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RUSSIA: Three more readers of Muslim theologian detained

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Following simultaneous raids on 20 homes in Krasnoyarsk on the night of 16-17 February by Russia's FSB security service, three readers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were detained for some 36 hours, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They and a fourth Nursi reader could now face religious extremism charges carrying a maximum three-year jail term. "These accusations of extremism are incomprehensible and ridiculous," Aleksei Gerasimov, one of those detained, told Forum 18 after his detention. "On the contrary, the Islam we're studying teaches deeper knowledge of the Most High, honesty, sincerity, how to help people and become a better person." Akhmad Kolobayev, the detained Muslims' lawyer, told Forum 18 that no formal charges have yet been brought, and he thought that court proceedings might not begin for some time. The Krasnoyarsk events follow similar raids and detentions in Dagestan in December 2009. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are also reporting a significant increase in brief police detentions since December.

Following simultaneous night raids on 20 homes by Russia's FSB security service in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk on 16-17 February, three readers of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi were detained for some 36 hours, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. They and a fourth reader could now face religious extremism charges carrying a maximum three-year jail term. "These accusations of extremism are incomprehensible and ridiculous," Aleksei Gerasimov, one of those detained, told Forum 18 from Krasnoyarsk on 22 February. "On the contrary, the Islam we're studying teaches deeper knowledge of the Most High, honesty, sincerity, how to help people and become a better person."

Gerasimov and fellow Nursi readers Fizuli Askarov, Yevgeny Petry and Andrei Dedkov – who was not detained – are suspected of co-ordinating activity by "Nurdzhular". Nursi readers insist that this group does not exist but it was controversially banned as an extremist religious organisation by Russia's Supreme Court on 10 April 2008 (see F18News 29 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1136). The Krasnoyarsk events follow similar raids and detentions in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan in December 2009 (see F18News 28 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1400).

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have experienced a significant increase in brief police detentions since Russia's Supreme Court labelled 34 items of their literature extremist in December (see F18News 26 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1415). Mikhail Odintsov of the office of Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman characterised their overall situation as "threatening", maintaining that "reverse Sovietisation" was taking place (see F18News 15 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1395).

According to Gerasimov, from four to seven state representatives conducted each of the 20 raids in Krasnoyarsk, beginning at approximately 11pm on 16 February; some identified themselves as FSB while others – masked and armed – did not. Those searching his flat did so "in a proper manner", he reported, but others acted "unpleasantly", such as by placing copies of the Koran on the floor. Those searching Gerasimov's flat seized titles from "Risale-i Nur" ("Messages of Light") - Nursi's collection of Koranic commentaries banned as extremist by Moscow's Koptevo District Court on 21 May 2007. In other cases they removed all Islamic literature - including the Koran - as well as computers, he told Forum 18. None of the confiscated items have been returned.

Subsequently detained by the FSB, Gerasimov refused to answer their questions. Petly was told that he and Gerasimov – ethnic Russians - are "traitors" for adopting Islam, he continued; overall, the interrogation suggested that the FSB were acting to implement the Supreme Court ban on "Nurdzhular". The three were released at 4pm on 18 February after pledging not to leave the locality.

Viewed by Forum 18, protocols drawn up between 3.30am and 4.35am on 17 February confirm Krasnoyarsk Regional FSB's detention of Gerasimov, Petly and Askarov and their transfer to a local temporary detention facility. Signed by all three, Gerasimov's and Petly's state that they were held on suspicion of organising activity by "Nurdzhular", and that they deny this and object to their detention. Askarov's does not detail his alleged crime.

Also speaking from Krasnoyarsk on 22 February, Akhmad Kolobayev, the detained Muslims' lawyer, told Forum 18 that no formal charges have yet been brought. While he expected their issue by the end of February, he thought that court proceedings might not begin for some time.

Viewed by Forum 18, a 15 February official resolution signed by the assistant head of Krasnoyarsk Regional FSB's investigation department, Vladimir Ruban, orders the opening of a criminal case against Askarov, Dedkov, Gerasimov and Petry for violating Article 282.2, Part 1 of the Criminal Code ("organising activity by a banned religious or other association") which can result in an up to three year jail term. Under the Extremism Law, mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of banned literature, such as Russian translations of works by Said Nursi, can also result in other parts of Criminal Code Article 282 ("incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred") being invoked. This could then lead to a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Specifically, the document signed by Ruban accuses the four of "organising the activity of a religious association for the joint profession of faith and study of books from the 'Risale-i Nur' collection of writings by Said Nursi, spiritual leader of the international religious association 'Nurdzhular'". Since the beginning of 2006, it maintains, the four formed a network of 12 study centres at flats in Krasnoyarsk city, where "religious lessons take place during which members of the association jointly study books from the 'Risale-i Nur' collection of writings (...) and perform religious rites." The suspects are also alleged to have translated into Russian, published and distributed Nursi's works, and to have attracted new "adepts" through "gradual psychological processing – the formation of a positive attitude towards death together with readiness for self-sacrifice in the interests of doctrine; propaganda of superiority and inferiority of citizens due to their attitude towards religion; enmity between Muslims and non-believers".

Vladimir Ruban's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 19 February. 22 and 23 February are public holidays in Russia.

Defence of Nursi's works

Added to the Federal List of Extremist Materials after being outlawed, the Russian translations of "Risale-i Nur" are now banned throughout Russia. Even before the verdict, Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights denounced the trial: "No form of opposition to citizens due to their choice of world view (religious or non-religious) is contained in the books and brochures, still less calls for religious hatred and intolerance," Vladimir Lukin declared. "It is very important that we do not allow interference in the convictions and beliefs of millions of citizens on the poorly grounded, unproven pretext of fighting against extremism, as this really could provoke wide-scale violations of their right to freedom of belief." Top Muslim leader Ravil Gainutdin has described the ban as "a crude violation of freedom of conscience in our country" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Koptevo District Court met in closed session and its seven-page ruling did not cite any evidence for the psychologists' and linguists' conclusions on which the ban rests, such as that Nursi's work "propagandises hatred between Muslims and non-believers". Among the strongest evidence against "Risale-i Nur" found by psychologists and psychiatrists in a 2006 analysis for a similar case opened in Tatarstan was that Nursi's reference to a prophecy about Jesus' Second Coming as the fulfilment of sharia law "discredits the religious value of Christianity as a religion" and that his reference to "the sword of strong faith" was "a concept of opposition and war which could lead to defensive behaviour" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Nursi opponents in Russia frequently cite an alleged ban in Turkey on both the theologian's works and "Nurdzhular" - a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers". However, official Turkish government documents recently viewed by Forum 18 counter this claim. A 1960 ruling by Afyon City Court in western Turkey notes that books of the "Risale-i Nur" collection "were published with state permission and are permitted to be freely bought and sold". It also notes – as today's Nursi readers in Russia allege – that "not a scrap of evidence was found to suggest that the defendants were gathering in pursuit of anything other than religious aims, or organised any form of society by the name of Nurdzhular (...) it was [therefore] ascertained that the only thing linking these people labelled Nurdzhular is spiritual unity as a result of reading the same books."

A 30 March 2007 statement signed by Mehmet Görmez, vice-chair of Turkey's governmental Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), likewise finds that the 14 books of "Risale-i Nur" "do not pose any harm whatsoever from a religious and social point of view".

Intermittent state action against Nursi readers occurred in Tatarstan and elsewhere in Russia both before and after the bans on "Risale-i Nur" and "Nurdzhular". Latterly, prominent officials in Tatarstan have expressed doubt about such action to Forum 18, especially after some 50 Turkish teachers in the republic were refused visa extensions to work in secular Tatar-Turkish lycees with a high reputation among the local government elite (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328).

Extremist ruling overturned

On 1 February Gorodishchensk District Court (Penza Region) overturned extremism rulings on two Islamic titles "Monotheism. Path from Darkness to Light", edited by Volga Muslim board leader Mufti Mukaddas Bibarsov, and "Good for Good, Evil for Evil" by Idris Galyautdinov, imam of the main mosque in Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan), Muslim news website Ansar.ru reported. The publications no longer appear on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which currently runs to 490 titles. (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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