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AZERBAIJAN: Muslim fired for rejecting forcible mosque take-over

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two weeks after police forcibly occupied Baku's historic Juma Mosque and handed it over to a new imposed leadership, one of the mosque community has been fired from his hospital job for refusing to accept the new leadership. Zeynal A. signed a statement that he was voluntarily resigning as "he was threatened that if he did not sign he would face more serious problems and he now fears further persecution," Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the imam removed by the authorities, told Forum 18 News Service. The authorities have long disliked imam Ibrahimoglu for his defence of the religious freedom of both Christians and Muslims. In a related move yesterday (21 July), the Supreme Court upheld the stripping of registration from a charity run by Ibrahimoglu, Islam-Ittihad. The head of the Baptist Union in Azerbaijan, Ilya Zenchenko, said that for the past three years the Justice Ministry has refused to register human rights organisations and expressed his support for the Juma Mosque community. "All who sincerely follow God in Azerbaijan are persecuted," he told Forum 18.

Two weeks after police raided the historic Juma (Friday) Mosque in the Old City of the capital Baku and expelled the imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev and the community (see F18News 7 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=357), a member of the mosque community who continued to support the ousted imam has been sacked from his job at Baku's Interior Ministry hospital. Zeynal A., who has asked that his full name be withheld, was sacked by the hospital director in mid-July, Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18 News Service from Baku on 22 July, but was pressured into signing a statement that he was resigning voluntarily. "He was threatened that if he did not sign he would face more serious problems and he now fears further persecution," Ibrahimoglu reported. In a further move against the imam and his followers, on 21 July the Supreme Court upheld the stripping of registration from a charity run by Ibrahimoglu, Islam-Ittihad. "This is the end of the road for our appeal against this in Azerbaijan," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. "We will now take this case also to the European Court of Human Rights."

Ibrahimoglu reported that Zeynal, a disinfectant worker, was already known at the hospital as a devout Muslim who attended the Juma Mosque. In the wake of the police's forcible seizure of the mosque from the community and its hand-over to new leadership named by the Caucasian Muslim Board, Zeynal's supervisors asked him if he accepted the new imam. "When he said no, that's when his problems began. He is now considering whether to take legal action over the dismissal or not."

Ibrahimoglu said this is the only known case of retaliation against mosque members at their place of work so far. "It was easy for the hospital administration as the Interior Ministry is part of the power structures."

The imam attributes the decision to strip the Islam-Ittihad society of its Justice Ministry registration to the authorities' desire to crush the community that has grown up around the Juma Mosque over the past decade. "They moved against the society less than a month after I and my colleague Azer Ramizoglu spoke at a conference on freedom of religion held by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna last July," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. "This was the first signal of the impending pressure on the community leading to my arrest in December and culminating in the worst possible development, the expulsion of our community from the mosque last month."

The Justice Ministry lodged its case at the Sabail district court, where Judge Alim Namazov ruled on 28 August 2003 to revoke Islam-Ittihad's registration. The society then appealed. After losing the appeal it took the case to the Supreme Court but, in a ten-minute hearing, judge Asad Mirzaliev ruled to uphold the revocation of registration. "They did not explain their decision. We explained the society's position and presented our arguments, but they did not listen to us," the society's lawyer Eldar Sultanov told the Baku paper Yeni Musavat after the hearing. "This was a politically-motivated case," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18.

Islam-Ittihad was noted for its charitable work, including the collection of blood donations, and conferences to promote religious tolerance. "Its members are continuing this work, but without registration we're limited in what we can do," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. He said no money was lost when the registration was revoked as the society had nothing in any bank accounts. Nor was any property taken from the society.

Ibrahimoglu pointed out that the authorities have been systematically obstructing all organisations he and his colleagues have been involved with. Apart from seizing the mosque and closing down Islam-Ittihad, the Justice Ministry persistently refused to register the Azerbaijani chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), of which he is secretary-general, and the

Devamm religious freedom organisation, of which he is leading coordinator. The authorities have long disliked imam Ibrahimoglu, known for his defence of the religious freedom of both Christians and Muslims (see F18News 5 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294).

Another founding member of the Azerbaijani IRLA chapter, Ilya Zenchenko, head of the Baptist Union, said that for the past three years the Justice Ministry has refused to register any human rights organisation. Zenchenko again expressed his support for the Juma Mosque community. "It would be just and right for the community to get back their mosque," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 22 July. "It was built for worship." He said the government is made up of former communist functionaries who now worship money and does not distinguish between Muslims and Christians. "All who sincerely follow God in Azerbaijan are persecuted."

In the wake of the mosque seizure and its transfer to a different Muslim organisation, the Caucasian Muslim Board, the Juma Mosque was closed for "repairs" on 9 July. Eldar Mikailov, deputy head of the Board, told Turan news agency that the Ministry of Culture, the committee to protect historic monuments and the Old City historical and architectural reserve took the decision to close the mosque for the repairs. The mosque has since been fenced off.

Ibrahimoglu complained that the courts have refused to accept his complaint against being manhandled by the police on 30 June while he was leading prayers. His assistant imam, Adil Huseinov, has likewise had his appeal against being violently seized by police when he was leading prayers in the mosque on 4 July returned. "They found bureaucratic excuses not to accept them," Ibrahimoglu told Forum 18. "They want people to get fed up and give up, but we're going to carry on." He said he expected the community's appeal against the decision to take the Juma Mosque from it to be heard by the Supreme Court on 8 August.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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