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TAJIKISTAN: Creeping implementation of Parental Responsibility Law?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Tajikistan appears to be only implementing against Muslims its new Parental Responsibility Law, which among other restrictions bans people under 18, who are not receiving state-approved religious education, from all religious activity. However, Muslim young people are still attending mosques. Faredun Hodizoda, a Dushanbe-based commentator, told Forum 18 News Service that "religious leaders cannot tell young people not to come to mosques because that would be against Islamic law". So he expected that young people would continue to attend mosques, and so "the authorities will have to punish the believers". Daler Saidmurodov of the Interior Ministry admitted to Forum 18 that there is "tightened control" of mosques on Fridays. But he insisted that the restriction was on schoolchildren attending mosques during school hours, and that police have been ordered to stop this. Meanwhile, the country's mosque closure campaign is continuing and a legally resident Jehovah's Witness has been deported.

Tajikistan appears to be hesitantly implementing its repressive Parental Responsibility Law, whose Article 8 includes the clause: "Parents are obliged (...) not to let children-teenagers participate in the activity of religious organisations, with the exception of those officially enrolled in religious education". However local observers have told Forum 18 News Service that many young people – far more than attend officially registered religious education – are still attending places of worship.

After the Law entered into force on 6 August, officials appeared unsure when asked by Forum 18 how the Law's numerous repressive articles would be implemented. Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) told Forum 18 that he thought that "the authorities will act once Ramadan is over [at the end of August]." (see F18News 16 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1602). On 31 August, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that police stopped people under 18 from entering mosques to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan.

"Religious leaders cannot tell young people not to come to mosques"

Faredun Hodizoda, a Dushanbe-based commentator with a long-standing interest in religious affairs, told Forum 18 on 6 October that he had observed children attending mosques during Ramadan and in September. He observed that "religious leaders cannot tell young people not to come to mosques because that would be against Islamic law". So he expected that young people would continue to attend mosques, and so "the authorities will have to punish the believers". He expected that in some circumstances this might lead to prison sentences against some young people or their parents thought to be violating the Law.

Christians and other minorities have also repeatedly expressed their opposition to the Parental Responsibility Law and how it may be implemented. Religious leaders of all faiths have also opposed an amendment to the Criminal Code passed at the same time punishing organisers of undefined "extremist religious" teaching, as well as an amendment to the Religion Law passed two weeks previously imposing tight restrictions on religious education in Tajikistan and abroad (see F18News 21 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1595).

But so far the authorities appear to have targeted only Muslims in implementing their latest repressive measures. Leaders of several Christian communities, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 5 October that they have not so far faced any obstacles to children attending their worship services. "It looks like the authorities are quiet for the time being," one Protestant commented.

"It's the Law"

Daler Saidmurodov of the Interior Ministry's Press Service claimed to Forum 18 on 6 October that police in the capital Dushanbe have been told to stop schoolchildren from attending mosques during school hours. "It's the Law and - as an executive organ of the state - we must implement it," he told Forum 18 on 6 October. He denied to Forum 18 that the Parental Responsibility Law banned children under 18 throughout Tajikistan, who are not receiving state-approved religious education, from attending places of worship, claiming that "as it says in the Law, schoolchildren are not allowed to attend the mosque during school hours".

Saidmurodov also stated that on Fridays there is "tightened control" of mosques, as more people attend Friday prayers. He declined to comment on whether the Law is good or bad, or what kind of measures will be taken against parents who continue to send their children to mosques.

Other Interior Ministry officials did not answer their telephones on 6 October.

Oleg Kadyrov, assistant to Dushanbe's Mayor Mahmadsaid Uboydullov, told Forum 18 on 6 October that Uboydullov was busy and could not talk to Forum 18. He referred Forum 18 to Shakat Saidov, the Mayor's Spokesperson. However, Saidov's phones went unanswered on 6 October.

Mosque closures continue

Tajikistan also continues to close mosques. Bobokhon Sharbatov, the chief religious affairs official of Khatlon Region, stated that 229 unregistered mosques in the region will soon "change their status and become first-aid stations and sports halls", independent press agency news.tj quoted him as declaring on 20 September. The Region's Jomi District had "transformed 16 unregistered mosques into similar social facilities", the agency reported. "This initiative is being adopted by other Districts in southern Tajikistan."

The official who answered Sharbatov's phone on 6 October told Forum 18 that Sharbatov was busy and not available to talk. He added that it was not in his competence to answer Forum 18's questions. Other phone numbers at the Regional Administration went unanswered on 6 October.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, Deputy Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee, said he is "not aware" of such continuing mosque closures. "I will find out about it, and you can call me later," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 6 October. He did not want to discuss other issues with Forum 18 saying that he was "in a meeting and very busy".

Tajikistan has been carrying out a sustained mosque closure campaign for some years (see eg. F18News 25 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1532).

Independent commentator Hodizoda observed to Forum 18 that many places used as mosques are so-called public places used by local residents for funerals and prayers. It is convenient for people to use them for prayers as they are close to where they live. "The authorities want these places to officially register as mosques," he said, "but it is very difficult to register these places as mosques as the authorities demand 24 different stamps or permissions from different state agencies." He further observed that many leaders of local Muslim communities do not know how to deal with this, so it is easier for the authorities to close them down.

Jehovah's Witness deported

Sherzod Rahimov, a Jehovah's Witness who is an Uzbek citizen was deported to Uzbekistan from Tajikistan on 17 August by the Tajik authorities, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in the country since October 2007 (see F18News 18 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036).

Rahimov was along with other Jehovah's Witnesses detained and fined on 12 August for breaking Article 474 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("carrying out religious activity without state registration or re-registration of the organisation"). He was also accused under Article 499 part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("violation by foreign citizens of the procedure for being in Tajikistan") (see F18News 16 August 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1602).

Rahimov, who is 24, can only walk with the aid of crutches and was beaten and threatened by police officers as he did not want to renounce his faith. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 6 October that Judge Izzatullo Shirinjonov of Dushanbe City Court on 17 August upheld the previous Court decision to fine and deport Rahimov, and "so he was deported on the same day".

As the Tajik border authorities put a "deported" stamp on each page of Rahimov's passport, he now needs a new Uzbek passport.

Phones at the State Border Service of Tajikistan went unanswered on 6 October. Asked the same day why a legally resident person was deported, Olimkhon Shamsov, Head of Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry's Consular Section, told Forum 18 this is "the first time I have run into such a problem". After he took down the details of the deportation, he promised Forum 18 that the Ministry "will look into the matter." (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553.

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 Tajikistan is available at
<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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