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TAJIKISTAN: "Extremism" prison term for Christian books?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

The NSC secret police in Khujand arrested Protestant pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov on 10 April after raiding his church and seizing Christian literature. Officials claim songbooks and a book "More Than a Carpenter" are "extremist". The pastor is being investigated on "extremism" criminal charges.

On 10 April the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police in Tajikistan's northern Sogd Region arrested Bakhrom Kholmatov, Pastor of the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in the regional capital Khujand. He remains in NSC secret police custody, apparently under investigation on criminal charges of "extremism". The charges follow the seizure of Christian books during a raid on his Church.

"Pastor Kholmatov's family and Church members don't know what the NSC secret police is doing with him," Protestants from Sogd Region who are closely following the situation and who, for fear of state reprisals, asked not to give their names, complained to Forum 18 on 20 April. They said they have had no news of Pastor Kholmatov's physical conditions or state of health since his arrest.

Reached on 28 April, the duty officer at the NSC secret police in the capital Dushanbe refused to transfer Forum 18's call to anyone. He consulted a colleague, then gave another number, which turned out to be that of a pharmacy (which said it often receives calls from people given the number by various state agencies). Called back, the NSC duty officer again said he would consult a colleague, then came back and told Forum 18 it had called a wrong number. He then put the phone down.

The Deputy Head of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Dushanbe, Khuseyn Shokirov, refused to explain why Pastor Kholmatov is under arrest accused of "extremism" (see below).

The NSC secret police, together with the State Committee for Religious Affairs and other law-enforcement agencies, began raiding Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations in Sogd Region in early February. Officials closed down the congregation in the town of Konibodom in March after interrogating and beating church members. NSC secret police officers arrested Pastor Kholmatov after they raided the Khujand Church in April (see below).

Meanwhile, officials in Dushanbe have closed down two kindergartens. One was closed after officials found a Christian songbook, the other apparently because Protestants were employed there (see below).

"Extremism" punishments

Officials have not revealed what criminal charges Pastor Kholmatov will or might face. The Criminal Code punishes a number of crimes related to "extremism".

Criminal Code Article 307-2 punishes "leading or organising an extremist community". Punishments are prison terms of up to 12 years (if conducted by an individual using their official position). The Article allows an individual to be freed from punishment if they voluntarily agree to stop their activity. This Article was among several related to "extremism" added to the Criminal Code in December 2015.

As elsewhere in the region, the Tajik authorities frequently use "extremism"-related charges to punish individuals for exercising freedom of religion or belief outside the framework of religious communities that the state allows to operate. Such charges are mainly levelled against Muslims.

In April 2016, a court in Sogd Region handed down an eight year prison term to Imam Khamid Karimov, the leader of the Mosque in Unji-Bobojon village. The Judge handed down seven year prison terms to each of four members of his Mosque. These - and many other Muslims, especially those accused of being Salafis - were imprisoned using Criminal Code "extremism" punishments (see F18News 19 May 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2180>).

Harsh state restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief

In defiance of its international human rights obligations, Tajikistan severely restricts rights to freedom of religion or belief. The authorities impose a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Interrogations, beatings to close church

Sunmin Sunbogym Protestant Church in Khujand was officially registered with the State Committee for Religious Affairs in 1993 as a "missionary centre" (Forum 18 has seen the certificate). After the new Religion Law entered into force in 2009, when all registered religious communities were required to re-register to continue to be allowed to exist, the Church was re-registered on 23 October 2009. Its affiliated congregations gained local registration.

In early February 2017, the NSC secret police, together with the State Committee for Religious Affairs and other law-enforcement agencies, began raiding Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations in Sogd Region. They particularly targeted the church in the town of Konibodom.

The authorities "put all kinds of pressure on the Church leaders and members so that they would cooperate with the Police for the closure of the Church in Konibodom," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "Officers insulted the believers by shouting and swearing at them. They demanded that they renounce their faith and leave the Church." The Protestants lamented that "some believers were even beaten." Finally in March the authorities sealed the church building, they added.

The Protestants added that some members of the Konibodom Church were dismissed from their jobs under NSC secret police pressure. For fear of state reprisals, they declined to give the names or the details of the dismissals.

Asked why officials had forcibly closed down the Konibodom Church, Khuseyn Shokirov, Deputy Head of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Dushanbe, overseeing work with religious organisations, insisted to Forum 18 on 26 April: "The Church was closed down because its members wished so, and it is their internal matter." He gave no evidence for his claim.

Why is Pastor being charged with "extremism"?

In early April the authorities began raids on the central Sunmin Sunbogym Church in Khujand. They searched all the Church's premises, Protestants told Forum 18. Officers seized Christian songbooks and other literature.

As in Konibodom, the law-enforcement officers in Khujand "interrogated believers and beat them." They complained that the authorities "threatened them that they must cooperate with them." NSC officers arrested Pastor Kholmatov after these raids.

NSC secret police told Church members during interrogations that their "purpose is to close down Churches in Tajikistan and take away their property," Protestants told Forum 18.

Lieutenant Colonel Mashraf Istamzoda, Chief of Sogd Regional Criminal Police, and Amis Usmanov, Chief of the Region's Organised Crime Police, said that the Police are not involved in Pastor Kholmatov's case. Istamzoda told Forum 18 from Khujand on 26 April that the NSC secret police "usually leads such cases".

The NSC secret police "could not find anything illegal" in the activity of Sunmin Sunbogym Church, Protestants from Sogd told Forum 18. Officers then decided to use the Church's Christian hymns from a songbook and Christian books against the Pastor.

The NSC secret police asserts that the songs "Praise God, oh the godless country," "God's army is marching," "Our fight is not against flesh and blood," are "extremist". Protestants pointed out that the words of these songs are references to texts of the Bible. Officers told Church members during interrogations that these songs are "extremist and call on the people to overthrow the government".

The NSC secret police also deemed one book they had found, "More Than a Carpenter" by American Protestant author Josh McDowell, "extremist". Officers told Church members that the group of religious "experts" concluded that both this book, and the songs, are "extremist".

"All these so called experts are Imams," Protestants complained. "How can Muslim experts give an opinion of Christian literature as extremist?"

"Experts" on religious literature of the State Committee in Dushanbe, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov and Alinazar Aliyev, told Forum 18 on 25 April that "no list" of banned Christian books exists in Tajikistan. "We undertake an expert analysis of each Christian book and then make our decision whether or not it can be allowed for import or distribution," Mavlanov told Forum 18. The two officials did not discuss state censorship of religious literature of other faiths, including Islamic literature.

Asked whether McDowell's book "More Than a Carpenter" is allowed for distribution in Tajikistan, both "Experts" gave similar answers: "I am not sure." Mavlanov asked Forum 18 to call back the next day, 26 April. The telephones of Mavlanov and Aliyev went unanswered between 26 and 27 April.

Told that according to the State Committee "Experts" no Christian books are banned in Tajikistan, State Committee Deputy Head Shokirov refused to discuss this or any further questions and put the phone down.

All religious literature must undergo state censorship before it can be printed, published, distributed, sold or imported. Those who violate these censorship provisions are liable to punishment (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Dushanbe kindergartens closed for Christian songbook, employing Protestants

Meanwhile, authorities in Dushanbe closed down two kindergartens where Protestant Christians were employed, Protestants from Dushanbe, who asked not to give their names or details of the closures for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 20 April. "In one kindergarten the authorities found a songbook of Christmas carols during a raid," they explained. "The other one was closed down just because they found that Christians worked in it."

The authorities have particularly targeted any educational activity related or perceived to be related to religion. Officials finally closed the country's last surviving state-approved madrasahs (Islamic religious schools for children) in 2016 (see F18News 6 September 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2213>). (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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