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TAJIKISTAN: "Too many mosques" and compulsory "stage music"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following a speech by President Emomali Rakhmonov stating that three suspected Tajik terrorists have been held by the USA in Guantanamo Bay, the operation of a medressah (Islamic educational institute) in northern Tajikistan is being prevented, 152 mosques were closed down, loudspeakers removed from many and 20 per cent of Imams removed from office, Forum 18 News Service has learned. State officials claimed that there were too many mosques. There have also been claims that the authorities compel written confirmation from young couples that they will marry in the "European manner", with music and dancing. This claim has been denied by the local official dealing with religious affairs.

The authorities in the town of Isfara, 100km east of Khudzhand, the principal town in the northern Tajik region of Sogdi, are continuing to prevent the operation of a medressah (Islamic educational institute) in Isfara district, the vice-chairman of the local branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party told Forum 18 News on 28 July. "It is the only medressah in Isfara district," Mukhamadali Abdumalakov remarked. "According to the Tajik law on religion, it is forbidden to teach religion without a graduate certificate from a religious institution. The question arises - who is going to teach people religious doctrine, if the authorities have closed down the only functioning medressah in the district? There have already been cases in which people were fined for teaching religious doctrine illegally."

The authorities closed down the Isfara district medressah last July. In the same month Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov stated in a speech that three suspected terrorists held by the United States at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base came from the Isfara area, and expressed concern about the possible appearance of civil strife in northern Sogdi region motivated by radical Islam .

Control over Muslim religious life in Isfara district was imposed after the president's speech. According to Rakhmonov, at least 33 of Isfara district's 152 mosques were closed down. To justify this, state officials explained that the area had too many mosques, and that some had not been properly registered. The authorities also ordered the removal of over one fifth of the district's imams, who were accused of political activity.

Isfara district is an exceptional area in northern Tajikistan since, as a whole, the population is more devout than in other districts in Sogdi region. Thus, in the Tajik parliamentary elections in 2000, the Islamic Renaissance Party won a large majority in and around Isfara district. In one village, Chorku, the same party gained 93 per cent of the vote.

Although the mosques which were closed are functioning again, said Abdumalakov, the authorities continue to prevent the operation of the medressah. In his view, this is not the only instance in which the authorities are exerting pressure on believers. Approximately a year ago loudspeakers through which the faithful are called to prayer were removed from every mosque in the district apart from the central one, he said. He also maintains that the authorities compel written confirmation from young couples that they will marry in the 'European manner', with music and dancing. "According to the canons of Islam, stage music is unacceptable. But the authorities literally force people to incorporate stage music into their wedding celebrations," said Abdumalakov.

"All the documents necessary for the registration of Isfara medressah have now been collated," Dzhambuluddin Rakhmonov, the official dealing with religious affairs in Isfara district, told Forum 18 on 29 July. According to Rakhmonov, the documents would

soon be sent to the Tajik capital Dushanbe and then, after they had been scrutinised by the Council for Religious Affairs attached to the Tajik government, the medressah would be able to begin functioning. Rakhmonov also claimed that loudspeakers had been removed from only a few mosques. "This was done for the convenience of believers. Calls to prayer were being sounded at different times from different mosques, with a time difference of several minutes. A Muslim is supposed to drop everything when he hears the call to prayer. It turned out that Muslims hardly had any time for their personal affairs due to this lack of co-ordination in the timing of the calls to prayer." Rakhmonov also categorically denied that the authorities interfered in wedding celebrations. "That's nonsense. I have personally attended Muslim weddings where there was no music," he said.

"The repercussions of President Rakhmonov's speech last year continue to be felt to this day," Negmatullo Mirsaidov, editor-in-chief of Tajikistan's Varorud Information Agency commented to Forum 18 in Khudzhand on 30 July. "In Kanabadam district [30km north of Isfara], for example, ten mosques remain closed."

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