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TAJIKISTAN: Religion Law's worst impact is on Muslims

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Tajikistan's restrictive new Religion Law is making its worst impact on the country's Muslim community, Forum 18 News Service has found. Several imams Forum 18 contacted to discuss freedom of religion and belief after the new Law refused to discuss the issue, fearing reprisals from the authorities. Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 that there is an "unwritten instruction from the authorities" that preaching should take place "only in Cathedral mosques". Some imams agreed with this statement, although others were not sure. One imam from the capital Dushanbe said he could not say "how much worse" the new Law made "the already bad situation of religious freedom" in Tajikistan. Even before the Law came in, the authorities banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and two Protestant communities. Deputy Culture Minister Mavlon Mukhtarov denied to Forum 18 that any ban has been imposed on sermons anywhere apart from Cathedral mosques.

The restrictive new Religion Law has already made a negative impact on Tajikistan's Muslim community. Although the new Law allows all officially registered mosques to hold sermons, Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 News Service that there is an "unwritten instruction from the authorities" that preaching should take place "only in Cathedral mosques". He said he did not know which government agency issued such an instruction. Forum 18 has been unable to establish how widely this ban is being enforced. An imam from a Dushanbe mosque, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of government reprisals, supported Saifullozoda's claim. He also confirmed that imams are often banned from preaching at weddings, but said "the ban on preaching at weddings already existed even before the new Law." He said police have warned a mosque in the city not to allow children to attend.

Several imams Forum 18 contacted to discuss freedom of religion or belief after the entry into force of the new Law in early April declined to discuss the issue, fearing reprisals from the authorities.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Minister of Culture, who oversees registration of religious organisations, specifically denied to Forum 18 that any ban has been imposed on sermons anywhere apart from in Cathedral mosques. "No one has banned imams from preaching," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 16 June. Asked if imams could preach in weddings and five-fold mosques Mukhtarov responded: "The Law does not explicitly prohibit it. What is not prohibited may be allowed." He refused to comment on why imams in certain cases have not been allowed to do so. "I can only talk to you and those people in person to answer."

Hoji Negmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chair of Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic Scholars), refused to comment to Forum 18 on 19 June on how the new Law is impacting their communities. Asked why preaching was banned anywhere apart from at Cathedral Mosques, he referred Forum 18 to the Fatwa Department of the Council. However, the telephone there went unanswered each time Forum 18 called.

The Russian Orthodox priest in the town of Chkalovsk in the northern Sughd Region (who also serves in the city of Khujand), Fr Vladimir Slepov, told Forum 18 on 19 June that he does not know what impact the new Law will have. However, he said he hopes that "good relations" with the local authorities will continue. He said he is preparing documents for re-registering the parish and only "minor issues" need to be resolved.

All religious communities must, under the Law, re-register by 1 January 2010 (see F18News 8 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1292).

Other religious communities – including the Baha'is and a number of Protestant churches - have told Forum 18 that they will wait to see what consequences the New Law will bring.

Some religious minority communities were banned by the authorities even before the new Religion Law. The Jehovah's Witnesses this month confirmed to Forum 18 that they still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also had "temporary" bans imposed on them at that time. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down after it was banned, 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).

Preaching outside Cathedral mosques not allowed

Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 that imams are no longer allowed to preach in five-fold mosques. A five-fold mosque in Tajikistan is where Muslims gather five times a day to pray.

The Religion Law divides mosques into three categories – the largest ones are designated Central cathedral mosques, medium sized ones as Cathedral mosques, and the smallest as five-fold mosques. A five-fold mosque by definition based on the Law's Articles 9, 11 and 13 is a religious community that may be established in residential areas with a population of 100 to 1,000 people, or – in the case of the city of Dushanbe - with population of 1,000 to 5,000, and registered with the local executive authorities.

"Now even imams who were loyal to the government complain of this," Saifullozoda told Forum 18 on 16 June from Dushanbe. "Only state-endorsed imams can preach and only in officially registered mosques," he complained, pointing to the new Law's Articles 4 Part 9 and 11 Part 6. "This seriously limits the propagation of Islam."

Article 4 Part 9 of the new Law states that only officially registered religious communities may engage in "mass propaganda". Article 11 Part 6 states: Imam-khatibs and imams of the mosques are selected (elected) by the approval of the appropriate state bodies in charge of religious affairs.

Saifullozoda added that the authorities also "closely monitor" weddings now. "They warn people planning to invite an imam to preach that they may be barred from holding the ceremony," he maintained. He said he knows of concrete cases across Tajikistan where the authorities directly told people so.

Imam Shamsiddin (he did not give his last name) of Amindjon Cathedral Mosque in Dushanbe's Firdavsi District said imams can only preach in officially registered mosques. "All the five-fold mosques in our area are registered, as far as I know," he told Forum 18 on 18 June. "I cannot say if imams are allowed to preach in unregistered five-fold mosques." He claimed that "probably the authorities would allow an educated imam to preach even in an unregistered mosque."

However, a Muslim who attends the same mosque, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of reprisals from the authorities, told Forum 18 on 17 June that he "only prays" in Amindjon Mosque. "Imams do not preach in our mosque. People go to a Central Cathedral Mosque in our area to hear sermons." The Muslim said he also has heard of preaching being "banned" in weddings as well. "Local authorities have ways to monitor this," he told Forum 18.

Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda in Khujand in Sughd Region said he has not heard of problems with preaching in their province yet. "I cannot positively say this about everybody but imams are generally allowed to preach at weddings here," he told Forum 18 on 16 June.

Restrictive new Religion Law still criticised

Imam Kalonzoda said that the new Law is "not very clear" about preaching and other issues. "We as law-abiding citizens must comply with the New Law but it is highly criticized," he stated.

The imam from Dushanbe said he could not say "how much worse" the new Law made "the already bad situation of religious freedom" in Tajikistan. "Women were banned from attending mosques already more than a year ago, before the new Law came in," he complained to Forum 18 on 19 June from Dushanbe. He added that only Cathedral mosques are allowed to use loudspeakers for the call to prayer.

In mid-June, the imam from Dushanbe told Forum 18, the Police went to the mosque near the meat market in central Dushanbe and told them to stop children under 16 from attending. "I don't know if this is connected with the new Law," he told Forum 18.

Tajikistan's government has made contradictory statements about whether or not the restrictive new Religion Law will be changed. The Law was condemned by a wide range of Tajik and international human rights defenders (see F18News 8 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1292).

Other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Female Muslim students have also faced difficulties wearing the hijab, the Islamic headcovering, in educational institutions. Tajikistan State University had expelled "up to four" students for wearing the hijab, Vice-Rector Latofat Nazirova told Forum 18. She claimed that this was "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code" (see F18News 12 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1312).

However, the University now states it has readmitted the expelled students. Nazirova told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on 16 June that eight students were readmitted because of "an understanding of women's role in Tajik society." However, she added the contradictory comment that students should "consider" the government's ban on traditional Islamic clothing such as the hijab.

Forum 18 has learnt that passport photos of men with beards and women wearing headscarves continue to be rejected by officials (see F18News 9 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=337). (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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