

12 November 2003

TAJIKISTAN: Tajik secular not Shariah law prevails in mountainous east

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has found during a visit to Tajikistan's remote and mountainous eastern region that the parts which were governed by compulsory Shariah law during the mid-1990's civil war have now returned to secular Tajik law. Muslims now follow Shariah law only if they choose to do so and the days when local people were forced by armed Tajik opposition groups to pray in mosques are over. Until the year 2000 fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan lived in parts of the region, but they then under pressure crossed into Afghanistan. Forum 18 has also found that in the distinctly Ismaili part of the region there are no Ismaili prayer houses. However, local people do not perceive a need for prayer houses as they can pray at home.

During a week-long visit in early November 2003 to Tajikistan's mountainous eastern regions (the Karategin valley and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in the Pamir mountains), Forum 18 News Service found that the parts of this remote region that were governed by compulsory Shariah law imposed during Tajikistan's civil war of the mid-1990s have now returned to secular law, with believers following Shariah law only at their own choice. The days when fighters forced local people to pray in mosques have gone.

During Tajikistan's bitter civil war, which raged from 1992-6, it was immigrants from this region who supported the Tajik opposition, one branch of which was made up of supporters of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), whose aim is the protection of Muslims' rights.

The region can be divided into two ethno-cultural regions. The Karategin valley and the adjoining western Pamir (Kalaikhumb and Vanch districts) are inhabited by Tajiks who are Sunni Muslims and whose language is connected to the western Iranian group. The other parts of Gorno-Badakhshan are inhabited by Pamir nationalities (Yazgulyam, Shungats, Rushants and Vakhants), who speak languages belonging to the Eastern Iranian language group.

Unlike Sunni Tajiks, the Pamir nationalities (excluding the Yazgulyam people) practice Ismailism - a movement drawn from the Shia branch of Islam, which is strongly influenced by Hinduism and neo-Platonism. Unlike other Muslims, Ismailis pray just three times a day, not five times. Many do not observe the fast of Ramadan. Although Ismailis do not encourage the consumption of alcohol, the ban is not so strictly enforced as it is among Sunni Muslims and traditional Shia Muslims.

Forum 18 found that today the population of Karategin valley, as well as that in Vanch and Kalaikhumb districts in Gorno-Badakhshan region, is in general governed by secular law. For example, criminals are sentenced under Tajik law. Even during the month of Ramadan, alcohol is sold openly in the shops. However, this situation is relatively new to this region. When in 1996 opposition fighters (mujahidin) managed to seize this part of Tajikistan, they tried to govern the population in line with Shariah law, with all decisions of the mujahidin taken at meetings in the mosque.

Moreover, the interpretation of Shariah law by the Tajik mujahidin was the same as that of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. Local residents told Forum 18 that the mujahidin forced them to pray at the mosque five times a day under threat of punishment. When out in public, women were forced to wear scarves covering the whole face except the eyes. The sale of alcohol was strictly forbidden, while in the Karategin valley cigarettes were banned as well. The mujahidin banned music at weddings, except for religious music played on traditional instruments. They also banned women from leaving their home village except when accompanied by their husband or other close male relative.

Interestingly, several punishments devised by the mujahidin did not conform to traditional Shariah standards. Criminals were beaten in the mosques, but not with a stick (as Shariah law dictates), but with the shell of a hand-held grenade launcher. Also, a tank was placed in each village. The accused was put in the tank which was then beaten with a stick. Local people told Forum 18 that often the victim's ear-drums burst after this form of punishment.

However, after the peace agreement reached between the opposition and the Tajik government in 1997, the Shariah laws introduced by the mujahidin were gradually replaced by secular laws. "Although personally I believe that Muslims should live in accordance

with Shariah law, we have to take into account the fact that Tajikistan is a secular state," Mukim Mukhambatov, a former opposition field commander and currently commander of the Vanch border control, told Forum 18 on 6 November in Vanch. He said the move away from Shariah laws took place gradually and was completed around 2001.

Although today secular law is applied in the mountainous regions of Tajikistan, the local population continues to follow Shariah law. For example, virtually all the local people observe the Ramadan fast. A canteen waitress in Vanch complained to Forum 18 that although the district authorities made her work in the daytime, there were no customers at all during the month of Ramadan. In every village there are several mosques (most of them not registered at the government's committee for religious affairs in Dushanbe) where the local children learn Arabic and are taught the Koran.

Up to the year 2000, fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) lived in Karategin valley and in the Vanch district of Gorno-Badakhshan. Fighters from Uzbekistan fought side by side with the Tajik opposition back in 1992. In 1996 one of the leaders of the IMU, Juma Namangani, became first deputy to the most influential field commander of Karategin, Mirzo Zieyev (now Tajikistan's Special Situations Minister). In Jirgatal village the mujahidin seized around 200 blank Tajik passports, which were immediately handed on to Uzbek fighters who filled them in as they chose.

After the terrorist attacks in the Uzbek capital Tashkent in February 1999, when the frightened Uzbek authorities began indiscriminately to arrest religious dissenters, many of whom had no links whatsoever with the armed underground movement, emigration from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan became a mass movement, with whole families fleeing. Gradually a network of close-knit Uzbek families appeared in Karategin. Official circles in Dushanbe even discussed seriously allocating part of the Karategin valley to Uzbek fighters to live in, where a "free Islamic Uzbekistan in exile" would be established. It is worth noting that Namangani married a woman from the village of Jamaak in Vanch district. Military camps also existed alongside civilian Uzbek settlements in Karategin (for example, on the outskirts of Khait village and at the former seismic station near the village of Tajikabad, as well as in the village of Mianada, 70 kilometres east of the district centre, Tavildar).

Interestingly, local people still remember the IMU fighters with great affection, telling Forum 18 that unlike the local fighters, the Uzbeks never robbed or looted and got on very well with the local people. "During the battles in 1996 we seized several soldiers from the government forces and our fighters started mocking them, but Juma Namangani told them not to do that, and explained that under Islamic law you had to treat prisoners humanely," Yurali Muroliev, the former deputy field commander of Yazgulyam Gorge and now deputy chairman of the IRP's Gorno-Badakhshan branch, told Forum 18 on 5 November in Vanch. In May 2000, under pressure from Tashkent, the IMU military camp was closed down and the majority at least of the IMU fighters crossed to Afghanistan.

During the week-long visit to the region, Forum 18 discovered no IMU fighters still present, and all those interviewed declared that no Uzbeks remained in Tajikistan's mountain regions.

The situation in "Ismaili" Gorno-Badakhshan is fundamentally different from that in Karategin valley or the Vanch and Kalaikhumd districts of Gorno-Badakhshan. Unlike the "Sunni" districts of Gorno-Badakhshan, the Pamirs have supported not the IRP, but the democratic section of the Tajik opposition. The Pamirs are much less devout than the Sunni Tajiks and, although up to 1997 this region was also controlled by the opposition, the Pamirs did not try to regulate their lives in line with Shariah law, unlike the neighbouring districts of Tajikistan's mountain regions. Today, there is not one Ismaili mosque on the territory of Gorno-Badakhshan, as the Pamirs regard them as unnecessary. "As far as building Ismaili prayer houses goes, there is simply no need for them," Aligbek Melisbekov, a worker at the Aga Khan's fund, told Forum 18 on 2 November in Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan's capital. "We can pray perfectly well at home."

Yet the religious factor does nevertheless affect the life of Ismaili Pamirs, even if only obliquely. The Ismaili spiritual leader, the Aga Khan IV (Shah Karim Al-Huseini), gives practical aid to Pamir and, until 2000, Gorno-Badakhshan essentially lived on this humanitarian aid. Since then, deliveries to the region from food stores run by the Aga Khan have ceased, but he is still putting significant resources into the development of a social infrastructure in the autonomous region, and also into the local education system.

"At first, the Aga Khan was simply feeding us. Now, he is teaching us what we need so we can feed ourselves," Melisbekov declared. "Thanks to the Aga Khan's money, hospitals, bridges and schools are being built. But they are now being built by Pamirs themselves, who are in this way earning money to support themselves. The Aga Khan attaches great importance to raising the level of education of Pamirs." He said specialists regularly come from abroad to train teachers and businessmen, while a Pamir university will shortly open in Khorog (Khorugh).

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>

and a printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan may be found at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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