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RUSSIA: What evidence that banned Islamic books are extremist?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The recently-released Buguruslan City Court decision banning 16 Islamic publications fails to identify which parts of the texts are extremist, Forum 18 News Service has found. The local ruling resulted in the titles being added to the national Federal List of Extremist Materials. Under the Extremism Law, the Criminal Code can be invoked so that anyone carrying out mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of the texts risks a five-year prison term. Handed a list of the titles and asked if any support terrorism, leading Islam specialist Aleksei Malashenko told Forum 18: "If you say this, then every book, including the Bible, may be called pro-terrorist. The problem is not the books, but one of commentary – how they are used." Forum 18 has read one of the banned publications, Muhammad Ali al-Hashimi's "The Personality of a Muslim". The book's sole emphasis is on kindness and generosity, including towards non-Muslims – but a criminal case has now been opened against the head of Moscow Islamic University's publishing department for distributing it. The chairman of Buguruslan City Court has declined to answer Forum 18's questions about his court's ruling.

The full decision by Buguruslan City Court (Orenburg Region) that ruled 16 Islamic publications extremist fails to identify specifically extremist elements in their texts, Forum 18 News Service has found.

As a result of the 6 August 2007 verdict, only recently released, the 16 titles were added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials on 29 December. Under the Extremism Law, mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of the titles can result in Criminal Code Article 282 ("incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred") being invoked. This carries a penalty of up to five years in prison. (see F18News 1 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1080).

Handed a list of the 16 banned publications on 16 July, leading Moscow-based Islam specialist Aleksei Malashenko thought he might have them all. "This is Islamic history and philosophy!" he exclaimed to Forum 18. "It is stupidity to prohibit all these books. If you prohibit the life of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, then you must prohibit all of Lenin's books and articles, immediately!" Asked if any of the titles supports terrorism, Malashenko replied that, "If you say so this, then every book, including the Bible, may be called pro-terrorist. The problem is not the books, but one of commentary – how they are used."

Forum 18 has read one of the banned Islamic publications, Muhammad Ali al-Hashimi's "The Personality of a Muslim". A manual of Koran-based advice on how Muslim men should relate to themselves, their families, neighbours and society, its sole emphasis is on kindness and generosity, including towards non-Muslims. Such an attitude, believes al-Hashimi, will return Muslims – presently "lost in the labyrinths of intolerance" – to the original intentions of Allah (see F18News 1 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1080).

A criminal case was opened on 14 May against Aslambek Ezhayev, the head of Moscow Islamic University's publishing department, for distributing "The Personality of a Muslim", Islam News reported on 14 July. As any district-level court conducts expert literary analysis, "secular life, with its own directives, is impinging upon religious life," Ezhayev complained to the Russian-language Muslim affairs website. "And there's no point in non-Muslims thinking that this only concerns Muslims - when religious and secular approaches collide, everyone has to pay, Christians and Jews too."

Finally published on its website on 11 June, Buguruslan City Court's seven-page ruling does not cite any of the 16 banned texts. The principal grounds given for outlawing "The Personality of a Muslim" and eight other works are that they "contain factors facilitating incitement of hatred between people due to their attitude towards religion," "alter the behavioural reactions in society of people who accept the ideas they propose" and – except for "The Personality of a Muslim" – "alter the personality".

Of the similarly brief and vague criticisms of the remaining seven works, there are only two references to their content. One attributes the formation of "open aggression towards representatives of other philosophical trends" to "the heightened emotionality of the texts, the rhythmic characteristics of the text and semantic structures." The other suggests that aggressive behaviour is stimulated by "the description of an enemy presence, the need to struggle for the sake of ideas and a concrete biographical example of an idealised personality."

These are the conclusions of a 5 June 2006 psycholinguistic expert analysis whose authorship is not given. The results of a similarly

anonymous 27 February 2006 religious studies analysis variously describe nine publications as "on the list of sectarian (Wahhabi-fundamentalist) literature compiled by the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims," "relating to Wahhabism in ideology," "containing elements of Wahhabi understanding not traditional for the majority of Muslims, especially of the Volga Region" and "popularising the official Saudi version of Wahhabism among Russian-speaking Muslims." It does not comment on the remaining seven, including "The Personality of a Muslim".

Buguruslan City Court rules the 16 titles extremist, the verdict states, because it "has no reason to doubt the conclusion of the specialists, who have been warned of criminal responsibility for knowingly providing false information."

The Bashkortostan-based Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Russia, still headed by its Soviet-era leader Talgat Tadzhuddin, published an extensive list of "sectarian (Wahhabi-fundamentalist) literature" on its website on 31 March 2005. The list indeed features several of the publications, but besides unsubstantiated claims that they are "in line with Wahhabi ideology" or written by "ideologists of fundamentalism," there is little detail on their content. The Spiritual Directorate also condemns such "serious doctrinal violations" as erroneous judgements on paganism, worship, appealing to Allah through or on behalf of intermediaries, visiting graves, innovations, Sufism and traditional Islamic schools. "The Personality of a Muslim" does in fact feature on the list, but with no accompanying comment.

The term "Wahhabism" is commonly used to signify a belief in the legitimacy of violence in pursuit of Islamic ideals. The loose way in which it is frequently deployed in both Russia and Central Asia casts doubt upon the soundness of accompanying accusations, however. Formally, it refers to Sheikh al-Wahhab, whose teachings form the religious basis of the present-day kingdom of Saudi Arabia (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

The chairman of Buguruslan City Court, Valeri Naumov, refused Forum 18's late January request for copies of its then unpublished decision and associated expert literary analyses. He also declined to answer questions about the case.

The Court's press secretary, Tatyana Panchikhina, told Forum 18 that experts from the Tatar Encyclopaedia Institute in Kazan (Tatarstan Republic) conducted the two analyses. While employees at the Institute told Forum 18 that they had no idea who was responsible for the psycholinguist analysis, they thought that Rafik Mukhametshin, also rector of Kazan's Russian Islamic University, probably conducted the religious studies assessment.

Also contacted by Forum 18 in late January, Mukhametshin agreed that no one else from the Tatar Encyclopaedia Institute could have conducted the religious studies analysis. Confirming there to be nothing extremist about "The Personality of a Muslim", he stated categorically that he had not provided any formal court assessment, however (see F18News 1 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1080).

Senior Presidential Administration official Aleksei Grishin on 27 June called for a special expert council to fix criteria for the addition of Islamic books to the Federal List of Extremist Materials, Interfax news agency stated. This would prevent court decisions banning Islamic books from raising doubts or "complicating Russia's relations with the Islamic world," he reportedly told a seminar on language, culture and religion at Moscow State Linguistics University.

An FSB security service check-up on Kaluga's main mosque on 14 May sought literature outlawed by Buguruslan City Court, Islam News website reported on 25 June. Local Muslim leader Rinat Salavatov described how the FSB arrived with a list of the banned publications downloaded from the internet and proceeded to make an inventory of books in the mosque's library, including "The Personality of a Muslim".

Responding to public complaints, regional public prosecutor representatives visited Krasnoyarsk's main mosque on 6 June and demanded the removal of an exterior placard proclaiming, "There is no God but Allah! Everything will perish except His face" (Koran 28:88), "Novyye Izvestiya" newspaper reported on 9 June. Local Muslims complied by replacing the placard with, "Neither speak thy prayer aloud, nor speak it in a low tone, but seek a middle course between" (Koran 17:110). Krasnoyarsk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office subsequently failed to find anything unlawful in displaying the original quotation, its representative Yelena Pimonenko told Interfax on 19 June.

Previous legal rulings on alleged Islamic extremism have relied on expert literary analyses which commonly confuse "propaganda of the superiority of citizens holding to a particular religious belief" – defined as extremism by the 2002 Law – with statements claiming the superiority of the religious belief itself. However, the freedom to claim the superiority of a particular belief is a fundamental part of religious freedom (see F18News 20 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=765).

Relying on similarly scant evidence, the latest attempts to outlaw allegedly extremist religious literature concern the Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 14 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1159). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 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>.

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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