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TAJIKISTAN: Muslims and Protestants are the latest official targets

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

After Tajikistan's adoption of a restrictive new Religion Law the Muslim community appears to be the main target of official hostility, Forum 18 News Service has found. Officials have told Forum 18 the NSC secret police is preparing the so-far unspecified charges against 93 members of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement, who were detained by the authorities in April and May. Tajikistan State University has expelled "up to four" Muslim students for wearing the hijab. The Vice-Rector claimed to Forum 18 that they were expelled "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code." Meanwhile attacks on the property of religious communities continue, with the Protestant Grace Sunmin Church in the capital Dushanbe having lost its legal battle to stop the authorities evicting it from its own church building. The Church has been given a deadline of 1 July to leave its building.

Female students who want to wear headscarves in university or school, followers of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement and the Protestant Grace Sunmin church in the capital Dushanbe are among the latest victims of the government crackdown on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Up to four female students of Tajikistan State University in Dushanbe were expelled for wearing the hijab – an Islamic headscarf for women - to lectures. Prosecution of some 93 followers of the Jamaat Tabligh movement arrested in April and May continues. The press officer of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, who did not give his name, refused to tell Forum 18 on 9 June how long the investigation of the detained followers would last and when any trials might take place. And Grace Sunmin church has lost its battle in the courts to retain its building and has been given a final deadline of 1 July to vacate it.

In the wake of the expulsion of the female students from Tajikistan State University for wearing the hijab, officials from the University and Education Ministry and the Presidential Administration have given conflicting remarks whether or not wearing hijab to universities is banned. Meanwhile some parents do not send their daughters to school because girls are not allowed to attend classes in hijab.

Hijab-wearing students barred from educational institutions

Latofat Nazirova, the State University's Vice-Rector responsible for educational and disciplinary matters, said the University expelled "up to four students this year" for wearing hijabs. "I do not remember the names of the students or what grade they were in," she told Forum 18 on 8 June from Dushanbe.

About the reasons of the expulsions, Nazirova said, it was "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code," according to which female students are not allowed to wear "totally black or dark apparels, and those that would tightly cover them." Asked whether the expelled students could be restored to the University, Nazirova responded: "They could if they gave up wearing hijabs."

Among those who said they had been expelled from the State University this year was Gulnora Bobonazarova, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajik Service reported on 26 May. She was quoted as saying that "the university administration did not admit her to the exams because she wore a hijab."

However, Nazirova claimed to Forum 18 that Bobonazarova, who she said is in her last year of university, was admitted to the final exams recently. "I had the order for her expulsion also but did not sign it when I found out she was about to graduate and was a diligent student," Nazirova claimed to Forum 18. She also claimed that Bobonazarova should be able to receive her diploma in September.

Forum 18 was unable to independently verify Vice-Rector Nazirova's claims about Bobonazarova between 8 and 11 June.

In 2007, another student of the State University Davlatmoh Ismoilova had challenged in the court the ban on wearing hijabs. However, she lost the case, and did not return to the University, reports RFE/RL.

Schoolgirls are also not allowed to wear hijabs to classes, as Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the officially registered Islamic Revival Party complains. "I know of many friends and acquaintances that do not send their daughters to schools because of this," he told Forum 18 on 11 June.

Dushanbe resident Makhmadjon Muhammadnuri told Forum 18 his eight-year-old daughter does attend any school because "it is against his convictions" for his daughter to attend classes without a hijab. He told Forum 18 on 11 June that he knew "the state secondary schools would not accept" his daughter in hijab and therefore he tried to place her in a private school, Sarparast, in 2008. "But they turned us down because of the hijab," he said. Muhammadnuri told Forum 18 that he knew of other parents who also would not send their daughters to school, because they were banned from wearing the hijab.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Sarparast school.

Schoolgirls wearing hijabs in northern Tajikistan have in the past been barred from receiving school leaving certificates (see F18News 7 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=739).

Why is the hijab banned in university and school?

Claiming to Forum 18 on 8 June that there is a ban on wearing hijab in the education institutions, signed by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon and the Education Minister, was an employee of the State University's Admissions Department, who did not give her name.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Abdulfatoh Sharipov, the Head of the President's Press Service, on 9 and 10 June. However, two different officials of the Press Service, neither of whom gave their names, insisted to Forum 18 that President Rahmon had not signed any ban on wearing the hijab. Both of them refused to comment on the claims of the official ban on the hijab and the expulsions of the students. "The ban comes from the Education Ministry," one Press Service official told Forum 18 on 10 June.

Jaloliddin Amirov, an official of the Education Ministry, denied to Forum 18 there was a "ban". He said there were merely two decisions of the Board of the Education Ministry from 3 July 2007, No.14/2 and No.14/3, which instruct students of higher education institutions and schoolchildren respectively to wear uniforms to universities and schools. "With the decision we have also provided universities and schools with photographs of up to six different models of uniform," Amirov told Forum 18 on 10 June. "So obviously when women wear a hijab to the university, they violate the dress code."

Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party argued that the Education Ministry instructions were "specifically against" Islamic religious apparel. "The dress models given by the Ministry include traditional Tajik head-scarves for female students provided the neck must not be covered, but the hijab covers the neck," Saifullozoda explained to Forum 18. "I am sure the women were against showing their necks according to their religious convictions, and therefore insisted on wearing hijab to classes."

Asked if all students followed the Education Ministry's dress code instructions, Amirov of the Education Ministry responded: "I would say 90 percent of the students do." He said there are those who "sometimes break the rules and come to classes in casual dress like jeans but they get warned immediately." Asked whether students who insisted on wearing casual dress to classes could also be expelled, Amirov asked, "Why should we expel students for that?" Amirov evaded the question why the State University expelled students for wearing hijabs. "I am not aware of that," he responded.

Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic scholars), which replaced the former Muftiate or Spiritual Board of Muslims, refused to comment to Forum 18 on 9 June on the expulsion of students or the ban on hijab. Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chairman of the Council, referred Forum 18 to the Islamic University of Tajikistan. The phones at the University went unanswered between 9 and 11 June.

The Council of Ulems has in the past supported the authorities actions in penalising Muslim schoolgirls for wearing the hijabs (see F18News 8 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=796). It has also supported government actions more recently (see F18News 17 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1230).

Prosecution of Jamaat Tabligh members continues

Although Tajikistan's General Prosecutor's Office had earlier told Forum 18 that it was about to bring charges against the arrested Jamaat Tabligh members, officials there and at the NSC secret police made it clear that it is the NSC which is now leading the prosecution.

Dushanbe City Division of the NSC secret police is leading the case of the arrested Jamaat Tabligh members, according to Sobirjon Isoboyev, Senior Official of the General Prosecutor's Office. "The Ministry of National Security is preparing charges against them," he told Forum 18 on 9 June. Isoboyev said he did not know how many Jamaat Tabligh members are being prosecuted.

One Jamaat Tabligh member had given Forum 18 the number of those arrested at 93, but officials had claimed that the number was

much smaller. However, the officials refused to state who is being held or why. Officials claimed the movement was banned in Tajikistan in 2006, but a Supreme Court official and civil society sources told Forum 18 that they were unaware of the ban (see F18News 15 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1297).

The NSC secret police's Press Officer told Forum that he could not say anything on the case. "I have not received any information on the case yet," he stated. Asked when NSM would announce the results of the investigation, he said he did not know and hung up the phone.

The Supreme Court banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009 (see F18News 23 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243). The ban came into effect on 9 February.

Isoboyev could not say what exactly the members of Jamaat Tabligh or the banned Muslim Salafi movement had violated. Isoboyev also said he does not know of any prosecution of Salafi members since they were banned.

Tightening controls over religious activity and loss of places of worship

The last few years have seen increasing official controls on religious activity. Jehovah's Witnesses still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. 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 20 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1242).

Religious communities have little security that they can retain their own places of worship. As well as Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin church, many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation. The Jewish community received no compensation for its synagogue bulldozed in Dushanbe in June 2008. Although the state did not compensate the Jewish community for demolishing the synagogue, a private businessman (and a brother-in-law of President Rahmon) provided the Jewish community with an alternative building in March 2009 (see F18News 26 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1274).

Grace Sunmin church members told Forum 18 on 12 June that the church's final appeal to the High Economic Court of Tajikistan to restore their property rights yielded no results. On 11 June the High Court upheld the previous court decisions to strip the church's property rights. The church has been given a final deadline of 1 July to vacate the building (see F18News 24 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1317).

Meanwhile the recently adopted new Religion Law has made its impact on the Muslim community. Although a number of religious communities – among them Baha'is and Protestant Christians - told Forum 18 that there have been no new raids or checkups since the new law, the Islamic Revival Party's Saifullozoda claimed that the authorities already watch the funeral ceremonies and weddings so there is no unauthorised preaching. "According to the New Law, preaching from the Koran may only take place in Cathedral mosques," he stated (see F18News 19 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1315).

Tajikistan's government has made contradictory statements about whether or not the new Law will be changed. President Rahmon has stated that it "will not be changed" as it is "well-defined and clear". However, Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Ministry of Culture, has told Forum 18 that the Law is "not a dogma" and may change. Muslim, Christian and Baha'i religious communities have complained to Forum 18 that, since 2006, almost no religious organisations have been given state registration, the head of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department confirming that "only" new non-Muslim religious organisations were denied registration since 2006 (see F18News 8 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1292). (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>.

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