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RUSSIA: Dagestan's religious freedom policy changing?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Islamist insurgents from Russia's North Caucasus republic of Dagestan have stepped up their attacks in recent months. However, Forum 18 News Service notes that the local state authorities appear to have realised that responding to this with harsh restrictions on the religious freedom of Muslims has proved futile and counter-productive. "The authorities are beginning to understand that they can't keep raiding everywhere and trying to control things in that way, that constant pressure doesn't make people regard them positively," local human rights lawyer Ziyautdin Uvaisov told Forum 18. "Physical elimination doesn't go anywhere," Shamil Shikhaliyev of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences agreed, "we've been destroying them [alleged Islamist militants] for ten years now but there are more and more - like the Hydra, you chop off one head and two more appear." Nevertheless, under current republican law the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan still has a monopoly on all Muslim life in the republic, including on religious literature distribution and education. Many in Dagestan's political and Muslim establishment also remain wary of a change in policy, due to frequent insurgent murders of their colleagues.

While Dagestan's Islamist insurgents have stepped up their attacks in recent months - conducting major suicide bombings in both Moscow and the republic itself - the local state authorities are beginning to relax their strict control on Muslim public life, Forum 18 News Service has found. Some local commentators think the authorities have realised that harsh restrictions on the religious freedom of Muslims outside the framework of the state-backed Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan have proved futile and counter-productive.

Under current law the Spiritual Directorate has a monopoly of all Muslim life in Dagestan, including on religious literature distribution and education. Although this control is not always enforced in practice, it has reduced the availability both of non-approved Islamic literature (see F18News 26 May 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1450>) and of Islamic religious education (see F18News 2 June 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1453>).

Dagestan - a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia - is highly ethnically diverse. Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority.

Thaw in Dagestan?

A sign of a thaw, local journalist Abdulmumin Gadzhiyev believes, is the fact that he has been able to write freely on Islamic affairs in Dagestan's popular independent Russian-language newspaper Chernovik for the past 18 months. "Earlier this would not have been considered OK," he told Forum 18 in the capital Makhachkala on 15 April. "It was one thing if the subject matter was ritual, but another if it touched on politics. But now that's appearing, and not just in Chernovik."

Writing in Chernovik in August 2008, for example, Gadzhiyev criticises Dagestan's criminalisation of so-called Wahhabis: "Today a Muslim is forbidden what is permitted a communist, for example - to have an opinion on forms of government. And in order to become a 'Wahhabi extremist' (..) you don't even need to commit a crime. It's enough to express the desire to live in a sharia state. Which follows absolutely naturally from a belief in the infallibility of the Book of Allah and His prophet (peace be upon him)."

In Dagestan Forum 18 found that Salafis - advocates of what they regard as a pure form of Islam as practised by the earliest Muslims - are often referred to as Wahhabis regardless of whether they reject violence. Critics of the republic's September 1999 Law outlawing Wahhabism - which it defines only as an "extremist trend" - say it contributed to the hounding of peaceful Salafi Muslims and indirectly stoked Dagestan's insurgency (see F18News 5 May 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1440>).

Persecution passed?

A Makhachala-based lawyer working with the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, Ziyautdin Uvaisov estimated to Forum 18 on 15 April that the peak of arbitrary state harassment of Muslims was approximately five years ago, when "OMON [special police] would surround the mosque on Fridays, detain, photograph and fingerprint the people there." In some parts of Dagestan people might still come under suspicion for promoting Islam very actively, he thought, or even for not drinking alcohol.

This view was echoed by Shamil Shikhaliyev, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Department at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Improvements began under republican President Mukhu Aliyev (2006-10), he told Forum 18 on 16 April. "It's not like in the early 2000s, when you'd be targeted for having a beard. Salafis are now noting that torture is not indiscriminate in the way it was before - there are still individual cases and abductions, forced confessions, but it's more likely the people were actually involved in militant activity."

In the southern city of Derbent, Salafi brothers Abumuslim and Magomed Shafiyev had heard that the situation for Muslims was becoming freer in Makhachkala, but maintained Derbent had not changed. Speaking to Forum 18 on 17 April, they were sceptical about the long-lasting impact of any new approach: "It's just temporary, a break (...) they can't stop this mechanism once it's started."

Futile policy

The state's shift in approach appears to come from a realisation that giving only the current Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan legitimacy while criminalising other Muslims is an ineffective tactic in curbing radicalism. "If the authorities sought to eradicate extremist sentiments by placing their stake on the Directorate and using it in their ideological struggle, they are now beginning to understand that there were no grounds for doing so and are forging other contacts," local journalist Gadzhiyev remarked to Forum 18. "They have no other option."

"The authorities are beginning to understand that they can't keep raiding everywhere and trying to control things in that way, that constant pressure doesn't make people regard them positively," human rights lawyer Uvaisov told Forum 18. "Physical elimination doesn't go anywhere," Shikhaliyev of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences agreed, "we've been destroying them [alleged Islamist militants] for ten years now but there are more and more - like the Hydra, you chop off one head and two more appear."

Shikhaliyev outlined how, after going underground in the wake of the 1999 anti-Wahhabi Law, many Salafis moved elsewhere in Russia, or obtained residency or asylum in Europe, where some took up aggressive campaigning for militant action against the Dagestani authorities. Among those who remained, he said, some who were initially peaceful became targets for attack by the law enforcement agencies and took up arms as a result: "This was just an additional stimulus to go into the forest" (join the insurgency).

Shikhaliyev also suggested that terrorist attacks in Dagestan had escalated since 2005 - despite a softening in state policy - because alleged extremists handed down short prison sentences of 2-3 years served them in institutions in Dagestan, where they became even more embittered and set on revenge after release.

In Derbent, the Shafiyev brothers also suggested that a repressive policy was counterproductive. "When we went to mosque, the authorities could monitor us, but when they wouldn't let us go, we broke into groups and they couldn't," they explained to Forum 18. "They created this problem themselves."

New tactic

The authorities now appear to be trying to win over the portion of Salafis who reject violence. Shikhaliyev of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences explained to Forum 18 that some Dagestani Salafis refuse to submit to non-Muslim rule because they regard their republic as part of Dar al-Islam, or Islamic territory, and believe its secular government should be resisted by all available means, including terrorism.

While not opposed to the idea of a caliphate in the North Caucasus, he said other Salafis believe Dagestan belongs instead to Dar al-Sulh - non-Muslim territory agreeing to protect resident Muslims - and thus see it as acceptable to live under a secular government. The latter group rejects the terrorist acts claimed by the self-styled Caucasus Emirate, he told Forum 18.

Press secretary of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan, Magomedrasul Omarov acknowledged that Salafis could be categorised as radical and moderate, and said steps were now being taken to engage the latter in dialogue. "There is nowhere else for them to go," he remarked to Forum 18 on 21 April.

Overall, there appears little interest among Dagestani Muslims in living in an Islamic state, according to Zaid Abdulagatov, a sociologist at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He found that approximately half of Muslims polled in recent years thought that Islam should remain the same as during the life of the Prophet Mohammed and his earliest followers, initially suggesting a fundamentalist position. But Abdulagatov told Forum 18 on 16 April that around three-quarters went on to say they were opposed to living in an Islamic republic where sharia was the main law.

Obstacles

However, many in Dagestan's political and Muslim establishment remain wary of a change in policy, due to frequent insurgent attacks against their colleagues. Omarov pointed out that ten Directorate imams had been killed and five injured in recent years, while Maksud Sadikov, rector of Makhachkala's Institute of Theology and International Relations, told Forum 18 on 20 April that

three of its lecturers had been killed in just five years of operation.

Rasul Gadzhiyev (no relation to Abdulmumin), departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs, supported dialogue if the participants had peaceful intentions. However, he claimed that the behaviour of those who described themselves as Salafis after the adoption of the 1999 anti-Wahhabi law "didn't correspond to what they said about religion at all. They killed people, formed armed groups," he maintained to Forum 18 on 22 April. "Why did they do that, if a believer's weapon is knowledge? It's impossible they could exist peacefully."

Gadzhiyev confirmed that policy changes were taking place, however, reporting that Dagestan's long-standing Council for Religious Affairs was in the process of being scrapped and its brief transferred to his own Ministry.

But by this stage, the main reason for distrust of Dagestan's government among the Muslim community - and thus of the Directorate, as it enjoys government backing - is endemic corruption. Forum 18 was told of traffic police demands for bribes to avoid prosecution for non-existent violations, of 5,000 roubles (1,043 Norwegian Kroner, 131 Euros or 161 US Dollars) or more to receive technically free state medical treatment or children's education, and of many times that to enrol in university, "after which a person with a good mind still can't get work because all the key posts are occupied by non-professionals with good family or other connections".

This underlying problem would have to be tackled before any improvement in the religious freedom situation were reached, Shikhaliyev of the Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences pointed out. But he related a popular Dagestani joke about there being two solutions to the republic's chronic problems, one realistic, the other fantasy. "One is if all government officials become honest and stop taking bribes, the other is if aliens land here and make everything good. The second option is more realistic." (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=1196>.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287> - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288>).

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

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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