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TAJIKISTAN: Last madrassahs finally closed

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Of the 19 madrassahs for 16 to 18 year old Muslims that functioned with state approval before the harsh 2009 Religion Law, all have now been closed. The five remaining madrassahs in Sogd Region - suspended in 2013 - were finally closed, as was the Islamic University's madrassah in Dushanbe.

Three years after officials ordered the suspension of the activity of five officially-registered madrassahs (Islamic religious schools for children) in Tajikistan's north-western Sogd Region, the Education Ministry has now ordered them closed down. The only state-approved madrassah in the capital Dushanbe, operated by the State Islamic University, was also closed down. This means no madrassahs - which used to teach 16 to 18 year olds - are now officially allowed to operate in the whole country, Forum 18 notes.

The final closures come as a new subject, the History of Religions, becomes a compulsory subject for 15 and 16 year olds in the last year of compulsory education in state schools. The subject mainly focuses on Hanafi Sunni Islam, the state-promoted version of Islam (see below).

Nine madrassahs functioned in Sogd Region until the harsh 2009 Religion Law. Only five of these were allowed to re-register after the new Law was adopted. However, their activity was "suspended" in July 2013 and the 300 children attending them had to transfer to state schools (see F18News 4 December 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903>). None was allowed to resume operating after that.

"The decision to close the madrassahs down was taken back in 2013, and this is nothing new," Muzaffar Yunusov, Press Secretary of Sogd Regional Administration, told Forum 18 on 1 September.

However, Sukhrob Rustomzoda, Chief official of Sogd Regional Religious Affairs Department, claimed to the media in early August in the Regional capital Khujand that the activity of the madrassahs was only suspended in 2013. This had been because the legal documents of these madrassahs were not in line with the Religion Law and the education given by them did not correspond to modern teaching standards, he claimed. Now the Education Ministry had made a final decision not to extend their registration, Rustomzoda said.

Rustomzoda added that "from now on only the school under the Islamic University of Tajikistan will educate future [Islamic] religious figures." However, he appeared unaware that this too has been closed down.

Dushanbe madrassah also closed down

The authorities "closed down the only madrassah in Dushanbe, the Abu Hanifa madrassah under the Islamic University, which they recognised as exemplary," Said Akhmadov, a religious expert and former Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 3 August. "Its students were transferred to teacher training colleges."

An independent religious expert from Dushanbe confirmed the closure of the city's only madrassah. "I know it exists on paper but it is not functioning, and it sent its students to colleges," the expert, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 5 September.

From 19 to none in seven years

The religious expert Akhmadov told Radio Free Europe that the process of closing down the madrassahs began in 2009. Until 2009 there were 19 officially-registered madrassahs in the whole of Tajikistan, but the authorities reduced the number "with the purpose of prevention of the youth from joining extremist religious groups".

The madrassahs taught either boys or girls. "Girls and boys studied in separate madrassahs in accordance with Tajikistan's Islamic tradition," Sharifmurodi Isrofilniyo, Director of the Education Ministry's Scientific Research Institute for Educational Development, told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 31 August. "The students did not live in dormitories but attended the schools from their homes,

since there were madrassahs in most regions."

The independent expert from Dushanbe told Forum 18 that children could attend the madrassahs from the age of 16 after completing the 9 grades of compulsory state education. Children who wished to have a religious education thus opted to study in madrassahs for their final 10th and 11th grades instead of in a state school.

Long-standing state pressure on religious education

Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and others are frequently punished for teaching religion to children without state permission (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

The 2009 Religion Law allows the giving of religious education only with state permission. It also requires that Tajik citizens wishing to receive religious education abroad must gain prior permission from the state (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Further restrictions on young people and their parents and guardians were introduced in the controversial Parental Responsibility Law, which entered into force in August 2011. Among many other provisions, it bans almost all young people from attending places of worship (see F18News 21 July 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1595>). The state has long been particularly hostile to Islamic religious activity by children, implementing the Parental Responsibility Law mainly against Muslims (see F18News 16 August 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1602>).

The United Nations Human Rights Committee criticised the state's restrictions on religious education - and other restrictions on freedom of religion - in a report published in August 2013 (see F18News 4 December 2013 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903>).

No answers

Mekhribon Dosiyeu, Assistant to Sulaymon Davlatzoda, Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, refused to discuss the madrassah closures or refer Forum 18 to any other official. "Send your questions in writing," Dosiyeu told Forum 18 on 31 August.

Other State Committee officials - including Press Secretary Avshin Mukim and Azizullo Mirzozoda - also refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18 on 31 August.

The official who answered the Education Ministry phone on 31 August, who did not give his name, declined to tell Forum 18 why the madrassahs had been finally closed down. He referred it to Arif Abdujabbor, the official responsible for religious education issues.

Asked on 2 September why the madrassahs were closed down, Abdujabbor brushed off Forum 18. "This is not the Religious Affairs Department, and I am too busy to answer your questions," he said angrily, and put the phone down. Subsequent calls the same day went unanswered.

Telephones at the office of Education Minister Nuriddin Said went unanswered between 31 August and 2 September.

Why were Sogd's madrassahs closed down?

Muzaffar Yunusov, Press Secretary of Sogd Regional Administration, told Forum 18 on 1 September that the madrassahs had finally been closed down "because their legal documents were not in line with the Religion Law, the education given by them did not correspond to modern teaching standards, and their teachers were not state-accredited instructors".

Asked why instead of closing them down the authorities did not assist the madrassahs, such as by providing them with teachers who graduated from the state-approved Islamic University, Yunusov responded: "There are not enough graduates. All of them get appointed as Imams to the mosques in various regions."

Yunusov told Forum 18 that secondary schools will teach a new subject of History of Religions from this year. Told that the subject studies Islam from a secular viewpoint and that it will include other religions as well, and asked why cannot the madrassahs, specialising in teaching Islam, do this work, he responded: "We are afraid that the youth will come under bad influence from religious radical groups." He did not identify any groups that he fears might exercise a "bad influence".

Told that the madrassahs allowed to function after the 2009 Religion Law were state-approved, and asked why they had to be closed down, Yunusov contradicted himself. "I do not know why, please talk to our religious affairs officials."

Asked why the madrassahs were closed down, Rustam Rakhmatzoda, Deputy Head of Sogd Regional Administration, wrote down the question and Forum18's details but did not answer. "We will tell you when we ourselves know about it," he said and put the

phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

The authorities "do not need the madrassahs"

A human rights defender from Dushanbe, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 2 September that the madrassahs were closed because the "authorities see anyone with deep religious convictions and faith as a potential threat to their power. Therefore they do not need the madrassahs, since they deepen the religious convictions of the young people."

The human rights defender added that "our President [Emomali Rahmon] many times in his speeches accused groups like the Islamic Renaissance Party [IRP] for all the problems and the civil war in the country in the early 1990s. Now that the IRP is no longer in the picture, the authorities continue their efforts significantly to reduce the number of religious believers. Closing down the madrassahs is one way to do so, they believe."

The authorities banned the IRP in 2015 and imprisoned many of its leading figures as prisoners of conscience on serious criminal charges (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138>).

Where can youth study Islam?

The human rights defender told Forum 18 that though the number of students of all the closed madrassahs across Tajikistan "is roughly one thousand, the number of those who wished to attend a madrassah but cannot, is in the thousands". The human rights defender lamented that "now only a handful can study Islam, and at that only the official version of the Hanafi faith."

Ekhsan Khushvakhtov, Press Secretary of the Education Ministry, told Forum 18 on 2 September that he has "no information" how many students in the past attended the madrassahs across the country. He referred Forum 18 to Abdujabbor of the Ministry.

Told that the number of the former students was about 1,000, and the number who wish to attend a madrassah might be in the thousands, and asked what will happen to those who were forced to stop their Islamic education, Khushvakhtov again referred Forum 18 to Abdujabbor.

Asked where thousands of young people who might wish to receive Islamic education might do so now, Yunusov of Sogd Administration objected. "There are not thousands of youth wanting to study Islam in Tajikistan today," he claimed.

President Rahmon has repeatedly criticised young men who study abroad in Islamic universities and madrassahs. Official data put the number at over 3,000, of whom, with government efforts, over 2,000 were returned to Tajikistan.

Asked why these young men would leave Tajikistan if there were enough schools which accepted them and taught them, Yunusov responded: "I cannot comment on that, I am just a Press-Secretary."

New school textbook covers mainly Hanafi Islam

The Education Ministry's Scientific Research Institute for Educational Development prepared the new textbook on History of Religions for use in secondary schools. Asked what the Religious Studies textbook for secondary schools covers, and who will be taught, Institute Director Isrofilniyo said that "9th grade pupils [aged about 16] will have the opportunity to study the subject, and it will be mandatory".

He added that the 300-page textbook "covers mainly the Hanafi school of Islam, which is the majority religion of Tajikistan. It also covers the Ismaili Muslim faith and other movements and schools of Islam, and some studies on Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism."

Asked whether the new subject will meet the needs of all youth, including those wishing to receive an Islamic religious education, Isrofilniyo, told Forum 18: "The youth will study all the religions but specifically the Hanafi school of Islam."

Asked whether the textbook takes into account all religions in their full diversity, including the various religious and spiritual movements within Islam, Isrofilniyo avoided the question. "It is a very important subject, and needs to be taught, because we do not want our youth to come under the influence of various religious groups and movements."

Teaching other forms of Islam and other religions can lead to civil war?

Asked why Tajikistan imposes the Hanafi school on Muslims and citizens who may want to study and devote themselves to other schools of Islam or other religions, Isrofilniyo replied: "We have religious freedoms in Tajikistan, everyone can choose their religion or school of Islam."

Asked why then both the Religion Law and the new textbook stress that Tajikistan's main religion must be Hanafi Islam, Isrofilniyo

responded: "The majority of the population do not approve or accept those who adhere to other religions. We want unity and do not want possible future conflicts." He pointed to the "devastating" civil war in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997. "And we know from the history of Islam that divisions do not bring anything good. So we are wary of these divisions and possible conflicts."

In contrast to Isrofilniyo, religious expert Akhmadov told Radio Free Europe that he "doubts that the closures of the madrassahs will help reduce the influence of extremism among the youth." He said that the madrassahs and those who studied there were "under the control [of the State] but now they will all be undereducated and left to themselves".

Akhmadov warned that "many now will go to mullahs, and be taught secretly". He believed there could be a return to the "secret madrassahs", disguised as "chaikhanas" (tea houses), which existed in the Soviet period. "Soon such chaikhanas will appear in various regions of the country," he predicted. (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=2138.

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://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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