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TAJIKISTAN: Council of Ulems – an instrument of state control

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Some Muslims have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service over the role of the Council of Ulems (theologians), a body close to the authorities which is seeking to exert control over all mosques and is pushing to receive 30 per cent of their income. Although in theory mosques choose their imams who are then confirmed by the Council, in practice the Council names them – and removes those the authorities do not like. One Dushanbe imam told Forum 18 that a month ago two imams who failed to attend a meeting between the mayor and the clergy were forced out. The Council works with the government to approve those allowed to go on the haj to Mecca and issued a controversial fatwa in 2004 (enforced by the police) banning women from mosques. "The Council of Ulems is completely dependent on the authorities and so there is no doubt that it was simply doing what it was told by the government," Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party complained to Forum 18. One Council member rejected all criticisms. "Thanks to our president, Tajik Muslims enjoy full rights," he told Forum 18.

Members of Tajikistan's Muslim community – many of whom spoke on condition of anonymity to protect themselves from repercussions – have complained to Forum 18 News Service over the actions of the Council of Ulems (theologians) and the way it functions as an instrument of state control. They expressed concern that the Council, which is de facto completely dependent on the authorities, aspires to total control over all the country's Muslim communities. The Council's press officer Said Negmatov insisted to Forum 18 on 2 June in the capital Dushanbe that all mosques should be governed by its decisions, adding that all mosques ought to pay it 30 per cent of their income. Negmatov completely supported the state's religious policy.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Muradulo Davlatov, the head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, why the state authorities are using the Council of Ulems to control the Muslim community when the Council is supposed to be an independent body. On 1 June, Davlatov refused to meet Forum 18, claiming that he and all his staff are "too busy" to respond to journalists' questions.

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 (see F18News 16 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=253).

The Council of Ulems, which is made up of 27 clergy members, has sweeping powers over individual Muslim communities, often working hand in glove with the authorities. Formally, individual imams are chosen by congregations, and the candidate they select is approved by the Council. However, in practice the Council of Ulems receives its instructions from the authorities and an unsuitable imam is quickly removed. "Around a month ago two imams failed to attend a meeting between the city's mayor and the Muslim clergy," one Dushanbe Muslim who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18 in early June. "After that, both of them were forced to resign."

The Council of Ulems has ordered imams to read prayers for the health of President Emomali Rahmonov, though so far no punishments are known to have been imposed on those who refuse or fail to do so.

Since 2003 the Council of Ulems and the Religious Affairs Committee have together approved the list of haj pilgrims to Mecca. This is also the case in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Saudi Arabia has given Tajikistan a quota of 6,000 pilgrims. After the Religious Affairs Committee and the Council of Ulems have approved the list of pilgrims - this year 4,000 people were sent on the pilgrimage - the two bodies take the list to Saudi Arabia's embassy in Almaty in Kazakhstan. The pilgrims from Tajikistan are then sent to Mecca in groups travelling on Tajik airlines. Independent journeys to Mecca (by car or by bus) are forbidden.

One of the Council's most controversial moves was its fatwa (religious ruling) issued in 2004 forbidding women from attending mosques. "The Council of Ulems is completely dependent on the authorities and so there is no doubt that it was simply doing what it was told by the government," Hikmatullo Saifullozoda, head of the Islamic Revival Party's Analytical Centre, complained to Forum 18 in Dushanbe on 2 June. "It's interesting that just before the fatwa was announced and for some time afterwards, police units patrolled near the mosques and would not let women near. In fact the president of Tajikistan simply wanted to do this to reduce the level of religiosity among women."

Forum 18 has established that in fact only three mosques are attended by women in Tajikistan. The best known of these is a mosque in the village of Turkobod, on the outskirts of Dushanbe, whose imam, Nuriddin Turajonzoda, is one of the most influential Sufi leaders.

Nuriddin Turajonzoda is the elder brother of Akbar Turajonzoda, Tajikistan's former chief mufti and a former leader of the Tajik opposition. Akbar Turajonzoda himself is one of the most ardent campaigners for the right of women to attend mosques. In 2005 the Tajik publishing house Nodyr published a book he had written entitled "Women's attendance at mosque in shariah and secular law" in which he argued that it does not contradict the Koran or shariah law for women to attend mosques. Turajonzoda also wrote that the decision of the Council of Ulems conflicts with the Tajik constitution which guarantees equality between men and women, and expressed his astonishment that the authorities have not reacted to the fatwa which he believes was issued with complete disregard for the constitution.

Some suspect that the government has been worried by the popularity of Nuriddin Turajonzoda, who is independent of the authorities and the only imam to criticise the authorities' religious policy publicly. On several occasions more people attended his Friday prayers than attended Dushanbe's main mosques. Muslims come to Turkobod not only from all over the country, but also from Uzbekistan. Forum 18 has established that for over a year the authorities have maintained a secret ban on the sale of recordings of Nuriddin Turajonzoda's sermons. Although recordings of his sermons are sold openly in Turkobod's mosque, this is the only place in Tajikistan where these recordings can be freely sold.

As the Council of Ulems' spokesperson, Negmatov failed to accept any criticism voiced by fellow-Muslims of the government's religious policy. Significantly, he declared that the Council of Ulems did not know about the new, highly restrictive draft law on religion, although the Islamic Revival party and many influential Islamic theologians like Akbar Turajonzoda have issued strong criticism of it (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=795).

Negmatov also said that he did not see any problem in denying schoolgirls school-leaving certificates for wearing the hijab Islamic headscarf (see F18News 7 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=739). "Every educational establishment has its own statute. Evidently, the statutes of the educational establishments you mention forbid the wearing of the hijab," he maintained. Negmatov's comments on the fatwa against women attending mosques were equally absurd. "Our mosques are not yet ready to receive women. We do not have any women's toilets or enough space to give women a separate place among the congregation," he claimed. He went on to contradict himself, saying that women attended only Nuriddin Turajonzoda's mosque.

When Forum 18 met a member of the Council of Ulems, the imam-hatyb of the central mosque in Gissar (a suburb of Dushanbe) haji Ismail Muhamadzoda on 6 June, Muhamadzoda started his interview by declaring: "Luckily God has sent us a president like Emomali Rahmonov. Thanks to our president, Tajik Muslims enjoy full rights." It is noteworthy that, not wearing a beard, Muhamadzoda looks like a government official, not like an imam.

Like Negmatov, Muhamadzoda also angrily dismissed criticisms voiced by many local Muslims. Forum 18's request for a comment on the education ministry's ban on wearing the hijab in school and also the issue of relations between the Council of Ulems and Nuriddin Turajonzoda threw Muhamadzoda into a rage. He started shouting: "What has it got to do with you whether schoolgirls wear the hijab or not?!" When Forum 18 terminated the interview and sought to leave, Muhamadzoda stood in the way. "I won't let anyone slander Tajikistan," he shouted.

Muhamadzoda also swore in Tajik at the Tajik cleric who was accompanying Forum 18 and threatened: "You will be summoned to the prosecutor's office soon: they'll deal with you there."

Ibadulo Kalonzade, imam-hatyb of the Nur mosque in the northern town of Khujand, told Forum 18 back in February that the Council is merely a consultative body, pointing out that similar agencies exist in many Muslim countries. He argued, though, that were the Council to end its dependence on the authorities "it could become the real defender of believers' rights" (see F18News 7 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=739). (END)

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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