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TAJIKISTAN: "This is not the first time.."

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Police in Tajikistan continue to try to suppress unregistered Muslim education throughout the country, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police General Sharif Nazarov told Forum 18 that "this is not the first time we have exposed illegal religious teachers, and given them administrative fines". Examples of such "offences" include three women fined for "just teaching how to read the Koran" to groups of young girls in their private homes without state permission, a Muslim who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. The three taught children the Arabic alphabet and so how to read to Koran. Similarly, police north of the capital Dushanbe are preparing charges against the Imam of an officially registered mosque, for teaching five children aged between nine and 17 in his private home. However, in Dushanbe the authorities have temporarily eased the mosque closure campaign. Some Muslims in the country suspect that this is for fear of the impact of the Arab Spring uprisings against dictatorships.

Police in Tajikistan continue to try to suppress unregistered Muslim education throughout the country, Forum 18 News Service notes. The authorities have brought administrative charges against at least fifteen Muslim teachers in three different regions – one of them the Imam of an officially registered Mosque – in the current repression. Some have already been fined by the courts, for teaching the Koran to children and adults without a special license from the state Religious Affairs Committee.

"This is not the first time.."

Police in northern Sughd Region are conducting a large-scale "Operation Madrassah" - as they have named the operation – aiming to stop all unapproved Muslim religious education. General Sharif Nazarov of Sughd Regional Police, who leads the operation, on 20 June tried to play down the seriousness of the violations of freedom of religion or belief. "This is not the first time we have exposed illegal religious teachers, and given them administrative fines," he told Forum 18. He declined to give details of previous cases, only stating that previous "violators" had also been given administrative fines.

The latest "Operation Madrassah" came a year after the Interior Ministry in 2010 launched a similar nationwide operation with the same codename, to suppress "illegal" instruction Koranic education (see F18News 2 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1483).

New "legal" restrictions

The raids and fines came as Parliament's Lower Chamber adopted a controversial Parental Responsibility Law banning almost all children under eighteen from participating in any religious activity except for funerals. Amendments to the Criminal Code were also adopted by the Lower Chamber making unregistered teaching of "extremist" religious doctrines punishable with prison terms of up to twelve years. This legislation has yet to reach the Upper Chamber (see F18News 22 June 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1583).

Restrictive amendments to the harsh 2009 Religion Law banning religious education abroad are also going through Parliament (see F18News 26 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1575).

No prison terms?

General Nazarov, commenting on the prison terms proposed in the draft Criminal Code amendments, claimed to Forum 18 that: "I do not think that after the final signing of the amendments into law, individuals who teach how to read the Koran without authorisation will be given prison terms".

The 2011 "Operation Madrassah"

2011's "Operation Madrassah" involved all the regional security agencies. In the northern Sughd Region it began on 1 May and covered all cities and districts in the Region. Regional authorities visited eight Madrassahs [Islamic schools], 93 Cathedral mosques and 955 Five-fold prayer mosques, according to the Asia-Plus independent news agency. Charges were brought against all the teachers involved in unapproved religious teaching, under Article 474 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

Article 474 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("Violation of legislation on religious organisations") specifies "teaching religious knowledge without [state] permission" as one such "violation". For first time offenders, the Article prescribes a fine on individuals of 7 to 10 state Financial Indicators, 20 to 30 on religious leaders, and 100 to 200 on registered religious organisations. One Financial Unit is currently 35 Somonis (41 Norwegian Kroner, 5 Euros or 8 US Dollars). Fines are higher for those who commit the same "violation" within one year, being 12 to 20 state Financial Indicators for individuals, 40 to 50 for religious leaders, and 300 to 400 for registered religious organisations.

Police General Nazarov would not give specific details, but told Forum 18 that "eight cases of illegal teaching of religion were exposed, and the violators of the Religion Law were all fined under Administrative Code Article 474".

Unnamed police from the Region told Asia-Plus on 16 June that at least 11 cases of illegal teaching of religion were exposed during raids. The "violations" took place in Isfara, Bobojongafurov and Spitamensk Districts and Kayrakum. In Isfara District, police stated that among those fined were Kamol Pochoyev, a 41-year-old man who taught eleven children, and Muhayyo Jurayeva, a 40-year-old woman who taught three adult women Islam.

More Mosques closed

Sughd region authorities have also recently closed down several Mosques. Muminjon Oripov, Head of Khujand's Religious Affairs Department, admitted to Forum 18 on 20 June that two mosques in the city, Dawud Hoja and Abubakri Siddik, had been closed. He claimed however that their activity was only "temporarily suspended". He said that this was because they were built before the 2009 Religion Law came into force, and needed to bring their activity into line with the Law. "We are looking into registering them after they collect all the necessary documents," he claimed.

Rejecting this claim, Imam Inomjon Saidov of Abubakri Siddik Mosque, told stan.tv, a Bishkek-based independent Central Asian news agency, on 30 May that he had visited various authorities for the last two years with no success to receive permission for the Mosque. "Now the neighbours who attended the Mosque have to travel several kilometres to attend another mosque for prayers," he complained.

Oripov refused to tell Forum 18 whether other mosques had been closed in the city.

For some years Tajikistan has been closing down places of worship, primarily mosques (see eg. F18News 25 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1532).

"Just teaching how to read the Koran"

In the south-western Khatlon Region, Judge Hasan Muminov of Qurghonteppa City Court in separate cases in May and June fined Zuhro Muhammadjanova, Mavluda Mavlonova and a third woman (whose name was not given) 10 Financial Indicators under Administrative Code Article 474. As a Financial Indicator is currently 35 Somonis, they were each fined 350 Somonis (414 Norwegian Kroner, 53 Euros or 75 US Dollars).

The three women were fined for "just teaching how to read the Koran" to groups of young girls in their private homes without state permission, a Muslim who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 15 June. The three taught children the Arabic alphabet and so how to read to Koran.

Public Prosecutors in a different Khatlon Region district are preparing several administrative cases for similar "violations". The person who wished to remain anonymous did not those involved to protect them from state reprisals.

Teaching how to read the Koran a crime?

Judge Muminov told Forum 18 on 15 June that the women violated the Religion Law by teaching religion without the approval of the state. "They did not receive permission from the Religious Affairs Committee or regional religious affairs officials."

He "did not think" the Religion Law violates the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief and so international human rights standards. The Religion Law attracted strong international criticism for violating the human rights Tajikistan has committed itself to implement (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553).

"There is a registered Madrassah in the city [Qurghonteppa] offering Koranic and Islamic courses", the Judge insisted. "Those who wish to study the Koran should attend it."

Officially registered mosque's imam prosecuted for teaching children

On 11 June police in Rudaki District opened an administrative case against the Imam of an officially registered mosque, for teaching

religion without permission from the authorities, a Muslim who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 15 June. The District is 20 kms (12 miles) north of the capital Dushanbe.

The Imam had been teaching five children aged between nine and 17 in his private home, the Muslim added, and he "will have to pay a fine now". As of 28 June the Imam had not yet been fined.

Where did you get this information?

Nemat Mahmudov, Deputy Chief of Rudaki District Police, told Forum 18 on 15 June that he could not comment on the case. He asked where Forum 18 had the information on the case from and whether the Imam's relatives had complained. Mahmudov said that when the Interior Ministry gives its approval the police would send written answers to Forum 18. No written answers had been received as of 28 June.

Fear of a Dushanbe "Arab Spring"?

In a recent easing of the sustained campaign to close down mosques, Dushanbe city has decided to "temporarily" give Cathedral mosque status to 10 more mosque. (Cathedral mosque is one of the mosque categories imposed by the Religion Law, and allows these mosques only to hold sermons with Friday prayers – see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553.)

Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, the Dushanbe City mayoral official in charge of religious affairs told Forum 18 on 15 June that the decision was made as "recently there were massive gatherings in and around some of the mosques for Friday prayers. So", he continued, "the authorities in order to ease the crowds temporarily gave the status of cathedral mosques to ten more mosques."

Muslims in the country, however, suspect that the authorities acted fearing the example of the Arab Spring uprisings against dictatorships for freedom, human rights and democracy. A Muslim who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 28 June that the authorities "may be wary of the population's growing discontent with official religious policies". Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the opposition Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 on 28 June that the authorities did this "not out of good will but for fear of spread of Arab Spring movements to Tajikistan."

Nuriddinov of the Mayor's Office has in the past been markedly less respectful of the population's wish to have open mosques, defending the sustained mosque closure campaign (see eg. F18News 25 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1532).

Permanent status?

However Nuriddinov was less forthcoming about whether the mosques might permanently become Cathedral mosques. In order for this to happen, "they need to make changes to their charters, also make other appropriate changes, as well as not to violate the Religion Law during their temporary status."

Nuriddinov told Forum 18 that the city authorities did not have any plans to build more cathedral mosques in future. But they were open to approaches from investors or private persons, "if they would like to build beautiful mosques which correspond to architecture, sanitary and other requirements". (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=1553.

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 Tajikistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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