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RUSSIA: Increasing crackdown on Muslim "extremist" books

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Muslims have complained to Forum 18 News Service of increased scrutiny of their literature, often by "specialists" who know nothing of Islam. Among reasons given for banning an eighteenth century book by the Arabian founder of Wahhabism, a Moscow court ruled in April that it "disputes the truth" of atheism, Sufism and monasticism. After confiscating religious literature from two Muslim communities in the Urals in 2002, officials "didn't find anything which would form the basis of a criminal case - they were prayer books, introductions to Islam and commentaries on the Koran," one leader told Forum 18. Accusations that a Muslim community is "extremist" – and therefore liable for banning under Russia's 2002 extremism law – reportedly often originate from rival Muslim jurisdictions, and are taken up by the FSB secret police and prosecutors. "The law is very frequently used by officials as a convenient instrument for exerting pressure on Muslims," Sheikh Nafigulla Ashirov of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asian Russia told Forum 18.

Russia's Muslim communities report increased scrutiny of their literature as well as charges – often inspired by rival Muslim jurisdictions but taken up by the FSB secret police and public prosecutors – of "extremism". An official warning issued to two Muslim leaders in the Urals region for distributing allegedly "extremist" literature was not an isolated case, complains Sheikh Nafigulla Ashirov, who chairs the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asian Russia to which the two leaders are affiliated. "The law is very frequently used by officials as a convenient instrument for exerting pressure on Muslims," he told Forum 18 News Service in Moscow on 13 September. "They can open a criminal case against any Muslim they like on the basis of it."

In late 2002, Danis Davletov of the Kazyat Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Sverdlovsk Region and Ruslan Nurmametov of its affiliate community in Yekaterinburg, Rakhman, were warned for distributing extremist literature, according to an anonymous "specialist on Wahhabism" at the FSB department for Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) region quoted by regional news website Uralpolit.ru.

The website's May 2003 report also cited Russian general public prosecutor Vladimir Kolesnikov's call for a federal law against "Wahhabism", which he called "an extremist tendency which zombifies young people into declaring jihad" whose proponents "are already preparing suicide bombers... in the Urals area, in western Siberia".

Strictly speaking, Wahhabism is a term for the brand of Islam followed by members of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam which is the official faith in Saudi Arabia, but is commonly used in the former Soviet republics as an all-embracing term for "Islamic extremism". In September 1999, Wahhabism was banned in Russia's southern Dagestan region.

Davletov and Nurmametov were cautioned in accordance with Russia's 2002 federal extremism law, under which a religious or social organisation receives an official warning if "facts should come to light indicating the presence of signs of extremism in its activity". Article 7 of the law declares that if a court does not strike down such a warning and it is not heeded by the organisation concerned, or if similar signs re-appear within a year of its issue, then the organisation is liable to be banned. According to the anonymous FSB official, however, the accusations against the "emissaries of the Wahhabis" in Yekaterinburg failed to result in criminal proceedings.

Nurmametov told Forum 18 in Yekaterinburg on 17 July that public procuracy and FSB officials first conducted a check-up on the identity papers of Rakhman members gathered for prayers at the end of Ramadan 2002. He said they also confiscated various Russian-language Muslim publications, including "The Personality of a Muslim," "The Fortress of a Muslim" and "Programmes for the Study of Sharia Science," returning them to the community only six months later.

Then, in March 2003, Russian television channel NTV reported that the organisers of Rakhman – "a Wahhabite school" – were detained and accused of distributing "hundreds of extremist books" inciting religious and ethnic hatred. While no official state analysis of the confiscated books was conducted, Nurmametov reported, academics from Yekaterinburg's Urals State University provided an evaluation of their contents. "But they didn't find anything which would form the basis of a criminal case - they were prayer books, introductions to Islam and commentaries on the Koran."

After reviewing two of the publications seized, "The Personality of a Muslim" and "The Fortress of a Muslim", purchased at a

Tatar-owned kiosk near Yekaterinburg bus station, Forum 18 ascertained that these two books at least conform to Nurmametov's description.

Crucially to the Muslims' reprieve, Nurmametov told Forum 18, the religious affairs department under Yekaterinburg regional governor Eduard Rossel had assisted them during the controversy. Then an official in that department and now head of the Centre for Open Society non-governmental organisation in Yekaterinburg, Tatyana Tagiyeva confirmed to Forum 18 on 18 July that the Muslims had consulted her about the accusations levelled against them. She maintained that the two religious studies academics who had evaluated the seized books were not experts in the field, Tatyana Rutnyeva being a culture and icon specialist and Vladimir Viktorov a former scientific atheism lecturer.

One of their criticisms, Tagiyeva told Forum 18, was that the literature belittled the national dignity of Christians, "which is rather rich when the New Testament says that there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ". While "belittling national dignity" is defined as a sign of extremist activity in the corresponding federal law of 2002, the use of unsuitable premises for the instruction of religion to minors – another accusation which Tagiyeva recalled – is not. "If that is held to be a sign of extremist activity, then what else can?" she remarked.

Although her department successfully disputed the allegations against the Muslim leaders, Tagiyeva pointed out to Forum 18 that this was still not widely known among lower level officials, so that the official warnings were in practice still valid.

Pointing out to Forum 18 that by the end of the Soviet period Islam in Russia had acquired a single hierarchical structure quite alien to its tradition, Tagiyeva also suggested that accusations of Wahhabism are typically directed against Muslim groups who prefer independence, especially from the Soviet-era successor body, the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims led by Talgat Tadzhuddin.

In this regard, Nurmametov told Forum 18 he had been surprised when a district public prosecutor had suggested to him during questioning that Rakhman transfer to the local Muslim spiritual directorate under Tadzhuddin.

Tagiyeva maintained to Forum 18 that it was the leader of this local directorate, Mufti Sibagatulla Saidulin, who had initiated the allegations of incitement of religious hatred. "Imagine – he goes to a district public prosecutor and the officials there know he's close to the governor, a member of the elite, and he complains about extremism, says that Islamic fighters are being trained right here in the Urals while the world is fighting a war on terror – how is a procuracy employee supposed to react?"

On 13 March 2003 - the same day that the Muslim leaders were reportedly arrested - Urals regional news agency Novy Region cited Mufti Saidulin as saying that "Arab emissaries" were distributing Wahhabi literature in the Urals region and complaining that the struggle against Islamic extremism there was insufficiently active: "It is only on paper, we must move from words to action." Uralpolit.ru similarly quoted the mufti's warning that, if Wahhabis were not stopped immediately, the central Urals region would be on the brink of a real terrorist threat in some five years' time.

Nurmametov insisted to Forum 18 that there was no problem of Islamic radicalism in the Urals, however. "Nor could there be. Any Muslim is afraid of violating the words of the Koran – 'There is no compulsion in religion.' A person who comes down from the mountains and points a gun at someone in the name of Allah doesn't know the essence of Islam."

Sheikh Ashirov also explained to Forum 18 that Islamic books subject to "incompetent analysis" such as those seized in Yekaterinburg are normally Russian translations of books containing verses from the Koran and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed which maintained that Islam was the only true religion: "There are similar bits in the Bible, I'm sure."

In addition to the Yekaterinburg case, he recalled an April 2004 decision by a local Moscow court banning the distribution in Russia of "The Book of Monotheism" by Mohammed ibn Suleiman al-Tamimi (also known as Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab), the eighteenth century founder of Wahhabism. "The expert analysis suggested that the text could incite religious hatred," Ashirov remarked, "but how can you convict on the basis of a suggestion?" Among the reasons for banning the book contained in the court's decision are that it "contains the foundations of the ideology of Wahhabism" and "disputes the truth of ideological trends... such as atheism, Sufism and monasticism... which contradict the true path of the Prophet Mohammed".

Ashirov, however, told Forum 18 that the book was a theological text used by Muslims in all countries for over 150 years. "It follows from the court decision that anyone could be prosecuted for having a copy," he told Forum 18. "So what are we supposed to do with them all? Send them to Kazakhstan or Ukraine where the book is still legal?"

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY