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TAJIKISTAN: New moves against Muslims in north

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Local schoolgirls who refuse to attend lessons without a hijab (Islamic headscarf) risk being denied their school-leavers' certificates (as happened to at least 23 last summer), while four imams were removed from local mosques in late December on government orders, human rights activist Islom Pokosov complained to Forum 18 News Service in Khujand in northern Tajikistan. He said policy towards Muslims in his region had grown harsher in the past six months. Local religious affairs official Abduhakim Sharipov admitted the denial of school-leaver's certificates, but insisted to Forum 18 that children had to abide by school uniform regulations. He said the imams had been sacked for teaching in mosques without a licence from the Muslim Spiritual Administration after the Religious Affairs Committee had discovered these "abuses of authority" during check-ups of the region's mosques. Officially, religious communities are separate from the state, so it remains unclear on what basis the Committee conducted the verification and ordered the imams' removal.

Over the past six months, the authorities' policy towards Muslims has become harsher, local human rights activist Islom Pokosov complained to Forum 18 News Service on 27 February in Khujand, the administrative centre of Sugd region in northern Tajikistan. Citing the refusal to allow girls to attend school wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) and the government-ordered removal from the town's mosques of four local imams in late December, Pokosov maintained that this change of policy is being developed on a semi-legal basis and is leading to actual repressive measures taken against Muslims by the authorities.

Pokosov told Forum 18 that at least 23 Muslim schoolgirls in Khujand were unable to receive their school-leavers' certificates last summer because they refused to attend lessons without a hijab and he fears the same could happen to others this year. School directors have refused to allow schoolgirls to attend lessons wearing the hijab, saying this headgear conflicts with a decree from the Education Ministry last autumn introducing a standard school uniform, although the ban seems already to have been enforced before the decree was issued.

Pokosov also reported that the four imam-hatybs were sacked because they had taught at theological colleges in Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the government's Religious Affairs Committee last autumn issued an unwritten order to imam-hatybs banning school children from attending mosques during school hours. Many imams, fearing retribution, have erred on side of caution and have banned school children entirely from their mosques (see F18News 31 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=679).

Abduhakim Sharipov, head of the Sugd regional administration's department for socio-cultural issues and links with public and political organisations, admitted that some schoolgirls had failed to receive their school-leavers' certificate last summer because they had refused to attend lessons without a hijab. "I don't know exactly how many of these students there have been, but it's true that such cases have occurred," he told Forum 18 on 28 February. "There is a standard school uniform and believing parents of schoolgirls should take this into account." At the same time he said he believes school directors should demonstrate "flexibility" and deal with each such case on an individual basis, though he failed to explain what this flexibility should entail.

Sharipov also admitted that four imams who had taught in Saudi Arabia had been sacked from their mosques, but insisted they were dismissed not because they had taught in Saudi Arabia, but because they were preaching Islam without a licence from the Spiritual Administration. "This was established during a check on the activity of mosques in the Sugd region carried out by the Tajik government's Religious Affairs Committee," he told Forum 18. "The Committee wrote a letter about the abuses of authority that had been discovered to Tajikistan's Council of Ulems [scholarly theologians] and the Council in its turn resolved to remove the imams from their posts."

Tajikistan's Constitution and Article 5 of the Religion Law both proclaim that religion is separate from the state, making it hard to see on what legal basis the government's Religious Affairs Committee conducted inspections of mosque activity or wrote "advisory" letters to the Council of Ulems.

However, Article 5 of the Religion Law does require that "people who teach religious beliefs must have permission from the appropriate spiritual administration". However, in 1994 the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Tajikistan was disbanded

because the leaders of this agency had taken an active role in the civil war on the side of the opposition. The government later handed the Administration's former powers to the Council of Ulems, though the Council in practice does the government's bidding (see F18News 16 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=253).

"The Council of Ulems, or theologians, is a purely consultative body and its decisions do not hold any juridical force for other mosques," Ibadulo Kalonzade, imam-hatyb of Khujand's Nur mosque, told Forum 18 in the town on 28 February. He pointed out that similar agencies exist in many Muslim countries. "Essentially, the Council simply presents the view of leading theologians on a social or political issue. Were the Council able to assert its independence from the authorities, then it could become the real defender of believers' rights."

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

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

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