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KYRGYZSTAN: Imam's killing seen as attack on independent Islam

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Muslims in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan see the killing of an imam, by the Kyrgyz NSS secret police, as an attack on Islam that is independent of the state, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Mohammadrafiq Kamalov was imam of one of the largest mosques in south Kyrgyzstan, and was killed by the NSS in circumstances that remain unclear. "My brother was certainly not a terrorist," Sadykjan Kamalov, former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18. "He was a very influential theologian and had enormous authority among the people of south Kyrgyzstan. I can't yet say exactly what happened. People say that officials from Uzbekistan's National Security Service secret police were taking part in an operation led by Kyrgyzstan's NSS secret police when the tragedy occurred. But so far at least there is no clear proof of this." Mohammadrafiq Kamalov had been accused of membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but he had denied this.

The killing of Mohammadrafiq Kamalov, imam of the As-Sarakhsi mosque is being seen by Muslims in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley as an attack on Islam that is independent of the state, Forum 18 News Service has been told. This view is shared by Muslims in both south Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's section of the devoutly Muslim Fergana Valley.

The As-Sarakhsi mosque is one of the largest mosques in the south of Kyrgyzstan, and Mohammadrafiq Kamalov was killed by the Kyrgyz National Security Service (NSS) secret police on the outskirts of Osh, south Kyrgyzstan's largest city, on 6 August. The mosque is situated in Karasu, an ethnic Uzbek town split in two by the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border some 15 kilometres (9 miles) north-west of Osh. Karasu is known as one of the main centres in Central Asia of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a party - banned in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan - that wants to rule the world under an Islamic caliphate and is known for its virulent anti-Western and antisemitic rhetoric (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 for an outline of its views).

The circumstances of the imam's death remain unclear, with the NSS on 7 August claiming that he was a terrorist shot along with two terrorists and that all three belonged to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. However, on 9 August, the NSS made a statement – quoted on fergana.ru - that "the terrorists had probably taken an influential religious leader hostage with the aim of using him as a human shield and, if he died, using his name to inflame the situation and provoke conflict between Muslims believers and the authorities, the end result being to destabilise the situation in the region".

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Kyrgyzstan has been widely condemned internationally – by for example the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the OSCE, and the European Union - for its co-operation with Uzbekistan, in deporting refugees from the Andijan events back to Uzbekistan. Karasu – where Imam Kamalov's mosque is – was itself caught up in the events surrounding the massacre (see F18News 23 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567). The heads of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek secret police recently discussed co-operation, after the Kyrgyz and Uzbek presidents agreed in late July to fight "international terrorism" and "religious extremism."

No fewer than 5,000 people attended Kamalov's funeral on 7 August, according to the fergana.ru website. During the funeral, supporters of the imam declared him to be "a victim of state terror" and a "shahid." This Islamic term technically means one who died for the faith or a martyr. On 11 August, Kamalov's supporters tried to hold another meeting, calling on the Kyrgyz authorities to conduct an independent investigation into the murder of the imam and punish the perpetrators. Police cordons prevented people from attending the meeting, Forum 18's sources state.

Mohammadrafiq Kamalov had denied being part of Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose members openly attended his mosque along with other Muslims, but this is disputed by some. He himself publicly stated that Hizb ut-Tahrir members were mistaken in their views, but had

the right to come to the mosque. On 24 May this year, Imam Kamalov was detained by officials from the NSS secret police, who claimed to have proof of the imam's connection with the activities of an armed group. However, Kamalov was released within a day at the insistence of his congregation.

"Our officials took no part in the operation during which Kamalov was killed – only NSS officials were involved in it," Zamirbek Sadykov of the Osh Internal Affairs Administration told Forum 18 on 22 August. "Therefore it is hard for me to make any comment on the circumstances of Kamalov's death. All I can say is that there are several versions of what happened."

Forum 18 tried to find out more at the Osh regional NSS office, but without success. The person who answered the telephone at the NSS said that the NSS "did not give information over the telephone."

The authorities in southern Kyrgyzstan have at times been hostile to the wearing of headscarves by Muslims (see F18News 11 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=757). They have also expressed concern about the situation in south Kyrgyzstan, claiming that religious freedom for Christians and other non-Muslim faiths should therefore be restricted (see F18News 12 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=810). (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222 and Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

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

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