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MACEDONIA: Archbishop to be jailed for 18 months

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

A Serbian Orthodox Archbishop, Jovan (Vranisskovski) of Ohrid, has had an 18 month jail sentence confirmed by a Macedonian appeal court, in the latest development in a long-running government campaign against the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in support of the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church. "It is ridiculous that they are trying to silence me, in this age of the internet and mass communication," Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18 News Service. He noted of government action against SOC believers that "when they hit the shepherd, they expect the sheep to run away, but church history is paradoxical, as, the more the church is persecuted, the more followers it gets." Court officials have claimed to Forum 18 that commenting on the jail sentence is "against the law." Archbishop Jovan was in 2003 jailed for five days in solitary confinement, for baptising his sister's grandchild.

"When they imprison an archbishop of a church in the 21st century - merely for serving his people - what else can you say about the system and the state?" the senior hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, Archbishop Jovan (Zoran Vranisskovski) of Ohrid, commented to Forum 18 News Service from his native town of Bitola in southern Macedonia on 24 June. He was speaking a day after Bitola appeal court confirmed the 18 month prison sentence on charges of "inciting national, racial and religious hatred, schism and intolerance" handed down by a lower Bitola court in August 2004 and upheld by another Bitola court two months later. The archbishop is due to be taken to prison eight days after the court decision.

Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18 that he had not yet seen the verdict, but expected the court to copy the ruling of the lower court. "This ruling is final and any appeal to the Supreme Court will not put off serving the prison sentence. So, as you may expect, I am going to jail after all."

Kite Juzevski, president of Bitola appeal court, confirmed on 24 June that the verdict had been announced the previous day, but declined to discuss it with Forum 18. "That information was given to the local media accredited and present at the press conference in Bitola. We do not give such information by telephone or fax. You should have come if you were interested. We do not have an obligation to inform you or your agency of anything." He added that commenting on the sentence is "against the law". He refused to give the text of the verdict, saying that Forum 18 should get it from "the interested party". Another court official told Forum 18 informally that only the court president is authorised to speak to the press.

Archbishop Jovan recalled that he had been accused of inciting national, racial and religious hatred on three grounds. Firstly, for the content of a small church calendar, secondly for proposing to Serbian Patriarch Pavle two monks, Joakim and Marko, to the rank of bishop, and thirdly for holding a liturgy in an apartment adopted as a sanctuary. "They have no proofs," he insisted. "They did not prove who wrote, published or even printed the calendar, although I stated in court that I agree with every sentence printed in it. As for performing the liturgy, they have no legal ground since Macedonia's constitutional court cancelled the rule that church services have to be reported to the police several years ago."

"It is ridiculous that they are trying to silence me, in this age of the internet and mass communication" Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18. "When they strike the shepherd they expect the sheep to scatter, but church history is paradoxical – the more the church is persecuted, the more followers it gets. They will hold this against me and use it at the most appropriate moment to remove me from the scene."

The confirmation of Archbishop Jovan's jail sentence is the latest move in the long-running campaign of the Macedonian government against the Serbian Orthodox Church in support of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This was stepped up after the Serbian Church in late May granted full autonomy to its branch in Macedonia and elevated Jovan to the rank of Archbishop (see F18News 8 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=579). Jovan has previously been jailed in 2003, when he was given five days' solitary confinement for baptising his sister's grandchild (see F18News 24 July 2003

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=113). Subsequently, on 31 October 2003, he was given a 12-month sentence, suspended for two years, for performing the baptism in a church building belonging to the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church, which was deemed to be violent entry into Macedonian Church property (see F18News 13 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=228).

Belgrade-based B92 radio reported on 24 June that in the wake of the latest ruling, the state can now also activate the suspended sentence of 12 months in jail. This means Archbishop Jovan will serve no less than 30 months in prison.

The roots of the dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Churches lie in the creation of the Macedonian Church in 1958 under heavy pressure from the then-communist government of Marshal Tito. In 1968 the Macedonian Church proclaimed its autocephaly (complete independence) from the Serbian Orthodox Church, but no other canonical Orthodox Church in the world recognises this autocephaly.

During the long-running government campaign it has, among other things, repeatedly refused to give state registration to the Serbian Orthodox Church (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505), staged police raids with priests of the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church to "persuade" members of the Serbian Church in Macedonia to join the Macedonian Church (see F18News 9 February 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=506), and demolished a monastery (see Forum18 News 21 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437) after a paramilitary "state security unit" attacked it with machine guns (see F18News 24 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=259).

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY