mirsahidov presiding.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with local human rights defender, Fergana city, July 4, 2002.

**Human Rights Watch documented the trials of twelve women that took place from March to July.** The authorities had charged the women for their alleged membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, or in relation to their having organized or participated in small demonstrations protesting the arrest of their husbands who had been convicted for membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. Some regard the rising number of females arrested in this context as significant, indicating that law enforcement agencies are unconstrained by the mores of traditional Uzbek society, according to which the arrest of women is considered an unduly harsh measure. All of the women were convicted; two were sentenced to three and a half years of imprisonment, and the rest were given suspended sentences.

Among those convicted was **Musharraf Usmanova**, the widow of Farhad Usmanov, who died from torture in custody in 1999 after police arrested him on charges of possession of a Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflet. At least half a dozen of Usmanov's relatives have been convicted during the last several years because of their connection to him. On April 14, 2002, police officers, together with forty to fifty unidentified men in civilian dress—presumed to be agents of the National Security Service (formerly the KGB)—raided the Usmanov home during the night and took Musharraf Usmanova into custody. Police failed to inform Usmanova's relatives of her whereabouts in custody for seven days and then held her incommunicado for about two more weeks before granting her access to a lawyer.<sup>13</sup> At trial, Usmanova was accused of heading the women's section of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Tashkent. On July 16, the Tashkent Municipal Court convicted her on the basis of witness court testimony that consisted of rumor and written statements that witnesses retracted in court, citing pressure by law enforcement agents to sign them. After one day of hearings, the court handed her a two-year suspended sentence.<sup>14</sup>

**Human Rights Watch has also documented the arrest of an additional nine women—all accused of having a connection to Hizb ut-Tahrir—during the last ten days of July.** Six of the women were subsequently released; among them was "A.A." (not the woman's true initials), whom police detained on four separate occasions within four days, for periods ranging from four to seventeen hours. During her detention she was questioned about her meetings with human rights and media organizations.<sup>15</sup> Another woman, **Dildora Akzamova**, "disappeared" for seven days after her arrest, as law enforcement authorities during that period refused to tell her relatives where she was being held. As of this writing, they have denied her access to family members or an attorney.<sup>16</sup>

Also in the last ten days of July, police detained about thirty women for protesting the harsh prison conditions of their male relatives who are jailed for their connection to Hizb ut-Tahrir. Most were released within several hours, however, some were kept in custody for several days.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with Usmanova's relatives and attorney, Tashkent, April 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch unofficial transcript of trial of Musharraf Usmanova, June 16, 2002, Tashkent Municipal Court, Tashkent.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch interviews with a local human rights defender, Tashkent, July 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with an individual close to Akzamova, Tashkent, August 5, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with a woman released from detention, July 23, 2002, Tashkent. Human Rights Watch interview with a local rights defender, July 25, 2002, Tashkent.

### *New arrest target: Nursi followers*

Uzbek authorities have begun detaining and prosecuting Muslims who study the works of Turkish scholar Bediuzzin Said Nursi (1873-1960). Nursi, whose books are legal and widely available in Turkey, gained renown there for having argued the absence of contradiction between religion and science in Islam. Nursi also emphasized the need for a revival of belief in the Koran and for the Koran's teachings to be reflected in daily social and political life. He sought to prove the existence of "fundamental truths"—including God's existence and unity, prophethood, and bodily resurrection—that he believed to be the only rational explanation for existence, man, and the universe. Some students of Nursi's works who were arrested and tried in Uzbekistan had attended Turkish lycée in Uzbekistan or had studied in Turkey.

In June 2002, a court convicted twelve alleged Nursi followers on a variety of charges, ranging from organizing a criminal society (article 242), to distributing materials deemed to be a threat to public security (article 244-1), and membership in a banned religious organization (article 216). The charges derive primarily from accusations that they read, possessed and/or distributed books by Nursi. According to a local activist, the court based the conviction solely on the "expert testimony" of the Committee on Religious Affairs of the Cabinet of Ministers, which characterized Nursi's works as "extremist," and supported the state's allegation that those who read them were members of a prohibited religious group and thus members of a criminal organization.<sup>18</sup> Ten of the defendants received prison sentences ranging from fifteen to eighteen years; the others were sentenced to five years each.

Among those convicted was **Ikrom Umarov**. Police arrested Umarov in August 2001 and found "extremist" literature in his home, which bore such titles as "Little Words," "Devotion," and "One Key to Human Enlightenment." His possession, study, and distribution of these works led to his conviction on charges of establishing an illegal religious organization, distributing material constituting a threat to public order, and creating, leading, and participating in a religious, extremist, separatist, fundamentalist, illegal organization. The court sentenced him to fifteen years of imprisonment.

#### **2. The amnesty**

**On August 22, 2001, Uzbek president Islam Karimov signed an amnesty that provided for the release of, among others, those sentenced to six years or less on charges of "anti-state activity" (article 159). Some officials have privately heralded the amnesty as a sign of good will and progress toward greater protection of religious freedom. It is neither. The amnesty affected only a small proportion of the estimated 7,000 religious prisoners. New arrests continued after its publication, and in several cases the authorities harassed or rearrested those who had been amnestied.**

On January 18, 2002, the Uzbek government made available a list of 860 individuals who had been sentenced to six years or less under article 159 and allegedly released under the amnesty. Human Rights Watch was able to conduct a limited spot check that showed many of those

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<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with local rights defender, Tashkent, July 9, 2002.

amnestied were indeed independent Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Our spot check also substantiated fears that those released would be vulnerable to re-arrest or persistent police harassment.

**Ibodot Sultanova**, for example, stated in an open letter that police in Margilan detained her for several hours and insulted her after she had been amnestied.<sup>20</sup> On March 5, the National Security Service detained her for ten hours for no apparent reason. On July 12 she told Human Rights Watch that police constantly harassed her, questioning her frequently about where she was going and with whom she met. She told Human Rights Watch that she regularly had to sign statements promising to stay at home and not participate in any protests.<sup>21</sup> On July 22, she was rearrested and reportedly accused of being the head of the women's section of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Margilan. At the time of writing she was in custody at the Fergana Province National Security Service.<sup>22</sup>

Human Rights Watch documented the case of another amnestied individual who had been arrested again and convicted: in 1999 **Merziot Usmanov** had been sentenced to three years of imprisonment on charges of violating article 159. He was released in December 2001 but rearrested in April 2002. In July the Shaikhantaurski District Court in Tashkent sentenced him to eight years of imprisonment on charges of "extremism."

**A closer look at the amnesty itself reveals that it offered little by way of real relief from religious persecution, and benefited only a small proportion of religious prisoners.**

- Amnesties are routinely used in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union to relieve gross overcrowding in prisons. They do not necessarily lead to a sustained decrease in the total prison population. Since the adoption of the August 2001 amnesty, many newly arrested religious prisoners are now taking the places of those who were amnestied.
- The amnesty did not apply to independent Muslims who were charged with anti-state activities and sentenced to more than six years of imprisonment. Yet the vast majority of Muslims accused of religious infractions have been sentenced to more than six years, some up to twenty years. Of the 709 religious prisoners in Human Rights Watch's database who had been arrested or tried as of August 2001, only seventy-one had been sentenced to six years or less.<sup>23</sup>
- The amnesty did not apply to prisoners who qualified but whom prison officials charged with violating prison rules. Human Rights Watch has documented a well-established pattern by which prison guards fabricate such violations in particular against independent Muslim prisoners.

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<sup>19</sup> The spot check included gathering confirmations from local defenders and relatives about releases and checking at several of the addresses on the government list in some areas in Tashkent.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of April 17, 2002, on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Idoat Sultanova, Margilan, July 12, 2002. In September 2000, Sultanova was sentenced to a six-year prison sentence for religious "extremism." After three months in jail, she appealed and her sentence was reduced to a three-year suspended jail term. Hence, at the time she was amnestied, Sultanova was at liberty. It is unclear how many others, like Sultanova, had been at liberty at the time they were amnestied.

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Farkhod Kodirov, a local National Security Service investigator, Fergana city, July 30, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> NB, the total number of cases in Human Rights Watch's database is, as of this writing, 873.

- Independent Muslims who prayed or otherwise displayed their faith while in prison did not benefit from the amnesty. Prison officials treat legitimate religious practice, such as daily prayer or observation of a religious holiday, as a violation of the prison regime and punish prisoners who engage in it.
- Local human rights groups investigating the amnesty process together with Human Rights Watch found that families of religious prisoners were compelled to pay sizeable bribes in order for prisoners to be included in the amnesty list. In some cases, prisoners expressed fear of retribution should they disclose the conditions for their release—especially the payment of bribes—and were therefore reluctant to give details to rights investigators.
- One of the informal requirements that made the amnesty all the more elusive for religious prisoners was that they renounce their faith and ask for the state’s forgiveness. Refusal to reject religious beliefs not only eliminated the chances for release, but brought with it additional and fierce physical punishment from prison authorities. This disturbing element of the amnesty process is detailed below.

### **3. Post-conviction torture and religious persecution**

**Religious prisoners arrested and tried during the campaign’s earlier years continue through the present to suffer torture and persecution as they serve out their prison sentences. In 2002 prison officials beat and raped Muslim prisoners to force pious men to renounce their faith and beg forgiveness, in part a dark consequence of the amnesty process. Local activists and former prisoners themselves testified that prison officials routinely demanded that prisoners disavow their religious beliefs or affiliations in order to attain freedom, or even simply to avoid physical mistreatment. In 2002 numerous convicts died under suspicious circumstances, but the authorities did not investigate their deaths.**

In 2002 gruesome reports emerged regarding the torture of religious Muslim prisoners. Numerous male prisoners reported beatings and sexual assault, including rape by guards and other prison authorities.

Human Rights Watch received disturbing reports about post-conviction religious prisoners who died under suspicious circumstances. **Just this month, two religious prisoners, Muzafar Avazov and Husnidin Alimov, died brutal deaths at the Jaslyk Prison**, which is infamous for its harsh conditions and ill-treatment and torture of religious prisoners. Those who saw Avazov’s body on August 8 told Human Rights Watch that it showed signs of burns on the legs, buttocks, lower back, and arms, that there was heavy bruising on the forehead and side of the neck and a large, bloody wound on the back of the head, and that his hands had no fingernails.<sup>24</sup> In May 2002 Human Rights Watch had received reports that prison authorities had beaten Avazov and put him in a punishment cell for stating that nothing could stop him from performing his prayers.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, Tashkent, August 9, 2002. A doctor told people who saw the body that burns covered 60 to 70 percent of his body.

<sup>25</sup> In 2000, Avazov was also reportedly tortured during pretrial detention and forced to watch as police abused his younger brother in an attempt to compel a confession. Avazov’s brother, Mirzakarim, remains in prison.



Police reportedly restricted viewing of the body of Husnidin Alimov when they returned it to his family members on August 8. Prior to his death, relatives of people imprisoned in Jaslyk told Human Rights Watch that before the end of June prison officials had placed Alimov in a punishment cell and kept him there for weeks. Prisoners are often placed in such cells for praying or refusing to ask for forgiveness from President Karimov. Conditions are reportedly severe and beatings common.

On May 26, 2002, **Husnidin Hikmatov** died at home, having been released from the prison hospital two days earlier.<sup>26</sup> Hikmatov was arrested in January 2001, and in September was sentenced to seventeen years in prison for “extremism,” for his alleged membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. He had recounted to his family severe beatings as punishment for praying, causing serious injury.

**A prisoner serving time in a facility in Kashkadaria province arranged to have a letter smuggled out that listed eighteen independent Muslim prisoners who had been raped or sexually assaulted by officials in that facility during the first part of the year.** The prisoner described this and other grim conditions that independent Muslims face in custody in the facility, which is located in southern Uzbekistan:

Followers of other religions are allowed to keep the Bible, the Gospels, and other religious books with them, while the followers of Islam, if they have even a small piece of paper with a verse from the Koran, they will immediately be sent to the ShIZO [punishment or isolation cell] for violating the [prison] regime. It got to the point where, in order to force a prisoner to write a “renunciation” [of his faith], they beat him brutally, degrade his manly dignity, sometimes even rape him. Former [deputy warden], declaring that he would turn him into a “pederast” [a term used as derogatory slang for homosexual, roughly equivalent to “fag”] himself, took off his pants, raped prisoner [name omitted by Human Rights Watch] and forced him to write a “renunciation.” This type of degradation was applied to about 20 prisoners...<sup>27</sup>

Among the eighteen cases described in the letter are the following:

- Tavakkaljon Akhmedov, a forty-year-old father of four, was tortured. Convicted in 1999 on religious charges, he is currently serving a seventeen-year prison sentence.
- Zhaloloddin Mamamirzaev, age twenty-six, was placed in a punishment cell for fifteen days for “violating” the prison regime by holding to his faith. He was also beaten, said the letter’s author, on the neck and in the kidneys, to the point where, when finally released, he could no longer walk.

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<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with persons close to the Hikmatov family, Tashkent, July 22, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Translation of letter given to Human Rights Watch in June 2002. The original with the author’s name was given to a local human rights activists, via relatives of the author. The original is in Uzbek.

- In March 2002, three Muslim prisoners (Nasriddin Shamsiddinov, Ikrom Usvaliev, and Bakhtior Orzikulov) received fifteen days “special punishment” for praying.

Human Rights Watch has received other testimony confirming that prison authorities punish religious inmates for manifestations of their faith. In May, the mother of a religious prisoner in the Jaslyk facility, who asked not to be named, told us that religious prisoners there are beaten and put into dark basement cells as punishment for any violation, including prayer and failure to offer the required apology to Karimov due every morning. She said that while in punishment cells religious inmates are given no food or water. Her son told her he was beaten on the soles of his feet for refusing to utter the ritual apology to President Karimov.<sup>28</sup>

Two prisoners who died of tuberculosis were also allegedly tortured in prison. **Mirkamol Solikhojoev**, thirty-seven, was sentenced in December 1999 to twelve years of imprisonment on charges of anti-state activities in connection with membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. According to official reports, he died from tuberculosis on February 28, 2002. Family members told Human Rights Watch that since his conviction, Solikhojoev had been systematically beaten with clubs and barbed wire in prison, leaving puncture wounds in his legs as a result.<sup>29</sup>

**Dilmurod Juraev**, twenty-seven, suffered the same fate. Convicted in 1999 and sentenced to sixteen years of imprisonment for anti-state activities linked to affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir, his corpse was delivered to his home by Ministry of Internal Affairs officials on February 6, 2002. Family members stated that he was subjected to electroshock and beaten with clubs while incarcerated.<sup>30</sup>

In January 2002, an Uzbek court convicted four policemen for torturing to death a young Hizb ut-Tahrir member, Ravshan Haitov, and sentenced them to twenty years of imprisonment. However, no official inquiry has been launched against those responsible for the treatment in custody of Farhod Usmanov, Rustam Norbabaev, Imam Kobil Muradov, Hasan Umarliev, Numon Saidaminov, or Ulugbek Anvarov, all of whom died in police custody under circumstances strongly suggestive of torture or extrajudicial execution.<sup>31</sup> Nor have there been any known investigations into the cause of death of numerous independent Muslims who have died in post-conviction prisons under suspicious circumstances in recent years. These include Azim Khojaev (the elderly father of a man labeled “Wahhabi”), Nematjon Karimov (whose skull was shattered and body showed unmistakable signs of torture), Abduaziz Rasulov (whom authorities said hanged himself in his cell), Shukhrat Parpiev, Shikhnozard Iakubov, Usmanoli Khamrokulov, Ma’raim Alikulov, Dilmurod Umarov, and Hikmatullo Hudaiberdiev,<sup>32</sup> and Husniddin Hikmatov.

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<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch interview, June 25, 2002, Tashkent.

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with relatives who requested anonymity, Tashkent, February 28, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with relatives who requested anonymity, Tashkent, February 28, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> For details on these cases, see Human Rights Watch, “And It Was Hell All Over Again: Torture in Uzbekistan,” *A Human Rights Watch Report*, vol. 12 no. 12 (D), December 2000. Information on the Norbabaev case derives from a Human Rights Watch interview with a local human rights defender on May 1, 2000, in Tashkent. For details on the Muradov case see Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2000: Events of 1999* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), p. 310.

<sup>32</sup> For details on these cases, see Human Rights Watch, “And It Was Hell All Over Again.” Information on the case of Hudaiberdiev derives from various interviews done in Tashkent in 2000.

Human Rights Watch has also documented the practice by which the authorities require religious prisoners to serve out their sentences in a hard labor prison (or strict regime) facility when they have been sentenced to a general regime prison. Attempts by relatives to rectify this breach of procedure have been unsuccessful.<sup>33</sup>

#### **4. No progress on reform**

**The government of Uzbekistan has made no progress toward legal reform that would improve the prospects for religious freedom and would improve the rights of religious prisoners in custody.**

In 2002 no changes were made to the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Proselytism and the private teaching of religion remained illegal, as did the import, possession, or distribution of religious literature that had not been previously sanctioned by the state. Any religious activity that was not registered with and approved by the state remained subject to criminal and administrative penalties.

The government also failed to institute habeas corpus or ensure that detainees had access to counsel, both steps that would help to protect detainees from torture. Independent Muslim detainees remain particularly vulnerable to torture and receive particularly harsh treatment in custody.

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<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with father of a religious prisoner, June 25, 2002, Tashkent. Human Rights Watch interview with wife of a religious prisoner, July 22, 2002, Tashkent.