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TAJIKISTAN: Continued state "total control" of Islam

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Mosque demolitions, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, a ban on state employees at Friday prayers, youth activists to prevent prayers not in Hanafi or Ismaili tradition continue state moves aiming to "establish total control of Muslim activity", human rights defenders told Forum 18 from Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's authorities are tightening the already strict control of Muslims who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 notes. The authorities have installed surveillance cameras in mosques in recent years and are beginning to install metal detectors. The latest state moves aim to "establish total control of Muslim activity" in the country, human rights defenders and independent experts on religious affairs told Forum 18.

While all religious communities remain under tight state control and surveillance, the Muslim community is subjected to special controls. The state imposes Sunni Hanafi Islam as almost the only permitted form of Islam (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). The one limited exception is for followers of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, who live mainly in Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Republic in eastern Tajikistan.

The authorities have already demolished or closed down hundreds of prayer rooms and mosques in the capital Dushanbe, and seem set to continue to do so (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). Interior Minister Lieutenant General Ramazon Khamro Rahimzoda told a 25 January press conference that about 900 out of an estimated 1,500 prayer rooms and mosques in the city had been closed down.

At an Interior Ministry round table on 3 March, Minister Rahimzoda told participants that groups of young activists will work in mosques as volunteers and, in cooperation with law-enforcement agencies, will help catch "extremists", as well as those who do not pray according to Hanafi or Ismaili traditions.

Sadullo Karimzoda, Chief of the Legal Department of Dushanbe City Administration, dismissed concerns about the installation of surveillance cameras in the city's mosques. He told Forum 18 on 26 April that the authorities have been installing them at least for the last three years. He refused to explain why metal detectors are needed.

In 2015 the authorities banned state employees from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). One official denied the ban to Forum 18. Others refused to say who ordered such a ban and why.

Police routinely crack down on men with beards and women wearing the hijab headscarf (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). Okil Sharipov was arrested in Isfara in Sogd Region for filming Police harassment in February of a group of women who wore hijabs. He is in prison awaiting possible trial under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media") (see F18News 26 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2172).

President Emomali Rahmon has ruled the country since 1992 and his rule has been marked by multiple human rights violations, little sign of the rule of law, and hostility to democracy including electoral fraud. His People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the lower house of parliament, while the now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) has no deputies. The IRP was Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party. Secular civil society organisations, even those not working on political or human rights issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections. (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

"Total control"

Saodat Olimova of the independent Sharq (Orient) Religious Studies Centre in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 26 April that the ban on officials attending Friday prayers came "because the authorities want to liquidate all the outward expression of religion in the

country".

Independent human rights defender Rustam Gulov told Forum 18 from Khujand in the northern Sogd Region on 3 May that Muslims are being "directed to fewer, bigger mosques in cities, where cameras will track their activity and volunteer civilians will help the law-enforcement agencies to catch alleged extremists who do not pray according to the Hanafi Islamic school. This is total control."

"With the help of the cameras in mosques, the authorities can also track men who wear long beards, women who wear hijabs, those under 18 or government officials who attend prayers," Gulov added.

Gulov and Muzafar Olimov, an expert of Sharq Research Centre, separately told Forum 18 that they have seen notices at the entrances of mosques warning that attendees can pray in them only according to Hanafi rules (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). Olimov said he had seen such signs in Dushanbe, while Gulov said he had seen them in Dushanbe as well as various cities in Sogd Region, including Khujand and Isfara. Both described this to Forum 18 as "discrimination".

"I understand the authorities may want to catch those who pray differently or propagate ideas of Islam different from the Hanafi school, or even those who are extremists, but to put a notice like that on the mosques is not normal based on Sharia Law," Olimov told Forum 18 on 4 May. "If this was right then adherents of various Islamic schools should not go together on the Haj pilgrimage [to Mecca]."

"All the mosques officially allowed to function preach and teach based on the Hanafi or Ismaili school," human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18. "This is discrimination against thousands of Muslims who adhere to a variety of Muslim schools."

Ismaili Muslims in Badakhshan pray only in homes, an Ismaili Muslim told Forum 18 from the region on 6 May. He said all the mosques there are Hanafi Sunni. The Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe is the only place where Ismailis can meet publicly to exercise freedom of religion or belief together, he added.

Why closures and demolitions of Dushanbe prayer rooms?

"The authorities only close down prayer rooms which do not have proper legal paperwork and do not correspond to the general architecture of the city," Karimzoda of Dushanbe City Administration insisted to Forum 18. He refused to give the exact number of closed prayer rooms or mosques (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). He also refused to comment on whether this is not a violation of Muslims' freedom of religion or belief, and then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Olimova of Sharq Research Centre explained that in earlier years people, using their religious freedom, built and opened numerous prayer rooms in residential areas, often without properly legalising the buildings (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138). "Later on some of them were able to receive registration, but many could not," she told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 26 April. "Now is a good opportunity for the authorities to close them down, citing legal justification. But this is against the religious rights of people guaranteed by the Constitution."

Young activists to catch those who do not pray Hanafi or Ismaili style

The Interior Ministry announced on 3 March that "from now on groups of young activists will work in mosques". The announcement came at a round table arranged by Interior Minister Rahimzoda that day, and reported on the Interior Ministry website the same day (seen by Forum 18 on 20 April and later).

Participants of the round table - who included scholars, Imam-hatyps of mosques, the state-sponsored Muslim Board, leaders of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA), as well as officers of the law-enforcement agencies - discussed the "reasons of the young people's involvement in extremist parties and movements", the Interior Ministry website noted.

"The purpose of the event is to prevent youth from getting involved in illegal parties and movements, explanation of the true meaning of the religion of Islam," the Interior Ministry said. A proposal was made to create groups of young activists, "members of which will explain to the population the essence of the religion of Islam, the hadith [sayings attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammad], and the prophets".

"These groups in cooperation with the law-enforcement agencies will help prevent youth from joining various extremist organisations, and will help detain those individuals who sow discord among the population and go against the state and national values."

On 25 January, the Interior Ministry reported that a group of young activists named "Avant-garde" helped to reveal 21 cases of "illegally" teaching religion.

However, on 5 March independent news agency Avesta.tj, citing the Ministry website, reported that "young Tajiks are asking [the authorities] to help create a special youth taskforce to train the population how to pray according to the Hanafi Muslim school."

The news agency cited the Ministry as declaring that 400 young people who pray the namaz made a proposal at the round table "to create a special youth group to cooperate with the law-enforcement agencies. Whenever the special group detects people who ignore the rules of praying according to the Hanafi or Ismaili school and disturb the prayers of mosque members, they can, in cooperation with the law-enforcement organs, stop those individuals or pass the information about them to the organs."

It reported the Ministry as identifying the extremist movements as the Muslim movements of Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat, Ansorulloh, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir and others (not specified). The Salafi school of thought and Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement have been banned, even though no crimes have been connected with them (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

(Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international political movement vowing to re-establish a single Islamic state, or caliphate, and claiming to be entirely peaceful. However, Forum 18 notes Hizb-ut-Tahir's denial of key human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, and that Hizb ut-Tahir has called for Jews to be murdered. Hizb ut-Tahrir's Draft Constitution prescribes execution for Muslims who change their faith, along with serious restrictions on other human rights (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

The Interior Ministry noted that round table participants included SCRA Head Sulaymon Davlatzoda, Chief Mufti Saidmukorrom Abdukodirzoda, Professor Abdurakhim Karimov of the Islamic Institute, and state-backed Muslim leaders Mirzo Ibronov, Makhmadullo Sharifzoda and Haji Ismoil Pirmuhammadzoda.

Interior Ministry, SCRA refuse comment on young activists

Interior Ministry Press Secretary Sadridin Jaloliddinov refused to say why the Ministry arranged the round table, and why the authorities planned to use young people to catch alleged extremists in the mosques. "Please talk to those higher in command in the Ministry," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 April.

The Interior Ministry duty official (who did not give his name) referred Forum 18 on 21 April to Minister Rahimzoda's office.

The official who answered the phone at the Minister's office the same day, who gave his name only as Karim and refused to give his last name, refused to say why the Police use young people to catch so-called extremists or why cameras and metal detectors are being installed in Dushanbe's mosques. "These are the kind of questions which cannot be discussed over the phone," he responded. "Please send us a letter."

Asked what the new group of activists mentioned at the round table of the Interior Ministry is, and what their duties will be, Davlatzoda of the SCRA similarly did not answer. He also did not say what will happen to those Muslims caught by the activists and detained by the Police who are not extremists, but pray in a manner which is not Hanafi or Ismaili. "Please, send those questions in writing," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 April.

Who are young activists, how they will be selected?

Olimov of the Sharq Research Centre said that Tajikistan had some experience during the Soviet times when people cooperated with the law-enforcement agencies. "But I don't how exactly they will select these young people," he told Forum 18.

"I understand that the authorities with the help of the cameras and the volunteers want to catch those who pray differently or who propagate their own teachings of Islam in the Mosques," Olimov added. "But using young people to catch extremists is not the right approach. How can these young people know or decide who is an extremist?"

Gulov told Forum 18 that it "may be not only young but also older people" that the authorities will use. "And it seems like a continuation of the system during Soviet times when people spied for the government for money, for future career or under pressure."

Metal detectors and cameras "to identify potential extremists"

The authorities "plan to install metal detectors and surveillance cameras in more than 70 mosques in the capital Dushanbe over government fears of extremist attacks," a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Agence France Press on 29 March. It reported that the "measure was to track the contingent praying at the mosque and identify among believers potential extremists". The official said that the "equipment will be installed at the expense of the mosques and their congregations".

Karimzoda, Chief of the Legal Department of Dushanbe City Administration, told Forum 18 on 26 April that "this is nothing new, and cameras began being installed in mosques three or four years ago." However, he insisted that "this is not for tracking people, but

just generally for the security of mosque attendees". He did not answer why metal detectors are needed.

Who issued ban on state employees at Friday prayers and why?

In 2015 the central authorities banned state employees from attending prayers and sermons on Fridays, which traditionally are conducted between 12.00 noon and 13.20 during the lunch break. However, it is not clear whether this is an officially written or unpublished order as well as when exactly this ban was put in place (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

Olimova of the Sharq Research Centre told Forum 18 that already in January 2015, at a conference at the Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe where religious issues were discussed, "official statements were made that state employees must not attend Friday prayers since they take place during official work hours".

Olimov added that "in recent months I have noticed that the number of state employees attending Friday prayers fell drastically. A few still attend, but they do so strictly during the lunch break."

Odinashoh Valizoda, Chief of the Presidential Administration's Section for Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals, on 5 May refused to answer who ordered state employees not to attend Friday prayers and why. "I will give you no comments," he said, and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing through the Foreign Ministry.

Asked who or which agency banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques and why, Azizullo Mirzozoda, Deputy Head of the SCRA, declined to say. "I am not competent in those issues, and I cannot answer you." He referred Forum 18 to Jumokhon Giyosov, the SCRA's First Deputy Head. However, Giyosov's phones went unanswered on 5 May.

Nazrullo Muhammadyusuf, Chief Religious Affairs Official of Dushanbe City Administration, adamantly denied the ban. "There is no such ban," he told Forum 18 on 5 May. When Forum 18 insisted, asking him to declare that state employees are therefore allowed to attend Friday prayers freely, he responded: "I cannot say that."

Asked which state agency had issued the ban or order that state employees must not attend Friday prayers, Muhammadyusuf did not answer. (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=2138.

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://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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