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RUSSIA: Any school of Islam, as long as it's Hanafi

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Not only do leaders of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Tatarstan support a local monopoly over all Muslim activity in the traditionally majority Muslim republic, so too do state officials, Forum 18 News Service has found. Renat Valiullin, the republic's top religious affairs official, acknowledged to Forum 18 that a requirement in Tatarstan's 1999 Religion Law that all Muslim religious organisations be subject to the Directorate had been struck down as unconstitutional. Yet he insisted all Muslim organisations must be subject to it "so as to keep the argument" of the 1999 Law, adding that they must also be of the Hanafi school of Islam. Kazan City Government religious affairs official Irek Arslanov spoke to Forum 18 approvingly of the Directorate's monthly meetings with the city's imams where "ideology is explained to them". Imam Ildus Faizov of the Directorate's Propaganda Department defended "good censorship" of Islamic thought, including the federal ban on many works of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. One Muslim told Forum 18 some Muslim women locally are afraid to wear the hijab and men are afraid to attend mosque for fear of being branded "religious extremists".

While stopping short of formal restrictions, the government of the traditionally majority Muslim republic of Tatarstan supports a monopoly on Islamic life by a single Muslim body, Forum 18 News Service has found.

A provision in Tatarstan's 1999 regional Religion Law stated that all Muslim religious organisations are subject to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Tatarstan. This was later struck down as unconstitutional, Renat Valiullin, the republic's top religious affairs official, acknowledged to Forum 18 on 22 June in the republic's capital Kazan. Nevertheless, he repeatedly referred to the Spiritual Directorate's registered statutes as if they were law. Tatarstan's 1,072 registered Muslim organisations must belong to the Spiritual Directorate on the basis of these statutes (charter), he stressed, whose relevant provision exists "so as to keep the argument" of the 1999 Law.

While Valiullin also acknowledged that the 1997 federal Religion Law allows for separate religious organisations of the same faith, "we follow such a subtle and balanced policy – both the Spiritual Directorate and state organs – that we do not see such incidents in the republic of Tatarstan."

Hanafi Muslim monopoly

Again according to the statutes of the Spiritual Directorate, all Muslim organisations must work on the basis of the Hanafi madhhab (school) of Islam, the head of Tatarstan's Council for Religious Affairs also stressed. "Our Islam here is the Hanafi madhhab, which finds a common language with people of other religions," Valiullin told Forum 18. "When Volga Bulgaria [the Tatar proto-state] adopted Islam in 920, there were also Orthodox churches, synagogues – that is the mindset of the people." While other places might follow a different madhhab or trend, such as Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, he suggested, "For them it is acceptable – 99 per cent of the people there are Muslims. But for us it is unacceptable."

Accepting that the state may not explicitly oppose or ban dissenting trends, Valiullin nevertheless spoke in support of the Spiritual Directorate's insistence upon a particular form of Islam. The Directorate produces copious literature promoting "traditional Islam", he pointed out, and mosque-goers "keep a check on" Salafi adherents seen to pray with their arms crossed and feet spread wide. "Tatars don't do this (...) there were cases when such people were told [by mosque-goers] to keep to the back, or leave, or do the same as us. That kind of approach is more effective than using force."

Unable to prohibit Muslims from studying Islam in countries following other traditions, the Tatar authorities also bolster local Islamic education by the Spiritual Directorate, Valiullin told Forum 18. The republic now has 11 licensed Islamic educational institutions, he said, while 35,000 students are enrolled on part-time courses at mosques. This policy has federal backing: senior presidential administration official Aleksei Grishin announced the allocation of 800 million roubles (approximately 165 million Norwegian Kroner, 18 million Euros or 25 million US Dollars) for Islamic education in Russia at a meeting in Kazan to mark the Spiritual Directorate's tenth anniversary in February 2008.

Responsible for relations with religious organisations at Kazan City Government, Irek Arslanov also praised containment of Islamic dissent in a 24 June interview in the Tatar capital. The Spiritual Directorate closely monitors activity at the city's 42 mosques, he told

Forum 18: "The imams gather almost every month and ideology is explained to them (..) sermons are kept to particular subjects (..) mosque-goers watch to see whether leaflets or newspapers are circulated without the approval of the Spiritual Directorate."

Imam Ildus Faizov, who heads the Spiritual Directorate's Propaganda Department, defended "good censorship" of Islamic thought at his Bulgar Mosque in Kazan on 23 June. Asked by Forum 18 about the ban on works by moderate Turkish theologian Said Nursi (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328), he maintained that state policy was "correct, in the sense that people who don't know the foundations of Islam get into different trends."

Asked about Muslims who support re-establishment of a caliphate (Islamic rule led by a caliph), Faizov described their sources of knowledge as "Building an Islamic State for Dummies". "Reading that, they think they can run a state, when there is no order in their families and they can't even run a small business," he remarked. "And any real Muslim knows that there will never be a caliphate."

From 1991, Faizov maintained to Forum 18, "dissidents began to penetrate and spread this kind of literature, repudiating our local, centuries-old Islamic scholarly heritage." As a result, Islam is only now beginning to develop in Tatarstan, he suggested: "Their books should have been banned from the start."

Religious expression restricted

While the Tatar approach to Islamic dissent is considerably more carrot than stick, Muslims affected by "extremism" charges fear it is nevertheless beginning to hamper religious expression. Handed a two-year suspended sentence in May 2009 for "religious extremism" charges he denies, the acting imam of Kazan's Al-Ikhlâs mosque, Rustam Safin, suggested to Forum 18 there on 22 June that the Tatar authorities wish to make "Sufism" official, as it does not encourage participation in public life: "I'm not against it, but then other trends will be oppressed and banned."

Books from which Safin taught before recently being ousted from a local madrassah (Muslim college) - including "The Foundations of Islamic Doctrine" and "The Personality of a Muslim" - are now among banned titles on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, he pointed out.

"The Personality of a Muslim", by Arab theologian Muhammad ali Al-Hashimi, is a manual of Koran-based advice for living whose sole emphasis is on kindness and generosity, including towards non-Muslims (see F18News 1 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1080). Ruled extremist by Buguruslan City Court (Orenburg Region) in August 2007, the work was automatically added to the Federal List the following December (see F18News 17 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1160).

Afraid to look like devout Muslims

In the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, names of those detained or wanted for Islamic extremism were culled from "Wahhabi lists" – police records of frequent mosque-goers - local Muslims there told Forum 18 in July 2008 (see F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

While doubting that such lists exist in Tatarstan, Taliya Gabdulhakova does believe that particularly devout Muslims are targeted as "religious extremists". This is why her son, daughter-in-law, nephew and his wife are currently on trial at the Supreme Court of Bashkortostan, she insisted to Forum 18 in Kazan on 21 June. From the Tatar city of Elabuga, the four face a wide-ranging set of charges - including religious extremism, terrorism and murder – which she and they insist are "fabricated from beginning to end" (see F18News 8 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1323).

Echoing Muslims in southern Russia, Gabdulhakova told Forum 18 that Tatar women who wear the hijab or headscarf and men who wear beards and rolled trousers arouse state suspicion. (One indictment against a Muslim activist in the southern Astrakhan Region viewed by Forum 18 accused him of inviting "Hindus [sic] and immigrants from the Caucasus propagandising radical Islam - specifically 'Wahhabism' - who wore untrimmed long beards and socks tucked into their trousers [sic]" – see F18News 8 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=723).

As a result, Gabdulhakova told Forum 18, local women – including her otherwise devout niece – are afraid to wear the hijab, and men are afraid to attend mosque. "Many Muslims here now say, 'Let our sons smoke, drink, take drugs, go to prostitutes – just not get into Islam, God forbid.'" (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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