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AZERBAIJAN: Raids on mosques, jailings, fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Secret police, police and religious affairs officials raided and closed another "illegal" mosque in Baku, complaining that young people "were involved in religious ceremonies". The secret police are investigating the owner. A Sheki court issued four one-month jailings and fines for protests against a plan to turn a mosque into a museum.

The State Security Service (SSS) secret police is investigating the leader of an "illegal" mosque where religious education of young people also took place. Officers raided and closed down the mosque in a joint operation in the capital Baku in late April.

The SSS secret police, the police and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations carried out two similar joint raids on mosques in Baku's Khazar District in February. The local court subsequently fined the two mosque leaders (see below).

A group of Muslims were punished in the northern city of Sheki for protesting against the transformation of the city's historic Khan Mosque into a museum. Four were given one month jail terms and nine in total were fined (two of them twice), for both the protest and their community's worship without state approval (see below).

A woman in Sheki was fined in February for unregistered worship (see below).

No officials of the SSS secret police, the police or the State Committee would explain why they raided places where people meet for worship.

The importance of the State Committee appears to be rising. Its head is among other senior officials who have joined the Cabinet of Ministers, while it is actively recruiting dozens of new staff (see below).

Strict controls

The government imposes severe controls on who is allowed to meet for worship and where. All religious communities must have state registration before they can legally function. However, many communities (like the Baptist church in Aliabad) are arbitrarily denied such registration. Muslim communities outside the framework of the state-backed Muslim Board are banned, although this is not enshrined in any law (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081>).

Fines for "illegal" meetings for worship are typically 1,500 Manats (7,000 Norwegian Kroner, 740 Euros or 880 US Dollars). This represents nearly three months' average wages for those with a formal job. However, for those in rural areas, those without a formal job, or pensioners, such fines represent a far heavier financial burden.

Officials from the police, State Security Service (SSS) secret police, State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, and Religious Affairs Commissions attached to city or district administrations frequently raid meetings for worship and help punish those exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 18 December 2017 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2343>).

In contrast to earlier years, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that so far in 2018, officials have not raided their meetings or fined any of their members. Police continue to detain individuals speaking about their faith to others on the street, but are now releasing them after an hour or so with no further charges, Jehovah's Witnesses added.

Qaradag District: Raid and closure of mosque, investigation

The State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the police and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations launched a joint raid on a mosque in a home in Baku's Qaradag District, the three agencies announced on their websites on 23 April. The home in Shikhlar in the settlement of Alat along the coast south of Baku is owned by Rahman Rahmanli.

The three agencies complained that young people "were involved in religious ceremonies" at the unregistered "non-traditional" mosque. Officials seized a large quantity of religious literature which they claim incited discord and "properly documented violations of the law", the three agencies declared. They ordered the mosque to stop functioning.

The mosque appears to be linked to a Naqshbandi Sufi community which draws its inspiration from Mahmud Afandi (1810-77), a Muslim told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 April.

The man who on 10 May answered the phone of Ali Ibrahimov, head of Qaradag District Police, said no officers from the District Police took part in the raid.

The SSS secret police launched an investigation into Rahmanli, the State Committee noted. Forum 18 asked the official who answered the phone at the SSS secret police press office on 3 May, who would not give his name, about whether Rahmanli is being investigated on criminal or administrative charges and why. "I don't know who you're talking about," the official responded and put the phone down.

No administrative case against Rahmanli appears to have been lodged at Qaradag District Court, court officials told Forum 18 on 8 May.

Officials at the Baku department of the State Committee told Forum 18 on 10 May that the head, Anar Kazimov, was on holiday. Officials refused to say why they took part in a raid on a place of worship.

Asked on 8 May about the raid on the mosque in Rahmanli's home, Yusif Nasibov, the head of the Religious Affairs Commission at Qaradag District Administration, told Forum 18 he could not hear and put the phone down. All Forum 18's subsequent calls went unanswered.

Khazar District: Mosque raid, fine

On 7 February, the SSS secret police, the police and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations launched a joint raid on a mosque in the settlement of Bina in Baku's Khazar District. They were joined by officials from the religious department of Khazar District Administration. The raid was launched to check for violations of the law, the State Committee announced on its website the same day.

Officers said Valeh Bashirov had violated the law by leading religious worship at the mosque without state registration. State Committee officials prepared a case against him under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2.

Administrative Code Article 515.0.2 punishes "Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies". The fine for individuals for this "offence" is between 1,500 and 2,000 Manats. This is equivalent to between three and four months' average wages for those in formal work (see F18News 2 June 2016 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2184>).

On 8 February, Judge Rashad Hasanov of Khazar District Court found Bashirov guilty and fined him, court officials told Forum 18 on 3 May. However, they refused to say how much Bashirov was fined.

Bashirov does not appear to have appealed against his fine to Baku Appeal Court.

Khazar District: Another mosque raid, fine

On 22 February, the SSS secret police, the police and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations launched a joint raid on the unregistered Imam Zeynalabdin Mosque in the settlement of Buzovna in Baku's Khazar District, the State Committee announced on its website the following day. The raid was to check whether "illegal" worship was being held there.

Photographs issued by the State Committee show the house with a notice outside clearly indicating that it is Imam Zeynalabdin Mosque, and the prayer room inside.

Officers said Farhad Ahmadov had violated the law by leading religious worship at the mosque without state registration. State Committee officials prepared a case against him under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2 ("Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies").

On 26 February, Judge Rashad Hasanov of Khazar District Court found Ahmadov guilty and fined him, court officials told Forum 18 on 3 May. However, they refused to say how much Ahmadov was fined.

Ahadov does not appear to have appealed against his fine to Baku Appeal Court.

Sheki: Jailings, fines for protesting against mosque transfer

A group of Muslims were punished in the northern city of Sheki for protesting against the transformation of the historic Khan Mosque into a museum. Four were given one month jail terms and nine in total were fined (two of them twice). The men had gathered at the Qishlaq Mosque (known officially as Topqaragaj Mosque), Azadliq.info website noted on 23 January.

The men were part of the New Azeri Islamic Society which took over Sheki's Khan Mosque in the early 1990s, renovated the building and held prayers there. The community repeatedly rejected state attempts to pressure them into seeking registration. It argued that state registration provided no benefits for it. The city authorities have long sought to hand the building to the Culture Department for use as a museum.

In a succession of cases on the evening of 23 January, Judges at Sheki District Court fined the six men on charges of "hooliganism" under Administrative Code Article 510, according to court records. Four of the men - Jabir Latifov, Qazanfar Hajiyev, Yunus Mustafayev and Nazim Sadiqov - were handed 30-day jail terms. Alfaddin Rizvanov and Shirin Aliyev were each fined 200 Manats, Azadliq added.

In February and March, State Committee officials brought further charges against the six and three other Muslims for holding meetings for worship without state permission under several provisions of the Administrative Code:

- Article 515.0.1, which punishes "A religious association's leader evading registration of the association with the relevant executive authority [State Committee]" with a fine for individuals of 1,500 to 2,000 Manats.

- Article 515.0.2, which punishes "Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies". The fine for individuals for this "offence" is between 1,500 and 2,000 Manats.

- Article 515.0.3, which punishes "clergy and members of religious associations holding special meetings for children and young people, as well as the organising or holding by religious bodies of organised labour, literary, or other clubs and groups unassociated with holding religious ceremonies" with fines for individuals of between 1,500 and 2,000 Manats.

It appears all nine Muslims were punished only under Article 515.0.2, with Sheki District Court dismissing the other charges.

In separate hearings on 8 February, Judge Jahid Imanov fined Latifov and Mustafayev, according to court records. On 19 February, the same Judge fined Rizvanov. On 21 and 26 February, Judge Kamran Suleymanov fined Aliyev and Hajiyev. On 14 March, the same Judge fined Sadiqov.

Judges fined three further Muslims - Badraddin Mammadov, Sadiq Abdullayev and Shirin Bayramov - on 13 and 19 February and 14 March. Abdullayev's fine was 1,500 Manats.

Abdullayev appealed against his fine. But on 16 March, Judge Imanverdi Shukurov of Sheki Appeal Court rejected his appeal, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

All Forum 18's calls to Taleh Abdullayev, the regional representative for the State Committee in Sheki who prepared the cases for court, went unanswered on 10 May.

Sheki: Another fine for worship

On 25 January, Judge Elchin Mehdiyev of Sheki District Court found Vafa Salamova guilty and fined her under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2 ("Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies").

Increased staff for State Committee - and power?

The State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations appears to be gaining increased importance. Under a 23 April Decree signed by President Ilham Aliyev, the State Committee Chair Mubariz Qurbanli was among 16 officials added to the Cabinet of Ministers.

The State Committee is also seeking to recruit a further 38 new staff. The recruitment is being handled by the State Examination Centre. In its 2 May announcement on its website, the Centre noted that the State Committee is by far the government agency with the highest number of positions for which it is seeking candidates.

The State Committee has in recent years been steadily building up its staff at the head office in Baku, as well as in local branches, which now total 15. Local branches now employ a total of 86 officials, with most having 5, according to the State Committee website. The Baku branch has 12, with Sumgait [Sumqayit] and Gyanja [GāncĀ] each having 8.

Despite its large staff, the State Committee managed to register 34 mosques in 2017 and only 13 in 2018. Among non-Muslim communities, it registered none in 2017 and only 3 (Seventh-day Adventists in Gyanja, New Apostolic Church in Baku and Vineyard Protestant Church in Baku) in 2018. Many other communities have waited in vain for registration for many years. (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Azerbaijan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=23>.

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.

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482.

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Azerbaijan>.

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