

23 January 2009

TAJIKISTAN: Islamic school of thought banned

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Even though a Tajik official has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that adherents of the Salafī school of Islamic thought have committed no crimes, the country's Supreme Court has banned Salafism and the import and distribution of Salafī literature. Saidbeg Mahmaddulloev of the state Religious Affairs Committee insisted to Forum 18, however, that Salafis may be "harmful" in future. Tajikistan's Supreme Court – which has refused to release the text of the decision – reportedly imposed the ban to protect the constitutional order, strengthen national security, and prevent conflict between religious confessions, even though restricting freedom of religion or belief for these reasons is impermissible under Tajikistan's international human rights commitments. An Ismaili imam, who did not wish to be identified, told Forum 18 that "Salafis do not constitute any threat for the country. It does not matter whether one is Sunni or Shiite, Ismaili or Salafī, we are all Muslims." Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 that he was concerned about the consequences "if the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship." The ban on the Islamic school of thought comes into force on 9 February.

In the wake of the ban by the authorities on the Salafiyya Islamic school of thought, Tajikistan's Assistant General Prosecutor Ahmad Sharifov insisted to Forum 18 News Service that Salafiyya adherents found actively propagating their ideas will be punished. Even though the authorities have reported that Salafis have not committed any crimes, they made it clear that they will hold them responsible for any propaganda. "Depending on their actions they will receive punishment," Sharifov told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 19 January. Asked whether Salafis will now be imprisoned or fined, Sharifov refused to say how exactly the authorities will punish them. "We have laws, and we will make them answerable," he responded. Also banned in Tajikistan are the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Saidbeg Mahmaddulloev of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee insisted that even though Salafis have not committed crimes yet they may be "harmful" for society in future. "Salafis may create instability in the country and disturb public order," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. Mahmaddulloev reported that his Committee has collected a large dossier on the Salafis, and has a negative opinion of the movement. Asked concretely what their findings are, Mahmaddulloev said he could only share that information in his office in Dushanbe.

Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned the Salafiyya school of thought on 8 January on the basis of a suit brought by the General Prosecutor's Office. Local press reports say prosecutors argued that this was necessary to protect the constitutional order, strengthen national security, and prevent conflict between religious confessions. The court is similarly reported to have justified its decision on this basis, even though restricting freedom of religion or belief for these reasons is impermissible under Tajikistan's international human rights commitments. The court decision also prohibited the import and distribution of Salafiyya literature in Tajikistan.

Forum 18 has been unable to get a copy of the court decision. Ikrom Kadamov from the Court chancellery told Forum 18 on 23 January that they cannot provide a copy nor explain what is in it since it has not entered into force. Another Supreme Court official, who did not identify himself, told Forum 18 on 22 January that the ban would enter into force on 9 February.

Another impending restriction on freedom of religion and belief is a new draft Religion Law being considered by the Parliament. If adopted, the Law would impose sweeping controls on religious activity and religious associations, particularly on mosques. All registered religious organisations will have to re-register by 1 July 2009. Those that fail to do this or who no longer meet new more restrictive registration criteria will lose their legal status (see F18News 17 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1230)

Bobodjon Bobokhonov, Tajikistan's General Prosecutor, said that "the Salafiyya - just like Wahhabis and Hizb ut-Tahrir - is a reactionary movement". "Wahhabi" is a term widely and inaccurately used by officials in Central Asia to describe religious groups they do not like. Hizb ut-Tahrir is a banned radical Islamist party, whose views are described at F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.

"Salafis disturb other believers with their bodily gestures and shouting during the prayers in mosques," Bobokhonov told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. "This is a manifestation of hooliganism." Asked if the Prosecutor's Office clarified who exactly were responsible for disturbances in mosques, Bobokhonov said they are "not stupid," and they know who the Salafis are. Asked why the

Prosecutor's Office would not investigate individual cases, he responded: "It is our internal matter." Bobokhonov then put the phone down.

Bobokhonov claimed at a press conference in Dushanbe on 13 January that the adherents of the Salafi movement pose a threat to Tajikistan's security, the local Asia-Plus news agency reported. "Although no crimes have been committed by the Salafis, and therefore no criminal charges were brought against concrete members of this organisation, this movement over the short of time of its existence managed to carry out active propaganda," Bobokhonov was quoted as saying.

He claimed that Salafis are seeking to overthrow the constitutional order in the country. He likened the current situation to that in the early 1990s at the beginning of Tajikistan's civil war, which he said started when Wahhabis began fighting first in Kulyab [Kulob], and then across the whole country.

Amanullo Nematzoda, the Head of Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic scholars), a state-backed advisory board, welcomed the ban on the Salafis. He told the Kyrgyz-based Stan.tv channel on 15 January that, in the wake of the court ruling, they had gathered all imam-hatibs (chief imams of mosques) from across the country. "I told all the imams to work with the attendees of their mosques, and explain the court decision to people," Nematzoda was quoted as saying.

Tajiks are mostly adherents of the Hanafi school of Islam, and people "do not accept" other branches and movements of Islam, Mufti Nematzoda was reported as saying. "The State and Court deemed Salafis as dangerous for the country and people. Today, we see in some families, parents are Hanafis and their sons are Salafis. Who can guarantee that tomorrow they will not rise against each other? By banning the activity of Salafiyya, the Court prevented many conflicts and contributed to the strengthening of public order. We, as representatives of traditional faiths are very happy for the ban." He did not define which "traditional faiths" he was claiming to speak on behalf of.

Forum 18 could not clarify with Mufti Nematzoda how the activity of Salafiyya could disturb public order if, as he claims, Tajik Muslims do not accept other Islamic movements. The phones at the Council of Ulems went unanswered on 19 and 22 January.

An Ismaili imam from the south-eastern Badakhshan region, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that he saw nothing wrong with Salafis. "Salafis do not constitute any threat for the country," he objected. "It does not matter whether one is Sunni or Shiite, Ismaili or Salafi, we are all Muslims." However, the imam said, despite what happened to Salafis, Ismaili followers can still function in Tajikistan. Asked whether he thought the Ismailis' activity could also be seriously constrained in future, the imam responded: "You need to ask officials in Dushanbe."

Ismailis are of a branch of Shia Islam led by the Aga Khan. In Tajikistan they are concentrated in the mountainous Badakhshan region.

Echoing the Ismaili imam was Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party, who said he did not see how Salafis could be a threat to public order. Objecting to the conclusion of Bobokhonov about the reasons of civil war in Tajikistan, Saifullozoda told Forum 18 on 14 January: "It is just the opposite. If the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship, this may result in some kind of civil disobedience."

Salafiyya is not a unified movement, but a school of thought. Modern Salafi beliefs grew from a reform-oriented approach among Muslims of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In line with other puritanical Islamic teachings, Salafis generally believe that the Quran and the hadith (oral traditions attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammed) are the ultimate religious authority, rather than later commentaries by Islamic scholars that interpret these sources.

The ban on the Salafiyya school of thought came as the authorities continued to close down and demolish Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship in Dushanbe (see F18News 20 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1242).

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses from Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 19 January that they still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan. The Culture Ministry banned the Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the whole of Tajikistan on 11 October 2007, a decision the Jehovah's Witnesses have challenged through the courts.

On 29 September 2008, the Military Tribunal of Dushanbe City Garrison upheld the ban. The Shokhmansour District Court on 24 December 2007 had transferred the case to the Military Tribunal, allegedly because of the Customs Security Division's involvement, the Jehovah's Witness reported (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200).

Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other – Ehyo Church – was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008 (see F18News 17 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1230). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY