

25 May 2010

RUSSIA: Dagestan's Sufi monopoly

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

The authorities in Russia's North Caucasus republic of Dagestan have imposed a near monopoly on Islam by a narrow strand of Sufism, Forum 18 News Service has found. The monopoly – imposed in an effort to counter the local Islamist insurgency - is not absolute, but it dramatically reduces the public space allowed for Muslims who do not wish to subjugate themselves to the one permitted Spiritual Directorate. By reinforcing the perception that only Muslims with legal status under the Spiritual Directorate are legitimate, it has fuelled persecution of other Muslims by law-enforcement agencies, local Muslims told Forum 18. A series of local provisions combine to give the Directorate legal control over Muslim public life in Dagestan, permitting only one umbrella organisation per confession. Local religious communities require the endorsement of this umbrella organisation – in Islam's case, the Directorate - to register. Religious literature and education are particularly restricted, although to varying degrees in practice. However, there are signs that the authorities are considering loosening the Directorate's control.

In their effort to counter the local Islamist insurgency, Dagestan's authorities have imposed a near monopoly on Islam by a narrow strand of Sufism, Forum 18 News Service has found. Although this domination is not absolute, it dramatically reduces the public space allowed for Muslims who do not wish to subjugate themselves to the one permitted Spiritual Directorate. By reinforcing the perception that only Muslims with legal status under the Spiritual Directorate are legitimate, it has also fuelled persecution of other Muslims by law-enforcement agencies, Forum 18 was told.

The state backed those who form the present Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan precisely as "the most resolutely aggressive towards Salafis", believes Shamil Shikhaliyev, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. (Salafis advocate what they regard as a pure form of Islam as practised by the earliest Muslims).

However, far from all Muslims in Dagestan recognise the legitimacy of the Directorate, founded in 1998. While most adhere to Sufism to varying degrees, only four or five of the republic's over 20 sheikhs (Sufi spiritual leaders) actually recognise the Directorate, Shikhaliyev told Forum 18 in the capital Makhachkala on 16 April. Opposition sheikhs – whose attitude towards one another varies from neutral to positive – have authority in some 60 per cent of Dagestan's districts, he estimates. "The Directorate doesn't even represent the majority."

Dagestan - a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia - is highly ethnically diverse. Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority.

Legal monopoly

A series of local provisions combine to give the Directorate legal control over Muslim public life in Dagestan. The republic's January 1998 Religion Law permits only one umbrella organisation per confession (Article 10). Under Dagestan's September 1999 anti-Wahhabi law (see F18News 5 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1440), local religious communities require the endorsement of this umbrella organisation – in Islam's case, the Directorate - in order to register (Article 4). These measures are fully enforced, as the state registers mosques only with the seal of approval of Mufti Akhmed-khadzhi Abdulayev, the leader of the Directorate, its Press Secretary Magomedrasul Omarov confirmed to Forum 18 on 21 April.

Religious literature and education are particularly restricted, although to varying degrees in practice. Under the 1998 Law (Article 21), an umbrella organisation's approval is required for the production, acquisition and distribution of religious literature, audio and video material and other items of religious significance (see F18News 26 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450).

Also under the 1998 Law (Article 9), both religious educational materials and study abroad are subject to approval by the umbrella organisation. Under the 1999 Law (Article 3), anyone teaching religion – even in private – must have the permission of the umbrella organisation (see F18News 2 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1453).

The 1999 Law is aimed particularly at Wahhabism, which it defines only as an "extremist trend". In Dagestan Forum 18 found that

Salafis are informally referred to as Wahhabis regardless of whether they reject violence.

Elsewhere in Russia, Wahhabism is usually understood as the belief in the legitimacy of violence in the pursuit of Islamic ideals. The term derives from the surname of Mohammed ibn Abdul-Wahhab, whose radical 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).

Restrictions defended

Directorate press secretary Magomedrasul Omarov defended his organisation's artificial domination of Islam in Dagestan to Forum 18, explaining that otherwise spiritual directorates founded by ethnicity would lead to "splintering - Muslims form one ummah, after all", and that the authorities would be unable to co-ordinate relations with different directorates, even for Dagestan's major ethnicities. He denied that the Directorate receives financial support from the state, however. "You won't see one mosque built on state funds (..) the state is separate from religion, and they remind us of that very firmly when it comes to giving money."

Omarov also denied that the Directorate was a particularly Sufi institution, insisting that it recognised as Muslims all who revere Allah and the Prophet Mohammed. He estimated there to be just four or five sheikhs in Dagestan, however, laughing that "there are plenty of impostors, of course, but we won't talk about them."

Also defending the restrictions was Rasul Gadzhiyev (no relation to Magomedgadzhi), departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs. Insisting there was nothing in the 1998 Law contradicting Russia's 1997 federal Religion Law (which in fact does not support the provisions outlined above), he stopped short of confirming that non-Directorate Muslims could organise separately, and supported the practice of having a single umbrella organisation per confession. "In not one Islamic country is there a mosque for these or those, for separate groups," he maintained to Forum 18 on 22 April. "It's very dangerous, for one thing. A mosque is a mosque, for all believers without distinction." Gadzhiyev also dismissed the plight of Muslims who did not recognise the Directorate: "It's their problem if they can't speak to their fellow believers in a common language."

Narrow strand

If the current Directorate were more inclusive, the restrictions would prove less significant – but it represents a relatively narrow theological strand within Sufism which a significant portion of Dagestani Muslims criticise or even reject. According to Shikhaliyev, opposition sheikhs have serious doubts about the practices of Directorate sheikhs, such as giving their murids (disciples) photographs of deceased sheikhs and even the Muslim Prophet Mohammed as visual aids in rabita – a Sufi practice in which a murid receives divine light by meditative contact with a particular sheikh and through him a line of sheikhs reaching back to the Prophet. Most Muslims observe a ban on depictions of living beings.

A 2008 publication endorsed by the Directorate and sold in its Makhachkala bookshops, Ali-Khadzhi Saigidguseinov's "Sufism: Foundation and Essence", supports this practice. "It is good to pass photographs and portraits of great scholar-theologians to people who did not see them," it declares. "In truth, grace is contained in their remembrance, just as it is in a meeting with them."

By contrast, Shikhaliyev told Forum 18, many Salafis trust certain opposition sheikhs and attend mosques associated with them. Both groups claim the Directorate wrongly places its particular tariqah (Sufi religious order) above broader Muslim scholarship by citing unprovenanced oral tradition over the Koran and established hadiths (sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed). Shikhaliyev gave the example of a hadith claimed by followers of the Directorate's main Sheikh Said-afandi of Chirkei which states that, on ascending to heaven, the Prophet Mohammed looked down and saw a beautiful green patch of land by the sea. Asking the angel Gabriel what it was, he was purportedly told: "That's Dagestan - there will be many ulema (Muslim scholars) there in the Last Days."

At least publicly, those associated with alternative sheikhs proved reluctant to criticise the Directorate's apparently sole regard for Sheikh Said-afandi, however. "Whether it's him or someone else doesn't bother us," Magomedgadzhi Gadzhiyev, pro-rector of Makhachkala's Imam Shafi'i Islamic University and follower of a line of sheikhs whose present leader is based in northern Cyprus, remarked to Forum 18 on 19 April. "Whether someone goes to Sheikh Said-Afandi or to us is in the hands of Allah."

But if opposition Sufis' concerns are over theological emphasis and the authenticity of Sheikh Said-afandi's succession, for Salafis all involvement with the Directorate is impossible. As well as distrusting its proximity to the state, Salafis Abumuslim and Mogamed Shafiyev made clear to Forum 18 in the southern city of Derbent on 17 April that they completely reject its theology: "Their religion is fairy tales."

By granting only the Directorate legal status and criminalising so-called Wahhabism, the Shafiyevs argue, the authorities encouraged the law enforcement agencies to target even peaceful Salafis. This has, they claim, included pressure to leave Dagestan, detention, torture or even - as the Shafiyevs believe happened to their brother Sirazhudin - abduction and killing (see F18News 4 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1439)

Partial influence

Amid signs that the authorities are now considering loosening the Directorate's grip (see F18News 3 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1454), Forum 18 found its control to be increasingly partial in practice. Abdulmumin Gadzhiyev (no relation to Magomedgadzhi or Rasul), Islamic affairs correspondent with Dagestan's popular independent Russian-language newspaper Chernovik, noted on 15 April that while mosques are officially allotted to the Directorate, over half of some communities are dissenters, "although there is no mosque in Makhachkala where the imam is overtly Salafi and in opposition to the Directorate."

Islamic scholar Shikhaliyev also remarked to Forum 18 that while all mosques are formally on the books of the Directorate, the situation has recently become freer for Salafis. Power has been gradually shifting in mosques - and imams even replaced - in the settlements of Buinaksk, Gubden and Shamkhal.

According to official local government figures, Dagestan has 2,365 mosques as of January 2010, all but 19 of them Sunni. Just 27 operated legally in the latter Soviet period. (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=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287) and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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