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TAJIKISTAN: Mosque raided, worshippers detained without trial, imams removed and fined, sermons banned

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Over 50 officials from the police, NSC secret police, Prosecutor's Office and the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) raided a high-profile mosque near Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe during Friday prayers on 9 December 2011. They accused the mosque leaders of marking a Shia Muslim commemoration, insisting that only Hanafi Sunni rituals should be observed. Two brothers from the prominent Turajonzoda family which ran the mosque were fined, while nine other mosque members were held for ten days with no court hearing, mosque members complained to Forum 18 News Service. The SCRA also removed the mosque's imams and downgraded its status. Police imposed a cordon on Fridays during successive weeks' prayers. But Alisher Abdurasulov, Deputy Chief of Vahdat Police, denied to Forum 18 that anyone was detained without trial or that the village was cordoned off to prevent worshippers reaching the mosque. Asked why he and other officials raided the mosque, SCRA Head Abdurahim Kholikov told Forum 18: "I have the right not to answer you."

Nearly two months after officials restricted the activity of a leading mosque near Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, run by members of the high-profile Turajonzoda family, only hundreds rather than thousands of worshippers can now attend Friday prayers. No sermons are allowed and the mosque's imams cannot return to lead the community, members of the mosque complained to Forum 18 News Service. More than 50 officials raided Friday prayers on 9 December 2011, accusing the mosque leaders of marking a Shia Muslim commemoration, insisting that only Hanafi Sunni rituals should be observed. Two Turajonzoda brothers were fined, while nine other members of the mosque were detained for ten days with no court hearing, members of the mosque complained. The State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) also removed the mosque's imams and downgraded its status. Police imposed a cordon on Fridays during successive weeks' prayers.

Asked why he thought the authorities put pressure on the Mosque, Haji Akbar Turajonzoda told Forum 18 on 2 February: "Perhaps the authorities want to remove us from the leadership of the Mosque and limit the number of worshippers who attend."

The Muhammadiyya Mosque is located in Vahdatobod (formerly Turkobod), a village of about 200 people in Vahdat District, 18 kms (11 miles) from Dushanbe. It is run by Haji Turajonzoda and his brother Imam Nuriddin Turajonzoda.

A Dushanbe-based journalist told Forum 18 that thousands of people from Dushanbe and even from the city of Kulyab, 200 kms (125 miles) south-east of Dushanbe, used to travel to the mosque for Friday worship. "Imam Nuriddin is a very well known Muslim preacher in Tajikistan, and Tajik Muslims love his sermons."

Thousands denied possibility to join Friday prayers

The state's actions are now preventing the thousands of worshippers from continuing to attend Friday prayers at the mosque. "According to the SCRA decision, multitudes of people cannot gather at the Mosque at the moment, and no sermons are allowed on Fridays," Haji Turajonzoda complained to Forum 18. "Now only a few hundred worshippers, mainly from Vahdat District, gather only for prayers."

Several local people told Forum 18 separately that attendance at Friday prayers often topped 10,000. "Sometimes, on good weather days, we have had 20,000 worshippers gather for Friday sermons," Habib Radiyev, a worshipper of Muhammadiyya Mosque and close associate of Haji Turajonzoda, told Forum 18 on 3 February. "People fill the building on those days, which can seat a few thousand, and a few thousands stand in the courtyard, and even outside the Mosque area, and listen through the loudspeakers." The mosque and its grounds cover more than one hectare (2.5 acres).

Several sources who wished not to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 that because the Mosque is run by the Turajonzoda brothers, it is independent from state-appointed imams. They added that the many worshippers like their sermons, which is why the brothers are respected by many Muslims of the country.

Akbar Turajonzoda was an independent Senator in Tajikistan's Parliament between 2005 and 2010. He served as Tajikistan's Mufti

from 1988 to 1991, and as the second-in-command of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and the United Tajik Opposition from 1993 until his expulsion from the party in 1999. He also served as Tajikistan's Deputy Prime Minister after the civil war ended in 1996.

Heavy state restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Tajikistan's authorities have imposed tight restrictions on all manifestations of the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief, especially since a restrictive new Religion Law came into force in April 2009. The Law bans unregistered religious activity by any community.

The Preamble to the Law recognises "the special role of the Hanafi school of the Islamic religion in the development of the national culture and spiritual life". Muslims who practice outside the framework of the state-backed Council of Ulems (Islamic scholars) face particular pressures from the state (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553).

Council of Ulems fatwa against Mosque and its leaders

Trouble began for the mosque on 6 December 2011, when the state-backed Council of Ulems issued a fatwa (religious ruling) against the Muhamadiyya Mosque and its leaders which was distributed to all mosques across Tajikistan.

The fatwa stated that the Council of Ulems "is not against observing the rite of Ashura by the Shia" but said "it is surprising to see that the Turajonzoda family, well-known in religious circles and who consider themselves Hanafi Muslims, observed it in the Turkobod Mosque on 2 December". This "may lead to schism between Muslims", it warned, adding that the Tajik people, "which adheres to the Hanafi movement, never in its history observed the rite of Ashura, and thereupon this deed of the Turajonzoda family fully contradicts Hanafi teachings".

The Council of Ulems' decision also called on the authorities to inspect the religious activity of the Turajonzoda family to see whether it "fits in the frames of the Religion Law".

The state-backed Council of Ulems has long been used by the authorities to control and limit the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by Muslims (see F18News 8 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=796).

Raid

The Head of the SCRA Abdurahim Kholikov, Anvari Vaysiddin, Head of Vahdat City Administration, Kurbonali Muhabbatov, Prosecutor of Vahdat Town, as well officials from the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police and Vahdat Police raided the mosque during Friday prayers on 9 December 2011, Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18. "About 50 officials participated in the raid, roughly 20 of which entered the Mosque while about 30 police mainly stood outside in the yard." Accompanying the officials was Mufti Saidmukarram Abdudukodirzoda, Head of the Council of Ulems.

"Mayor Vaysiddin and other officials without taking off their shoes broke in the Mosque while Imam Nuriddin was preaching," he complained. "The officials went up to the minbar [pulpit], interrupting the sermon took the microphone, and attempted to announce the Council of Ulems' fatwa." However, he added that the "indignant worshippers chanting Allahu-Akbar [God is great]" prevented officials from ending their speech.

Haji Turajonzoda complained that "worshippers in the mosque felt insulted by the rude intervention of the authorities, and the fact many officials entered in their shoes."

Prosecutor Muhabbatov claimed to Forum 18 on 1 February that only Mayor Vaysiddin and a few police officers did not take off their shoes "in ignorance of the Mosque rules, and when these were explained they took off their shoes".

Detentions without trial – denials by Deputy Police Chief

Radiyev, a worshipper at Muhamadiyya Mosque, told Forum 18 that during the raid, police also detained nine worshippers. They kept the nine at the Vahdat Police Detention Centre for ten days, releasing them on 19 December 2011. "They were kept there without any Court decision," he complained.

An independent source from Dushanbe, who is not sympathetic to the Turajonzoda brothers or the Muhamadiyya community, and who asked not to be identified, confirmed the detentions to Forum 18 on 3 February. "Yes, nine of their members were arrested by Police and later released, and the community made heroes out of them."

However, Alisher Abdurasulov, Deputy Chief of Vahdat Police, denied to Forum 18 on 3 February that the police detained any worshippers on 9 December 2011 or later.

Officials dismiss imams and downgrade mosque

On 12 December 2011, three days after the raid, the SCRA downgraded the status of the Mosque from cathedral to five-time prayer mosque for three months. It also dismissed the two brothers, Nuriddin and Mahmudjon Turajonzoda, as the mosque's Imams, Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18.

Unwritten state instructions allow sermons only in cathedral mosques (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553).

The SCRA decision says that "if the Mosque does not further violate the Law within three months, it may consider restoring its status as a cathedral Mosque," Turajonzoda added. "Even if the SCRA restores our status, it is unclear who they will appoint as Imams." And he insisted, "we as the Community will not accept other state-appointed Imams."

Police cordoned off village – but Deputy Police Chief denies it

On 16 December 2011, the Friday after the raid, police imposed a cordon around Vahdatobod village "not to allow any worshippers to reach the village for the Friday prayer and sermon", Haji Turajonzoda complained. He said it was maintained for the next three or four Fridays. He said that he heard some reports that several young people were detained each week, taken to the police station, questioned, warned and released. "Police asked them why they travel so far to come to Vahdatobod, and why they do not attend mosques near them," Haji Turajonzoda said.

Two independent sources, one journalist and one human rights defender, who both wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, confirmed to Forum 18 the police operation around the village. "The police carried out its responsibility, since the authorities made a decision to limit the Mosque's activity," the journalist said.

Deputy Police Chief Abdurasulov adamantly denied to Forum 18 that Police had undertaken any operations in or around Vahdotobod or tried to stop people from attending the Muhamadiyya Mosque. "Who told you this, and who gave you my phone number?" he asked Forum 18. He also denied that the SCRA had decided to limit the activity of the Mosque. "No such decisions were made," he insisted. He then declined to talk further, and put the phone down.

Fines

Judge Mahmud Rahmonov of Vahdat Court on 23 December 2011 fined Imam Nuriddin Turajonzoda and his brother Haji Turajonzoda under Administrative Code Article 460, for allegedly insulting Mufti Abdukodirzoda, Head of the Council of Ulems who took part in the raid, Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18.

Article 460 ("Petty hooliganism") punishes swearing and abusive language in public places, abusive pestering of citizens and other similar actions which violate the public order and peace of citizens with fines of between seven and ten months' minimum wages or with administrative arrest of between five and fifteen days. Each of the brothers was fined 350 Somonis (about 429 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros, or 74 US Dollars).

Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18 that he and his brother paid the fine as Prosecutors and Court officials warned them not to complain, "because the Court gave the minimum punishment, and continued conflict with the authorities could result in harsher punishments".

Vahdat Court officials refused to comment on the cases on 2 February 2012. The officials, who did not give their names, each time asked Forum 18 to call back later, saying that neither Safarali Kholmatov, Chair of the Court nor Judge Rahmonov were available. When asked who could comment, one court official responded: "No one can. All the Judges are busy hearing cases."

Why the raid and punishments?

Asked for the reasons of the charges, Prosecutor Muhabbatov – who brought the administrative case against the Turajonzoda brothers – claimed to Forum 18 that they "insulted Mufti Abdukodirzoda and other officials" during the 9 December 2011 raid. Asked what exactly Imam Nuriddin or Haji Akbar Turajonzoda said to the officials, he refused to say, claiming it is unquotable. When Forum 18 insisted, he said, "Well, for example, they called the Mufti a Salafi Muslim." Asked how that can be an insult, the Prosecutor said that the Salafi Muslim movement is banned in Tajikistan.

The Salafi school of Islamic thought has been banned in the country since 2009, even though no crimes had been linked to this school at the time of the ban (see F18News 23 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243). Followers of this approach to Islam have since been jailed, apparently without having committed any crime (see eg. F18News 19 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446).

Prosecutor Muhabbatov would not say why the Prosecutor's office did not open a similar case against the officials who raided the mosque.

Prosecutor Muhabbatov also defended the raid to Forum 18. He said officials who witnessed Friday prayers on 2 December 2011 "reported to us that Imam Nuriddin gave a sermon on Ashura, and worshippers were dressed in black clothes". He did not explain why officials had attended the prayers. He insisted that the raid the following week was necessary "to check up on the community to see whether they are commemorating Ashura". Asked why this should be of concern for the authorities, he insisted: "This is a violation of their charter which says that it is a Hanafi Muslim mosque."

The Day of Ashura is the 10th day of Muharram in the Islamic calendar and marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram. Shia Muslims commemorate it as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Muslim prophet Muhammad at the Battle of Karbala in 680 (61 in the Islamic Calendar).

However, Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18 that in his 2 December 2011 sermon, the Imam only spoke of "the shameful killings, which happened between the Muslim brothers in the history". He said that "we do not generally observe the month of Muharram or Ashura days as the Shia do" insisting that "we are Hanafi Sunni Muslims, and we are not Shia". But Haji Turajonzoda explained to Forum 18 that "we feel that we need to explain this event to our Muslim brothers, so similar things do not happen between the Muslims now".

SCRA Head Kholikov in Dushanbe took down Forum 18's name on 2 February 2012. But when asked why he with other state agencies raided the Muhamadiyya mosque, he said: "I have the right not to answer you." He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered, as did telephones of other SCRA officials.

Prosecutor's officials refuse to open a case on Turajonzoda brothers' complaint

The Turajonzoda brothers also brought a suit against SCRA Head Kholikov and Vahdat's Mayor Vaysiddin to Vahdat Prosecutor's and Tajikistan's Prosecutor General's offices under Criminal Code Article 157 for "illegal meddling" with the activity of their Mosque. Article 157 ("Impeding a religious organisation's activity") punishes: "Impeding legal activity of religious organisations or religious rituals, unless it violates public order or infringe upon citizens' rights, is punishable by a fine of up to 500 times the minimum monthly wage, or correctional labour for up to 2 years, or imprisonment for up to 3 months."

Haji Turajonzoda told Forum 18 that the response from Vahdat Prosecutor's Office, signed by Deputy Prosecutor N. Hassanov (first name not given), noted that the Prosecutor's office does "not see anything in the actions of the officials violating the Law since their intention was not to meddle in the activity but participate in the worship, and will therefore bring no action against them." Although signed on 28 December 2011, Turajonzoda told Forum 18 he did not receive it until 2 February 2012.

This official response contradicts Prosecutor Muhabbatov's claim to Forum 18 that the authorities' reason for the 9 December 2011 raid was to check whether the Mosque was marking Ashura.

Prosecutor Muhabbatov told Forum 18 on 6 February 2012 that "it took us some time to investigate their complaint." He also denied any contradiction between his previous claim to Forum 18 on 1 February that the authorities went to the Muhamadiyya Mosque to check whether the Mosque was marking Ashura and his Office's official response to Turajonzoda that the authorities' intention was only to participate in the prayers.

"Yes they went there to participate in the prayers but also the Mufti wanted to speak there," he said, "and share his opinion with the worshippers that Hanafi Muslims should not observe Ashura." Asked why the Mufti should speak in the Mosque when the Imam and the worshippers did not want this, Prosecutor Muhabbatov said: "These Turajonzoda brothers are dangerous people, and we need to warn people about them."

Muhabbatov asserted that the Turajonzoda brothers and their associates are "to blame for hundreds of thousands of deaths in the Civil War" in early 1990s. "We are afraid that they are dividing Tajiks into Shias and Sunnis, which may result in civil war again." He claimed that the Turajonzoda brothers "still support the idea that Tajikistan should become a religious state, and support militant Islam"

Asked why Prosecutor's Office officials do not open a criminal investigation, Muhabbatov claimed to Forum 18 that "we have so many videotapes with their war rhetoric but we decided to give them the minimum punishment now." He added that "if they continue with comments on political issues and in support of a religious state, we will open a criminal case."

Asked if Imam Nuriddin will be restored as Imam of the Mosque as the community wishes, Muhabbatov asked: "How can this be? We have been lenient in our punishment, in another state these people would have been put in prison by now."

Dushanbe Court wants Mufti and Turajonzoda brothers to reconcile

The Turajonzoda brothers also brought a suit against Mufti Abdukodirzoda, claiming that he had falsely accused them in the fatwa of inciting religious intolerance. Hearings began under Judge Zokirjon Aminov of Dushanbe's Ismoil-Somoni Court on 26 December 2011 and are due to continue on 8 February 2012. The judge urged the two sides to reconcile, but Haji Turajonzoda insisted to Forum 18 that he wants the fatwa withdrawn.

An official of the Council of Ulems who did not give his name said on 6 February that he could not comment on the Council's decision on the Muhamadiyya Mosque or the Court case. He referred Forum 18 to Abdulbasir Saidov, Assistant of Mufti Abdukodirzoda. However Saidov's phone went unanswered on 6 February. (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1553.

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 Tajikistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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