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Uzbekistan: Facebook users detained and questioned

The Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA), International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Amnesty International are concerned about a recent series of detentions and interrogations of users of the social media platform Facebook in Uzbekistan.

From 24 August to date sources in Uzbekistan have informed our organizations that dozens of people have been arbitrarily detained throughout the country and held on administrative charges after they posted comments on their Facebook accounts or 'liked' and shared posts of other social media users.

All the comments appear to relate to cultural and religious issues that the authorities in Uzbekistan consider particularly sensitive, such as the wearing of hijabs (Islamic headscarves), which is prohibited in places of work or schools in Uzbekistan. We are concerned that the authorities in Uzbekistan are trying to clamp down on any discussions on social media critical of the government's cultural and religious policies and legislative initiatives.

Nine of those who were detained are known to be Adham Olimov;¹ Otabek Usmanov;² Miraziz Ahmedov;³ Ziyovuddin Rakhim;⁴ Tulkin Astanov;⁵ Turabek Baimirzaev;⁶ Dilshod Khalilov;⁷ Khurshidbek Mukhammadrozykov;⁸ and Erkin Sulaimon. Police also briefly detained and questioned three people for four to five hours: Shokir Sharipov⁹ (uses name of Muhammad Shakur on the internet); Iskander Sadirov¹⁰ and Malokhat Anvarova (uses name of Ummu Abbas on the internet). According to media reports, several of the Facebook users detained were released from custody on 11 September, including Miraziz Ahmedov, Adham Olimov and Dilshod Khalilov, although their computers and telephones were not returned to them.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/MusannifAdham>

² <https://www.facebook.com/otabek.usmon> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTqtjwlpSyM>
<https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-45374852>

³ <http://miraziz.uz/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ziyovuddin.rahim>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/astanov.tulkun>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/turabek.baymirzaev>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100012419503121>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/fikrbankCom>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009276784848>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9hRBE312Jg>

https://www.facebook.com/voa.uzbek/videos/2026612550694443/?fb_dtsg_ag=AdyPdn0LOwrOKDmk3tAqgHHeX6C-YkdkApkuQ-otROvKpg%3AAAdwjyf5DwoZTp3Ai5SCYafvI9CAnMqnf3izXdmCd-i-zRw

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/iskandar.sadirov.1>

Several of those detained signed statements undertaking not to participate in any further “suspicious” activities - but without receiving an explanation from law enforcement officials as to what qualifies as “suspicious”. In addition, “suspicious” is not a legally defined term and does not refer to any internationally recognised offence; hence the demand is an arbitrary restriction of the right to freedom of expression.

According to our information, the authorities tracked Facebook users by their IP addresses and then dispatched police officers from the regional anti-terrorism units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to detain them, search their homes and confiscate computer and technical equipment, in most cases without presenting arrest or search warrants. In the cases we are aware of, interrogations at police stations lasted for four hours or more without any legal representatives present and relatives of those detained were not informed of their whereabouts. The charges were often excessive in terms of the alleged offence – for example, someone trying to organize a small-scale protest (picket) was charged with calling for mass unrest.

According to information we have received from sources who cannot be identified because of security concerns, law enforcement officials have arbitrarily charged some detainees with 'failure to comply with the lawful demands of a police officer' under Article 194 of the Code of Administrative Offences. In some of these cases the officers themselves had exceeded their authority and verbally insulted and physically assaulted detainees and subjected them to ill-treatment.

The cases highlighted below show to what extent the Uzbekistani authorities closely monitor social media networks and react to critical posts by private individuals concerning, for example, the prohibition of wearing a hijab or initiatives to hold small scale protests.

Shokir Sharipov – (pseudonym Muhammad Shakur) was arrested on 25 August 2018. He lives in Tashkent region and has 4,879 “friends” on Facebook and 753 followers. He is a wheelchair user. Eight officers from the Department of Internal Affairs of Kibraisky District, Tashkent came to his home to arrest him and take him to the police station. During detention he was reportedly ill-treated, threatened and insulted. His computer, phone and other equipment were confiscated without any warrant or him being given a receipt. Several hours later he was taken back home. According to media reports¹¹ he was accused of “inciting mass unrest” and “residing without a residence permit”.

Shortly before he was arrested the following post in Uzbek appeared on Muhammad Shakur’s Facebook page:

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9hRBE312lg>



Central to a democratic state are - peaceful demonstrations - pickets. A picket is the expression of any protest by a small group of persons. Four people needed. I am the fifth. We will hold a picket. A peaceful picket. The banners will read: "A headscarf is not a weapon!", "A headscarf is a requirement of our faith!", "Do not trample on our souls!"

Nearly 200 Facebook users 'liked' this post and discussions and began sharing it. Legislation in Uzbekistan does not prohibit calling people to attend a picket, which may be the reason that Shokir Sharipov was charged with calling for mass disorder.

Adham Olimov, (internet name Musanif Adham), has 5,601 subscribers to his personal page. He writes about socio-political problems as well as issues of a spiritual and moral character and comments on changes in society. He was arrested by one police officer and eight officials from the Olmazar District Department of Internal Affairs on 28 August at 6:40 pm at his home in the Almazar district of Tashkent. On 29 August he was sentenced to 15 days' detention by Almazar Administrative Court for the administrative offences of "failure to comply with the lawful requirement of a police officer" and "obstructing the work of police officers". Adham Olimov is currently in custody.

Otabek Usmanov is from Andijan. He came to the attention of the authorities because of his posts on spiritual and moral issues, such as government-imposed restrictions on children being allowed to attend the mosque. According to Fergana News, he was detained at his work at General Motors in Andijan region by representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and held in a cell with a group of women who started an argument with him and lodged a complaint against him with the regional prosecutor's office. Following the complaint, on 29 August law enforcement officials in Andijan charged him with petty hooliganism and detained him for 15 days.

Ziyovuddin Rahim: Ziyovuddin Kabirov¹² writes under the name Ziyovuddin Rahim and is a theological scholar and author of over 20 religious books. He has 4,975 "friends" and 3,260 followers on Facebook. In his posts he writes about spiritual and moral issues. Little information is available about his detention although it is known that his house was searched when he was arrested and that he is still under arrest at the time of writing.

Additionally Facebook user **Tulkin Astanov** is known to have been arrested on 24 August and held for ten days in administrative detention.¹³

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/ziyovuddin.rahim>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-45423885>

The whereabouts of **Miraziz Ahmedov** were unknown for ten days. On 2 September, he wrote on his Facebook page "I've been summoned to the police. Pray for me." The same day he complied with a summons to the district police office and was not seen until he was released on 11 September. News agency Ferghana.Ru quotes sources as saying he is being held at the Department of Internal Affairs in Tashkent.¹⁴ For more than 15 years, Miraziz Ahmedov worked as an interior designer and founded the Miraziz Design Group.¹⁵ In the autumn, this studio planned to open design schools in several cities in Uzbekistan.

He repeatedly spoke about religious topics on Facebook. For example, in response to a government resolution on the introduction of a standard countrywide school uniform, he wrote that if his daughter was forbidden to wear a headscarf to school, she might not attend. He repeatedly condemned what he regarded as the hypocrisy of religious debates and called on users to join a group to defend the rights of Muslims in Uzbekistan.

Although information about the detentions of these users of social networks continues to arrive from Uzbekistan, it has proved difficult to follow up the current situation of those in detention and even of those briefly detained, as they decline to comment. Their families have likewise declined to speak about the detentions. We are concerned that this indicates that they have been put under pressure by the authorities not to speak to media or human rights observers.

On 5 September the Ministry of Justice issued a press release outlining the establishment of a register of banned sites to include those which publish information calling for violent overthrow of the constitutional system; propagate violence, terrorism and religious extremism, provide confidential information on state secrets or laws; and which incite national, ethnic or religious hatred or harm the honour or dignity or citizens. Given the restrictive context for freedom of expression in Uzbekistan, we are concerned that this and other recently announced measures regulating and restricting access to internet sites which are considered to distribute such types of information could lead to more violations of human rights and further arbitrary detentions of users who visit such sites.

We call on the Uzbekistani authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release from detention all those who are detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression;
- Investigate reports that police officers ill-treated internet users during arrest and administrative detention;
- Bring national legislation governing online as well as printed and broadcast media fully into compliance with Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations and ensure full respect for the right to freedom of expression in law and in practice;
- Ensure unrestricted access to online information resources, including national and international news sites, social networks and CSO websites.
- Ensure that there are no restrictions on social networks, the media and literature except those which are demonstrably necessary and proportionate for protection of the rights of others or specified public interests as set out in international law.

¹⁴ <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/10158>

¹⁵ <http://miraziz.uz/>

- Ensure that journalists, writers and individuals can work freely without fear of retribution for expressing critical opinions or covering topics that the government deems sensitive.