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TAJIKISTAN: State control of Islam increasing

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Tajikistan continues to increase state control of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate, all others having been closed. An imam fired by the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Also, President Emomali Rahmon has decided that imams must wear a uniform and be paid by the state. Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, SCRA Deputy Chair Solehjon Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda from Sogd Region told Forum 18 that "I do not think it is state interference". He went on to claim that "military men have their uniforms, so do the police and other state officials. The imams need to have their official uniform".

Tajikistan is continuing to increase state restrictions on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate by the authorities, all others having been closed down. An imam fired by the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Also, President Emomali Rahmon has decided that imams must wear a standard uniform (which the imams have to pay for themselves) and be paid by the state.

Other existing state limitations on freedom of religion or belief include: a total ban on all participation by people under the age of 18 in all religious activity, apart from funerals; a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; sweeping limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted; limitations on the right to share beliefs; tight government censorship; and state appointment and dismissal of imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Tajikistan's Constitution claims in article 8 that "no state ideology or religion may be established" and that "religious organisations are separate from the state and may not interfere in governmental affairs". Yet this does not stop multiple violations of these claims in the Religion Law, the Code of Administrative Offences, and in official actions. The life of the Islamic community is mainly restricted from inside its structures by the state, notably through the Council of Ulems, and the lives of other communities tend to be restricted from outside their structures (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Only one madrassah allowed

After the 2009 Religion Law was brought in, the authorities ran nationwide campaigns, codenamed "Operation Madrassah" with fines and police raids, to stop all Islamic religious education of any kind that did not have state permission (see eg. F18News 28 June 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1586). Only one madrassah – in Tursonzoda near Dushanbe – is still allowed by the authorities to function in all of the country. All other madrassahs remain closed and have not been allowed to reopen.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, then Deputy Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) claimed to Forum 18 that the closure by July 2013 of almost all madrassahs was not permanent. In December 2013 he claimed that after changes to their curricula and legal documents, madrassahs would resume their work "as soon as the changes are ready and approved by us" (see F18News 4 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903).

Solehjon Zavkiyev, Deputy Chair of the SCRA responsible for overseeing the work with mosques, told Forum 18 on 26 February 2014 that he cannot say when they will be re-opened.

Zavkiyev was previously Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. In that capacity in May 2009 he denied all knowledge of a Supreme Court ban other officials claimed had been imposed on the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic missionary movement (see F18News 15 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1297).

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has criticised Tajikistan's restrictions on religious education – and other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief – in August 2013. It stated that Tajikistan should "should repeal or amend all provisions" of the Religion Law, the Parental Responsibility Law and the Administrative Code "that impose disproportionate restrictions on the rights protected by article 18 ["freedom of thought, conscience and religion" of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]" (see F18News 4 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903).

Imam dismissed by SCRA

Meanwhile Ubaydullo Khasanov, who was Chief Imam in Vossei District of the south-western Khatlon Region is still unemployed after being dismissed by the SCRA in July 2013. He was fired on the SCRA's instructions after a meeting of district imams summoned by the religious affairs official of the District. The imams then dismissed Khasanov in his absence., Asia-Plus news agency reported on 15 July.

Imam Khasanov told Forum 18 that the local authorities told him that he was dismissed because he allegedly gave "false information to the President". The Imam explained that, on 4 July he had asked President Rahmon in a public meeting for a plot of land to build a new mosque building. A private house is being used.

The Imam told Forum 18 on 26 February 2014 that he is "still unemployed". He has asked the local authorities for work as an imam in another mosque, or as a teacher in a madrassah.

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the dismissal decision was initiated by the SCRA. "The board of the district imams decided to dismiss him, and asked us to endorse their decision." Asked what the reason for the dismissal was, Zavkiyev claimed that "no reasons were indicated in their request." He claimed that "the Board of imams is not obliged to give reasons when requesting a dismissal."

Asked how imams are appointed, Zavkiyev said that, "they are elected by the local boards of imams and then we endorse the candidate. We look at the education and other qualifications of the Imam". In practice, the Council of Ulems appoints imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Zavkiyev of the SCRA would not answer the question when Forum 18 asked why the SCRA looks at reasons for appointing imams but not reasons for dismissing imams.

Centralised preaching imposed by SCRA

Another recent example of increasing controls on Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief is that imams across Tajikistan were instructed by the SCRA to preach against homosexuals and "nontraditional sexual relations". Grand Mufti Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda, head of the state backed-Council of Ulems, on 7 February at the Friday prayer in the Dushanbe Central Mosque delivered this message, and on the same day mosque attendees across the country heard it, Radio Free Europe reported on 7 February.

The Council of Ulems has long been a part of the state's control of Muslim religious activity. Islamic preaching is only allowed within state-designated "Cathedral mosques" (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, and why the SCRA issued an instruction on what to preach to all imams, Zavkiyev of the SCRA denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." He went on to claim that "in most Muslim countries, like Egypt and Turkey, the texts of sermons are prepared by their Islamic centres and sent to all mosques". He further claimed that "we do not interfere in this as it is an internal affair of the Council of Ulems".

Zavkiyev also claimed that mosques "cannot preach their own sermons but must agree it every time with the Council of Ulems." He quickly added that this is "not state interference but an internal issue of the Council and the mosques under it."

Deputy Grand Mufti Haji Nigmatullo Olimov on 21 February, asked by Forum 18 why imams cannot preach their own sermons and must receive pre-written texts from the Council of Ulems, replied: "It's absolutely not true. The imams can preach their own sermons."

Olimov has in the past defended the authorities' demolition of mosques outside state-control in Dushanbe (see F18News 10 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1032).

Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda of Nuri-Islam Mosque in Khujand, Sogd Region, told Forum 18 on 21 February that he "does not see anything wrong" with mosques receiving pre-written texts of sermons from the Council of Ulems. "I do not think it is state interference", he told Forum 18. "Even in Egypt and other Muslim countries such texts are prepared centrally." He added that "If

you compare today with Soviet times, this is a great achievement. We can read the Koran, attend mosques, and hear sermons."

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev became noticeably upset when asked by Forum 18 why the topic of homosexuality was chosen as a topic for a centralised preaching instruction, instead of another topic. He refused to answer the question and put the phone down.

Why state control?

Abdulkhakim Sharipov, the north-western Sogd Region's senior religious affairs official, was asked by Forum 18 on 26 February whether he thought increasing state control of Islam is being imposed. He replied: "Do you think western countries would allow just anybody to open any kind of religious organisation and teach anything they want?"

Sharipov explained that by "western countries", he meant any country in Western Europe or North America. Forum 18 noted that in such countries, unless some kind of financial or other state assistance is sought, anyone is free to - without state registration or any kind of state permission - form a religious organisation to teach their beliefs.

Sharipov then claimed that "we are not totally controlling religious activity, but we want some order in it."

State uniforms and salaries for imams

In a 4 July 2013 speech published on the presidential website, President Rahmon stated that the "Ministry of Finance and SCRA along with other relevant organs, were instructed to take measures for the institution of official salaries as of 1 January 2014 for the imams of Cathedral mosques". He also instructed the Council of Ulems to "pay serious attention to the question of moral image of its religious ministers, and prepare before the end of the current year [2013] and adopt a standard uniform for imams of Cathedral mosques with elements of national culture".

Grand Mufto of Tajikistan Saidmukorram Abdukodizoda, who chairs the Council of Ulems, told the islam.ru website on 15 January 2014 that salaries will be paid by order of President Rahmon from 1 February, and imams will "begin wearing their new official uniforms from next week."

Forum 18 has learned from various imams who did not wish to be named that, as of the end of 28 February, the promised salaries had not been paid.

Why?

President Rahmon in his speech claimed that "today whoever wears the uniform of a religious minister, without regards to their level of knowledge and piety, is called an Imam." Speaking of the reasons for paying salaries to imams, SCRA head Kholikov told Asia-Plus that the President told the imams in the meeting that: "I ordered you to be paid salaries so that you would not be in need of the hundred Dollars they are paying or trying to pay you from abroad. Having given you a hundred dollars, they will demand a hundred services from you."

Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of Tajikistan's officially registered Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) on 25 February told Forum that the "by assigning salaries to the imams and obliging them to wear official uniforms, the state is aiming at exploiting them for its interests."

Sayfullozoda also said that the decision "violates the Constitution, which states the separation of state and religion." Religious organisations "cannot be integrated into state structures, and must not be paid salaries from the state budget".

Asked if the salaries and standard uniforms were meant to protect the state interpretations of Islam, both Zavkiyev of the SCRA and Imam Kalonzoda from Khujand stated that the activity of mosques needed to be centrally controlled.

Asked why standard uniforms were needed, Imam Kalonzoda replied that "every country has their traditional Muslim dress, and so we want to have our own uniforms". He went on to state that "military men have their uniforms, so do the police and other state officials. The imams need to have their official uniform."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA noted that imams "are obliged to buy their own uniforms."

How much?

Grand Mufti Abdukodirzoda told islam.ru that the imam of the Central Mosque in Dushanbe – i.e himself - will receive 2,000 Somonis (about 2,500 Norwegian Kroner, 300 Euros, or 400 US Dollars) a month. Imams of Central Cathedral mosques will receive 1,500 Somonis a month, and imams of Cathedral mosques 800 Somonis a month. He said that "around 300" imams will receive salaries.

Salaries in Tajikistan are very low, especially in rural areas. The minimum monthly salary is 250 Somonis (about 300 Norwegian

Kroner, 40 Euros, or 50 US Dollars).

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev, asked by Forum 18 whether economically poor Tajikistan can afford this extra expenditure of possibly 4 million Somonis (about 5,017,000 Norwegian Kroner, 603,750 Euros, or 832,000 US Dollars) a year, replied that "if our distinguished President initiated this, he knows that we can do it."

Rajabali Odinayev, head of the section of the Finance Ministry dealing with salaries, told Forum 18 on 26 February that "we give salaries to state employees not imams". When asked whether salaries are being given or will be given to imams, Odinayev referred Forum 18 to the SCRA. "These questions are in their competition, and they must know all the details."

Salaries for other religious communities?

Zavkiyev of the SCRA told Forum 18 that other religious communities will not receive state financial support. He claimed that "we offered this to all registered religious communities, but they declined this".

Father Pitirim (Konstantin Tvorogov) of the Russian Orthodox Church's Diocese in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 24 February that "it would help us if we also could receive financial assistance from the state". He stated that "there were talks with the SCRA that they might pay salaries to three of our priests in Dushanbe, but that would not help us much."

Igor Samiyev of the state-registered Association of Evangelical Christians-Baptists told Forum 18 on 24 February that the SCRA "a couple of months ago" offered to pay "one or two ministers from each religious community a salary". Samiyev said that he declined the offer, as did other Protestant leaders in the meeting he attended. "We all think that with these salaries will come more state control and more demands on the communities. And the salaries would not help us much anyway." (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/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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