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RUSSIA: Dagestan's controls on Islamic education

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Legal provisions in the Russian North Caucasus republic of Dagestan restricting religious education are a major element in the near monopoly on Muslim public life enjoyed by the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Some local Muslims maintain that the restrictions prevent qualified people from teaching. "You might have a very well-educated imam returning from Syria or Egypt who is a classic convinced Shafi'i Muslim in line with Dagestan's tradition," Shamil Shikhaliyev, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, told Forum 18. "But he won't get a position at a mosque because it is the unwritten law of the Directorate that anyone who studied abroad is Wahhabi and can't become an imam." One local human rights defender, Ziyautdin Uvaisov, has described how those disagreeing with the Directorate's line who have tried to study in its educational institutions usually ended up either leaving or being expelled.

"Preaching or giving lessons on Islam not in the name of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan is regarded as dissemination of radical ideas," Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, Islamic affairs correspondent with Chernovik, a popular local independent Russian-language newspaper, told Forum 18 in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala on 15 April.

While not always enforced, local legal provisions restricting religious education are a major element in the near monopoly on Muslim public life enjoyed by the Directorate (see F18News 25 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1449). Similarly important are restrictions obstructing Dagestan's many practising Muslims from reading more than a relatively narrow range of Islamic literature (see F18News 26 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450).

The educational restrictions mean that all Islamic educational institutions in Dagestan must subjugate themselves to the Directorate and conform their teaching with its views. Large-scale independent Islamic education is impossible. The Directorate reportedly also ensures that no one who has studied Islam abroad can work as an imam or religious teacher on their return to Dagestan.

Only one umbrella organisation per confession - in Islam's case, the Directorate - is permitted under Dagestan's 1998 Religion Law (Article 10). Under the same law, both religious educational materials and study abroad are subject to approval by that organisation (Article 9). Under Dagestan's separate September 1999 anti-Wahhabi law (Article 3), anyone teaching religion - even in private - must also have the permission of the relevant umbrella organisation (see F18News 5 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1440).

In Dagestan Forum 18 found that Salafis - advocates of what they regard as a pure form of Islam as practised by the earliest Muslims - are informally referred to as Wahhabis regardless of whether they reject violence.

Elsewhere in Russia, Wahhabism is usually understood as the belief in the legitimacy of violence in the pursuit of Islamic ideals. The term derives from the surname of Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab, whose radical teachings form the religious basis of the present-day kingdom of Saudi Arabia (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

Dagestan - a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia - is highly ethnically diverse. Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority.

Fear of foreign influence

Dagestan's controls on sharing Islam stem from concern that foreign influence is stoking the local Islamist insurgency. In a compilation of papers from a local government conference on preventing religious-political extremism held in Makhachkala in May 2009, scholar Tagir Muslimov points out that "for many, the way to the forest (joining the insurgency) starts in Islamic educational institutions abroad." The compilation also notes that some 4,000 young Dagestanis are currently studying in Islamic countries.

Pro-rector of Makhachkala's Imam Shafi'i Islamic University, Magomedgadzhi Gadzhiev (no relation to Abdulmumin) sees religious education as the key to beating the insurgency. "If a vessel is full of water and you pour water into it, it will overflow," he explained to Forum 18 on 19 April. "If a young person has adopted Wahhabi ideas and we try to say something from the side, he

won't accept what we say, as his head is already full."

For this reason, Gadzhiyev supports Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's pilot scheme introducing religious studies into state schools, he told Forum 18. He would go further, suggesting that a madrassah in every Dagestani village should teach even pre-school children, "giving different ideas first – that terrorism and murder are absolutely unacceptable in Islam."

Founded by the Directorate in 1997, Imam Shafi'i Islamic University is the oldest Islamic university in Dagestan. It trains imams in Arabic and sharia studies following study programmes approved by the Directorate.

Makhachkala's Institute of Theology and International Relations also agrees its educational programmes with the Directorate and uses approximately 80 per cent of the syllabus taught in purely Islamic universities such as Gadzhiyev's, its rector Maksud Sadikov told Forum 18 on 20 April. It also employs its lecturers via the Directorate.

With 750 internal and 500 external students, the Institute is the oldest of still only a handful of higher educational institutions in Russia offering combined Islamic and secular qualifications approved by the state. Graduates are thus able to work either as imams and Directorate personnel or as secular teachers and state officials, Sadikov explained to Forum 18.

While imams are elected, they must also be endorsed by the Directorate, he continued. Asked if this meant that Salafis could not work as imams, Sadikov drew an analogy with the unacceptability of a Jehovah's Witness wanting to lead an Orthodox parish church. (While Orthodox do not recognise Jehovah's Witnesses as Christians, however, Sadikov had told Forum 18 minutes earlier that he regards Salafis as full Muslims).

Directorate press secretary Magomedrasul Omarov confirmed to Forum 18 on 21 April that the Directorate trains all imams. If a village or settlement needs an imam, it consults with the Directorate, he said, while graduates of Islamic educational institutions are allocated posts in the way that employment was allotted during the Soviet period.

Local sociologist of religion Zaid Abdulagatov estimated to Forum 18 on 16 April that there are currently around 6,000 higher students of Islam in Dagestan. According to January 2010 official local government figures, the republic has 13 institutions of higher Islamic education.

Controls too tight?

According to Rasul Gadzhiyev (no relation to Abdulmumin or Magomedgadzhi), departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs, there is generally no friction between the Directorate and Dagestani Muslims who have studied abroad. While those educated in Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia had some "points of misunderstanding" with local Muslims clergy, he told Forum 18 on 22 April, if they had not turned to terrorism they were engaged in peaceful dialogue.

Others maintained to Forum 18 that the restrictions on Islamic education prevented well-qualified people from teaching, however. "You might have a very well-educated imam returning from Syria or Egypt who is a classic convinced Shafi'i Muslim in line with Dagestan's tradition," Shamil Shikhaliyev, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, recounted to Forum 18 on 16 April. "But he won't get a position at a mosque because it is the unwritten law of the Directorate that anyone who studied abroad is Wahhabi and can't become an imam."

Ziyautdin Uvaisov, a Makhachala-based lawyer working with the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, described to Forum 18 on 15 April how those disagreeing with the Directorate's line who tried to study in its educational institutions usually ended up either leaving or being expelled.

The situation which culminated in the state authorities' alleged abduction of Sirazhudin Shafiyev began when the community of Derbent's Juma Mosque attempted to elect a non-Directorate imam (see F18News 4 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1439). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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

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