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RUSSIA: Tatar Muslim women fear purge following Said Nursi ban

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

*Following extensive state harassment and a ban imposed by a Moscow court in May on the Russian translation of Said Nursi's book *Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light)*, a group of 50 women in Tatarstan who study the late Turkish theologian's writings on the Koran fear a new crackdown. "We Muslims who read Said Nursi's books are afraid for our lives and the lives of our loved ones," they told Forum 18 News Service. Although no reprisals have occurred since the Moscow ban, they note that television stations have reported that if the appeal against the ban fails anyone reading the banned work will be liable to prosecution. Eduard Ismagilov of the Tatarstan branch of the FSB secret police staunchly denied to Forum 18 the women's allegations of abuse. Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office – who initiated the case that led up to the Moscow ban – also denied that officials used coercion against Nursi followers. However, he told Forum 18 they are dangerous "because their literature harms people's health" and "because they lure children into their activity".*

"We Muslims who read Said Nursi's books are afraid for our lives and the lives of our loved ones," a group of women claiming to be hounded by the law enforcement agencies in the traditionally Muslim republic of Tatarstan for studying the moderate Turkish theologian have told Forum 18 News Service. "We do not feel safe at home, at work or on the streets." The public relations officer for the Tatarstan branch of the FSB secret police on 11 July staunchly denied their allegations of abuse, however. "In our work we exclusively follow the Criminal Procedural Code, which doesn't provide for any type of duress," Eduard Ismagilov told Forum 18 from Kazan.

Valeri Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office similarly insisted to Forum 18 on 11 July that the republic's state representatives have used neither coercion nor force against Nursi followers.

Moscow's Koptevo District Court banned as extremist the Russian translation of *Risale-i Nur (Messages of Light)*, Said Nursi's fourteen-part commentary on the Koran and Islam more broadly, on 21 May 2007. If an appeal - expected to be heard in August - fails, anyone popularising contents of the work could be imprisoned for up to five years under Article 282 of the Criminal Code (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

The Moscow-based lawyer fighting the ban, Sergei Sychev, has told Forum 18 he fears it will first spark a Soviet-style crackdown on Nursi followers in Tatarstan, "where it already smells like 1937".

So far there have been no reprisals in Tatarstan, according to one of 50 women who form a study group centred on Nursi's works in the town of Naberezhnyye Chelny. "Although local television reports of the court decision left no doubt that Nursi's books are terrorist, and that whoever reads them would be liable to criminal prosecution," Alsu Khusayenova told Forum 18 on 4 July.

Events in the Volga republic over the past two years – as documented by the women's study group in a recent statement to Forum 18 - give a sinister indication of future state action against Nursi followers should the ban be upheld, however. Nursi followers have been subjected to raids, searches, book confiscations, forced psychiatric evaluations and an attempt to launch a criminal prosecution (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992).

Ismagilov, the public relations officer for Tatarstan FSB, declined to comment to Forum 18 about whether his department is countering the activity of Nursi followers in the republic. While aware that a criminal case had been opened in relation to them and that Moscow's Koptevo District Court had reached a decision concerning them in May, he responded: "I can't say whether we took part or not. It wouldn't be ethical for me to comment as we're not directly involved – it is the public prosecutor's case." By contrast, Ismagilov was prepared to acknowledge FSB involvement in an unrelated case.

Kuzmin of Tatarstan Public Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 that the local state authorities regard Nursi followers as dangerous solely "because their literature harms people's health" and "because they lure children into their activity". He defended earlier action against the women's study group.

While the Naberezhnyye Chelny women's study group is in touch with similar ones across Russia and in Turkey, Khusayenova insisted to Forum 18 that there is no organised Nursi movement, let alone a "Nurdzhular sect" (a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish

for "Nursi followers"). "There are admirers of Nursi's books among ordinary Muslims and that's all, in the same way that there are admirers of Pushkin or Goethe in different countries," she explained. "We do not consider ourselves a group separate from other Muslims." The women regard Ravil Gainutdin, who chairs Russia's Council of Muftis, as their chief mufti.

One of Russia's main Muslim organisations, the Council of Muftis appeared as an interested party in the Koptevo District Court case. Together with Russia's principal Muslim leaders and Ombudsman for Human Rights, it has condemned the ban on Nursi's work (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

The Naberezhnyye Chelny women also insist in their statement that there is nothing extremist in Nursi's works. "When you read them you begin to understand that to judge a person is a sin, to say nothing of violence. We are taught that all power comes from Allah, and that it is hard for people in power, they should be helped in their difficult task, i.e. we should pray for them," they write. "We are taught to vote conscientiously in elections (..) and that we will be answerable for the actions of the person we elect before the Almighty."

The women's particular interest in Nursi's works, they say, is due to the deeper understanding of the Koran that they foster. "They explain the ayats [verses] of the Koran in accessible, modern language, using examples from recent scientific discoveries, natural phenomena or society. Everything is explained so simply that even the elderly and small children understand these books."

From a Sufi family, Turkish theologian Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. Known particularly for his biting opposition to the social consequences of atheist ideology, he once wrote to the Vatican suggesting that Muslims and Christians should join forces against it. Inevitably at odds with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rigidly secularist regime, Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison. Today, however, his works are freely available in Turkey, where his followers - known in Turkish as "Nurcular" - operate their own foundations and mosques.

Khusayenova suggested to Forum 18 that the Tatarstan authorities are targeting her group because the women are close friends and meet with Nursi readers from other Russian towns and cities. "The works of Said Nursi teach people to think," she concludes, "and thinking people don't get along well with any form of authority." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

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