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AZERBAIJAN: 200 Nakhichevan Muslims arrested, 50 still detained, 50 mosques closed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The authorities in Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan continue to restrict freedom of religion or belief even more severely than in the rest of the country, Forum 18 News Service notes. In mid-November, several sources have stated that up to 200 Muslims were arrested. Most were released within one or two days but up to 50 are apparently still in detention, Yafez Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18. Restrictions are particularly tight during the Shia Muslim commemoration of Ashura. As in the past, in November police stood outside mosques and once again prevented young people, especially school children and students, from entering. Malahat Nasibova of the Nakhichevan-based Democracy and NGO Development Resource Centre told Forum 18. Even outside Ashura many state employees – and even employees of many private companies, some of which have ties to state officials – are "too afraid" to attend mosques, Akramoglu and Nasibova separately told Forum 18. Up to 50 mosques – especially those Nakhichevan's authorities think are oriented towards Iran - appear to have been forcibly closed after the mid-November arrests.

About 200 Muslims were arrested by the authorities in Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhichevan [Naxçıvan] in mid-November, several sources have told Forum 18 News Service. While most were released within one or two days, up to 50 are apparently still in detention in early December. They are being held in the Justice Ministry's Pre-trial Detention Centre in the village of Boyukduz in Nakhichevan's Kangarli District, Yafez Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe told Forum 18 on 3 December.

The arrests appear to have been motivated by a government desire to reduce perceived Iranian influence, Akramoglu thought (see below).

Arrests without trial have also been used in Nakhichevan in the past against Muslim readers of the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1447). Most of the exclave's Muslims are Shia, but Turkey previously provided several Sunni Muslim imams for mosques. All these imams were forced to leave in 2011 (see F18News 13 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1570). Under Azerbaijan's Religion Law only Muslims who have been trained in the country are allowed to lead mosques and conduct Islamic rites and ceremonies (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

Severe restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Nakhichevan – an autonomous territory of Azerbaijan on the Arax river wedged between Armenia, Turkey and Iran - has a population of more than 400,000 and its own government and parliament. The autonomous territory's restrictions on people's ability to exercise human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and other political and social freedoms are far tighter than in the rest of Azerbaijan. These include a de facto ban on people exercising freedom of religion or belief who are Shia Muslims outside state control, Sunni Muslims meeting as communities, and non-Muslims such as Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists, Hare Krishna devotees, or Russian Orthodox (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1447).

Ashura restrictions

Restrictions are particularly tight during the Shia Muslim commemoration of Ashura, which fell this year on 4 November. "This is constantly the case," Akramoglu told Forum 18. "People themselves know not to go to mosque." He pointed to his home village where up to 400 people would attend Ashura commemorations a decade ago. "This year there were between 10 and 15 people."

As in the past, in 2014 police stood outside mosques at Ashura and once again prevented young people, especially school children and students, from entering, Malahat Nasibova, Head of the Nakhichevan-based Democracy and NGO Development Resource Centre, told Forum 18 from Baku on 26 November. In 2010 the authorities warned employees of state enterprises and students not to attend mosques during Ashura. At the same time many Muslims were detained, but it is not clear if this was because they participated in Ashura commemorations or to prevent potential opposition (see F18News 21 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1397).

"Too afraid" to attend mosques

Outside Ashura such freedom of religion or belief violations also continue to the present day. There is long-standing tight government surveillance of mosques, the only places of worship permitted. Many state employees in Nakhichevan – and even employees of many private companies, some of which have ties to state officials – are "too afraid" to attend mosques, Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe and Nasibova of the Democracy and NGO Development Resource Centre both separately told Forum 18. Employees fear possible dismissal if they are known to attend mosque.

Perhaps up to 50 mosques across Nakhichevan – especially those the government thinks are oriented towards Iran - appear to have been forcibly closed by the state following the mid-November 2014 arrests, Akramoglu told Forum 18. "When we came out we saw that the locks on all the mosques' doors had been broken and new locks installed," he quoted the released detainee as declaring.

Nakhichevan city's Turkish-built Sunni Juma Mosque was closed in February 2011 after the enforced departure of its Turkish imam (see F18News 13 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1570). The Mosque was closed for about a year and when it reopened in early 2012 it was under the control of an officially-backed Shia imam, both Nasibova and Akramoglu separately told Forum 18.

Akramoglu told Forum 18 that many imams who had studied in Iran have since 2005 been removed from their posts, and the state no longer appoints imams who have studied in Iran.

In the rest of Azerbaijan the state continues to forcibly close Sunni mosques, and to prosecute Muslims for the "illegal" exercise of freedom of religion or belief (see eg. F18News 1 December 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2019).

Mass arrests, beatings

Nakhichevan's police and National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police raided many homes in mid-November 2014, detaining about 200 Muslims, Akramoglu of Radio Free Europe and a Baku-based Muslim who did not wish to be identified for fear of state reprisals both told Forum 18. Arrests began in Sharur District in the north of the exclave before spreading to other Districts, Akramoglu said.

Akramoglu, a Nakhichevan native who was deported from the exclave in 2011, quoted several of the freed Muslim detainees as stating that they were tortured in detention. Nakhichevan's Interior Minister Ahmad Ahmadov personally beat some of the detainees, Akramoglu noted. Some of those freed had fled to Baku or to Turkey, he added.

The telephone of Nakhichevan Interior Minister Ahmadov went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 3 and 4 December. His deputy Qulu Rustamov put the phone down on 4 December as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Officials at Nakhichevan's Interior Ministry (which oversees the police) repeatedly put the phone down on 3 December as soon as Forum 18 asked about the arrests.

Similarly, no official at the office of Nakhichevan's Human Rights Ombudsperson Ulkar Bayramova, who reports to the exclave's Parliament, was prepared to explain what action if any she might have taken to defend the rights of the detained Muslims.

Releases

Within up to 48 hours, up to about half of those detained were reportedly freed. About 60 were freed when the authorities established that they are Sunni Muslims who study the works of Said Nursi, one of their friends told Forum 18 from Baku on 26 November. In the past, Sunni Muslims who study Nursi's works have been the authorities' targets (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1447).

"My friends were not maltreated in custody, not beaten," the Baku-based Muslim told Forum 18. "But they were very hungry – they hadn't been given anything to eat while they were held."

Akramoglu similarly noted that individuals identified as Sunni rather than Shia Muslims were soon freed.

One man who requested not to be identified for fear of state retaliation told Akramoglu that when he was freed, he and others were told that if they attended mosque in future they would be arrested again.

Sunni Muslims were in 2010 told not to attend a Sunni mosque (see F18News 20 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1447). Since 2011 the only permitted mosques have been Shia Muslim (see F18News 13 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1570).

How many still held?

While many were soon freed – including all the known Muslims who study Nursi's works - about 50 Muslims were thought today (4 December) to be still held, Akramoglu told Forum 18. He said some of them appear to have been tried in court, but most are held without any due process.

Formal state controls

The laws that restrict freedom of religion or belief in Nakhichevan are almost the same as in the rest of Azerbaijan (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690).

In Nakhichevan some extra formal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief have also been introduced. In a 29 November 2014 interview with Nakhichevan's official newspaper "Sharq qapisi" (Eastern Gate), the Head of Nakhichevan's Department for Work with Religious Organisations Vuqar Babayev outlined the state's formal controls over exercising freedom of religion or belief. He noted the requirement that – as in the rest of Azerbaijan - mosques and their imams must have state permission to operate. Also, all religious literature imported into Nakhichevan (wherever it is from) must be censored in advance by his Department, he stated.

Babayev also stated that all imams must wear a prescribed uniform. He said two sets of such a uniform and pairs of shoes had been issued to each state-appointed imam. No such uniform is required for imams in the rest of Azerbaijan, Forum 18 notes.

In the interview Babayev insisted that the Nakhichevan authorities were taking action against "radical religious sects" (presumably among the Muslim community). However, he did not identify them.

Unlike in the rest of Azerbaijan, in Nakhichevan policy on freedom of religion or belief is enacted by the Department for Work with Religious Organisations. This is under the Nakhichevan authorities, not the central State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in Azerbaijan's capital Baku. Babayev was appointed head of Nakhichevan's Department on 1 July 2013 by a decree from Vasif Talibov, the Chair of Nakhichevan's Supreme Council since 1995 and the exclave's de facto ruler.

Under a 20 August 2014 Decree, a new Multiculturalism and Religious Affairs Committee was established with branches in each District of Nakhichevan. Promoting religion "in the right direction", controlling public rituals, especially funerals, and countering "religious sects" (presumably within the Muslim community) appear to be key tasks, according to a 20 September interview in "Sharq qapisi" with Committee Head Mirhashim Seyidov. He claimed that Nakhichevan has 209 mosques and 638 registered imams. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1690.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>.

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.

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482.

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