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TURKMENISTAN: Why was former chief mufti given long jail term?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Reliable sources in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 News Service that they believe the country's former Sunni Muslim chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was sentenced to a long jail term for his opposition to tight presidential control over the Muslim community. Government prosecutors claimed he was part of an assassination attempt against the president. Although previously known for his obedience, Ibadullah began to oppose the cult of personality around the president by reportedly obstructing the use in mosques of the president's moral code Ruhnama (Book of the Soul). Imams are forced to display this book prominently in mosques and quote approvingly from it in sermons, as are Russian Orthodox priests in their churches. Ibadullah is also believed to have been targeted as an ethnic Uzbek, Forum 18 having noted the government removing ethnic Uzbek imams to replace them with ethnic Turkmens.

Commentators in Turkmenistan have told Forum 18 News Service that they believe the former chief mufti of the country's Sunni Muslim community has been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment for his opposition while in office to the president's tight control over the Muslim community, not for his alleged involvement in an assassination plot against the President in November 2002, as prosecutors claimed. Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, ousted as chief mufti by President Saparmurat Niyazov in January 2003, was sentenced on 2 March to 22 years' imprisonment apparently on treason charges by the court of the Azatlyk district in the capital Ashgabad after a two-day trial. The first five years are to be served in a high security prison. At a similar trial that took place simultaneously, former water resources minister Gurbangeldy Volmuradov received a fifteen-year sentence. Neither sentence has yet been announced in the official media.

Contacted by Forum 18, Judge Nazarov, who reportedly tried the former chief mufti, denied that he had tried Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah and refused to discuss the case further.

The government used the attack on President Niyazov's motorcade as it travelled through Ashgabad on 25 November 2002 to launch an unprecedented wave of arrests on anti-government activists, real and imagined, and to restrict civil liberties even further. Several hundred people were detained in the wake of the attack and some 60 have been sentenced to prison terms, with sentences ranging from twelve years to life, mostly on treason charges. The alleged leader of the plot, former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov, is claimed by the authorities to be in detention after being sentenced to life imprisonment in December 2002, although some believe he may already have died in prison from torture.

In a recently-published book allegedly written by Shikhmuradov while in prison, Nasrullah was mentioned prominently as a key conspirator in the plot. The book alleged that he worked to inform Muslim clerics and members of the ethnic Uzbek community about the coming coup and to get agreement from them to quickly recognise a Shikhmuradov-led government. Given that Shikhmuradov, if he is still alive, is in the hands of the National Security Ministry, it is impossible for Forum 18 to verify whether Shikhmuradov himself has made the claims.

"I have a very hard time believing that Mufti Nasrullah was witting of or complicit in the events of 25 November 2002," one source told Forum 18 in the wake of the trial. The source speculated that the government saw linking him with the November 2002 coup attempt as a convenient way to justify sacking him and provide itself some political cover for having done so.

However, a representative of the Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative, a human rights group now led from outside Turkmenistan, believes Ibadullah's imprisonment is related more to a new wave of government persecution of the country's ethnic Uzbek minority. "Many prominent and respected ethnic Uzbek leaders have been arrested and sentenced," the representative told Forum 18 on 8 March. The representative believed the sentence has not been officially reported to try not to inflame further anti-government sentiment among ethnic Uzbeks.

Ibadullah had a long track-record of obedience to the Soviet authorities (he became kazi of Turkmenistan towards the end of the Soviet period, becoming chief mufti after independence, when Central Asia's governments encouraged Muslim communities to take over their own leadership from the Soviet-era centre in the Uzbek capital Tashkent). He was also loyal to President Niyazov,

becoming head of the government's religious affairs office. When Niyazov set up the Gengeshi (Committee) for Religious Affairs in 1994 to replace the earlier office, Ibadullah became one of the deputy chairmen.

The Turkmenistan Helsinki Initiative representative noted that Ibadullah removed several imams from mosques in the late 1990s – including a leading imam in the north-eastern city of Dashoguz - for refusing to recite the special verses (suras) in praise of the president that imams are supposed to recite during Friday prayers.

Although known for his obedience, commentators point to his known opposition to the president's moves to tighten control over mosques in the later 1990s as the cult of personality around the president increased. As Niyazov's suspicions of ethnic minorities increased, Ibadullah – an ethnic Uzbek from Dashoguz who speaks Turkmen with a heavy Uzbek accent – suffered on ethnic grounds. When Niyazov removed him both as chief mufti and as deputy chairman of the Gengeshi in January 2003 he was replaced by an ethnic Turkmen, Kakageldy Vepaev. In the wake of his sacking, some Muslims complained that this was a further government move to restrict the freedom of the Sunni Muslim community.

One of Ibadullah's key goals was reportedly to obstruct as far as possible the use in mosques of the president's moral code Ruhnama (Book of the Soul), which imams are being forced to display prominently in mosques and quote approvingly in sermons. Some officials have even declared that the Ruhnama is a modern equivalent of the Koran and that President Niyazov, as its alleged author, is a prophet. Likewise, Russian Orthodox priests reportedly received instructions from the end of 2000 to quote from and praise the Ruhnama in sermons.

The anti-Uzbek campaign has also had a direct impact on mosques in north-eastern Turkmenistan, as the government has removed ethnic Uzbek imams and replaced them with ethnic Turkmen (see F18News 4 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=268).

For more background see Forum 18's report on the new religion law at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=180

and Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151

A printer-friendly map of Turkmenistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=turkme>

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