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# RUSSIA: Religious dispute fuels state oppression of Kabardino-Balkaria Muslims

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

*Conflict between Muslims in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria led to the local authorities' repressive policy towards one party, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Returning from Islamic study abroad in the 1990s, young Kabardin and Balkars insisted upon the removal of what they learnt to be corrupt local customs. While criticism could centre on trivial details – such as the wearing of a hat during prayer – "you only need to strike a match to light a fire," one local Muslim pointed out to Forum 18. Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate and the older generation responded to the younger Muslims' demands by branding them "Wahhabi" extremists. In part because they saw adherents of stricter Islam as a threat to local traditional and political culture, the republic's authorities backed these claims and instigated a brutal crackdown against them.*

Ignorance about religion is at the root of the conflict between Muslims in Kabardino-Balkaria, representatives of both sides have told Forum 18 News Service. But they disagree sharply over whose interpretation of Islam is correct.

The authorities in the North Caucasus republic have backed Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate in the dispute. In 2003-5 they instigated a brutal crackdown on young Muslims forming an independent jamaat [Arabic: assembly or congregation] (see F18News 19 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172). Organised Islamic activity outside the Spiritual Directorate is now impossible (see F18News 22 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1177).

"Revival [of Islam] should be healthy and pure, without bidah [innovation]," local Muslim Ali Pshigotyzhev remarked to Forum 18 in Kabardino-Balkaria's capital, Nalchik, on 24 July. In Adyghe [ethnic group including Kabardin] culture, however, contradictions with Islam persist, he explained. "We never have an event – weddings, birthdays – without alcohol. People say, 'How can you raise a toast without a glass of alcohol?' But Islam rejects that. And if there is something sinful – forbidden in Islam – in Adyghe culture, then we won't do it."

Ali Pshigotyzhev's family has been adversely affected by Kabardino-Balkaria's treatment of Muslims in a number of ways (see F18News 21 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1175).

A practising Muslim, local lawyer Larisa Dorogova pointed to similar discrepancies. "An imam might attend a wedding where there'll be alcohol on the table, although he won't drink. Some of the older imams drink a lot, even," she told Forum 18 on 23 July. "Weddings and funerals are also very elaborate – although this has no place in Islam." Muslims at odds with Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate resolutely oppose such practices, she told Forum 18.

The division affects the republic's law enforcement agencies – staffed by Kabardin and Balkars rather than Russians – local lawyer Magomed Abubakarov, an ethnic Chechen, told Forum 18 on 24 July. "Police might sit and drink vodka, turning into I-don't-know-what while insisting they are believers," he explained. "They say they have a positive attitude towards Islam, but they divide it into 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', which they call 'Wahhabism'. 'Traditional' speaks for itself – Islam plus national traditions, as in Chechnya, where we have many ancestral customs that aren't part of Islam."

"Wahhabism" is a loose term for Islamic extremism commonly used in Russia and Central Asia (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

Contempt for stricter Islam, added Abubakarov, lies partly behind brutal treatment of those accused of the failed 2005 Nalchik uprising by people from almost identical backgrounds (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171). "They're some kind of different caste. There were even police who were silent when their relatives were detained. They didn't help their own relatives who were being tortured in the next office."

Arsen Mokayev, the brother of one of the accused and himself detained numerous times, described to Forum 18 on 25 July how a police officer might laugh that Allah was "probably on his way but run out of petrol" if a detainee cried out for divine aid while being beaten in custody. "But in an accident, he'll be the first to cry out, 'Help me, Allah!'."


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Local officials dealing with religious affairs and a senior detention centre administrator have denied reports of abuse to Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171 and 19 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172).

While Kabardino-Balkaria is viewed as a traditionally Muslim republic – Islam gained a foothold there by at least the sixteenth century – the population has never been deeply observant. Even by the 1830s, when British traveller Edmund Spencer spent several months living incognito among Adyghe tribes, he noted that they drank alcohol and venerated gods of the wind, livestock and bees while adorning their homes with wooden tablets bearing Koranic verses.

The Stalinist purges of a century later only exacerbated such practices, according to Ali Pshigotyzhev. "Muslims here were completely destroyed. There was no one left to teach people – no one who had studied in Turkey or Egypt. The older people just did what they knew."

By the 1990s, "we didn't know what Islam was," according to Boris Pashtov, who heads Kabardino-Balkaria's Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations, responsible for religious affairs. Not understanding their content, some village elders even used to read journals in Arabic in place of prayers, he noted to Forum 18.

As younger Muslims began to challenge accepted practice in the post-Soviet period, a conflict broke out, Ali Pshigotyzhev told Forum 18. In Adyghe culture, for example, a man always wears a hat, "but the young people got to know that you could pray without a hat, and some did." Older Muslims then began to insist that no one should enter a mosque without a hat: "In some villages you would be chased out of mosques for that." While this might sound trivial, "you only need to strike a match to light a fire," he pointed out.

If the Spiritual Directorate had chosen "a course towards pure Islam from the beginning, the young people would have supported it," Pshigotyzhev, who is 56, maintained. "But they sided with the old people." The Spiritual Directorate, state media and local officials continue to maintain that there is no contradiction between Adyghe culture and Islam, he claimed.

While there are local customs incompatible with Islam, "these are of secondary importance," Mufti Anas Pshikhachev of the Spiritual Directorate insisted to Forum 18 on 25 July, "and it takes time to root them out." Agreeing that consumption of alcohol was one such discrepancy, "we explain that everywhere in lectures and sermons," he said. Pshikhachev noted, however, that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed over 23 years at a time when alcohol consumption was also widespread: "It wasn't banned all at once – three ayat [Koranic verses] were needed. It should happen gradually. One of the mistakes of the extremists is to demand that everything must end straightaway – but they don't know Islam."

Members of Kabardino-Balkaria's jamaat, in turn, did not recognise or trust the Spiritual Directorate, local Muslims told Forum 18. Not believing the business funds which supported its construction to be halal [permissible in Islam], for example, they refused to attend Nalchik's central mosque – opened in 2004 and also home to the Spiritual Directorate – the mother of two young Muslims killed in the failed 2005 uprising told Forum 18 on 23 July.

Mufti Pshikhachev confirmed that Kabardino-Balkaria's current president, Arsen Kanokov, had supported construction of the central mosque as a "rich businessman" (see F18News 22 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1177).

Young Muslims at odds with the Spiritual Directorate chose to study abroad and later with the unregistered Islamic Research Institute in Nalchik. Their zeal baffled Kabardino-Balkaria's late president, Valeri Kokov, Ali Pshigotyzhev told Forum 18: "He didn't understand why young people went to mosque and not the disco. He thought they were paid to go from abroad, that they were preparing a second Chechnya in Kabardino-Balkaria."

The republic's religious affairs officials view study by up to 200 local young Muslims in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt in the late 1990s as the source of extremism. "Very often, unfortunately, they received a radical interpretation of Islam," Boris Pashtov maintained to Forum 18.

In a typical scenario, according to Pashtov's colleague Dzhambulat Gergokov, "Four might go to Syria or Saudi Arabia, say – one gets into a normal, classical Muslim university, but the others don't and look elsewhere. Then a group of people go up to them and say, 'Come with us, we'll teach you'." A young Muslim who travelled from Kabardino-Balkaria in this way would know nothing about Islam due to the absence of religion in the Soviet period, he pointed out to Forum 18. "But he's told he's chosen, on a mission, and, after a certain processing, he returns."

"I heard one of those who went say he came back to do jihad [Arabic: struggle, commonly understood as holy war]," remarked Pashtov. "That's exactly the word he used."

Mufti Anas Pshikhachev – who himself studied in Libya and Syria during the 1990s - saw a further problem in what his young rivals encountered abroad. While most Muslims in Russia – including Kabardino-Balkaria – are traditionally of the Hanafi madhhab, or


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school, of Sunni Islam, those in Saudi Arabia follow the Hanbali school. While the differences are slight and most scholars agree that it is irrelevant which madhhab is followed, he told Forum 18, "literature coming from Saudi Arabia – including in Russian – doesn't say it is Hanbali, it just says it's the Koran and Sunnah." As younger Muslims were unaware of this, he explained, "They accused the older people of not praying right."

Pshikhachev likened what he saw as their extremist stance to the seventh-century Kharijite sect of Islam: "Their mindset is, 'Whoever isn't with us is against us.' They believe that if people aren't Muslim, it is alright to oppress and kill them."

Ali Pshigotyzhev, however, insisted to Forum 18 that the Kabardino-Balkaria authorities' opposition to those branded extremist is in fact directed against non-violent Islam. "Obviously you can't struggle against Islam openly, but if you call Muslims 'Wahhabis', you can conduct searches, arrest and even destroy them physically."

Young mosque-goers in Kabardino-Balkaria reported being listed as "Wahhabis" by police and subjected to beatings and more severe torture (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

If members of the jamaat were in fact opposed to violence, Forum 18 wondered whether they could have practised their faith freely in Kabardino-Balkaria if the state had adopted a different approach. Pshigotyzhev thought the crackdown inevitable, however. "If the state produces alcohol, takes bribes, encourages fornication - everything forbidden by Allah - and people who live in accordance with Islam tell politicians they can't do that, they see a threat to their positions," he explained to Forum 18. "Their predisposition was not to allow the spread of Islam – because how they live is the complete opposite." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the http://www.samstar.ru Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi.

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