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TAJIKISTAN: "Your children will become extremists and terrorists"

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A new crackdown is underway on religious education of children and young people in Tajikistan and abroad, Forum 18 News Service notes. In televised remarks, President Emomali Rahmon called on parents to recall their children from foreign Islamic colleges, claiming that otherwise "your children will become extremists and terrorists". "We ourselves, the government and the Religious Affairs Committee, will decide how many religious ministers are needed for the country," he insisted. Presidential Advisor Mansur Sayfutdinov claimed to Forum 18 that the president was speaking not of all such students, but only those who had not sought state permission for such studies. Meanwhile, the Interior Ministry launched an apparently nationwide "Operation Madrassah" to end private teaching of Islam, which has seen many madrassahs raided and administrative cases launched against teachers. "We have only identified and stopped illegally acting mullahs who have no licence to teach the Koran," one police officer told Forum 18. Article 474 of the Administrative Code bans "teaching religious knowledge without [state] permission".

As state controls increase on religious activity, Tajikistan's authorities have recently focused on imposing tighter control on Islamic education, Forum 18 News Service notes. President Emomali Rahmon has warned and asked all parents to call back their children studying religion abroad, putting particular stress on those studying Islam. As part of a nationwide operation, police in the northern Sugd Region and elsewhere have raided numerous homes of Muslims privately teaching children the Koran. Administrative and criminal cases were opened against private Muslim teachers and parents who "do not allow" their children to go to school.

Tajikistan has imposed ever-tighter controls on religious activity in recent years. Officials claim that the Muslim Jamaat Tabligh movement was banned in 2006 (the ban does not appear to have been published), while Jehovah's Witness activity was banned entirely in 2007. In 2009 the Salafi school of Islamic thought was banned. A restrictive new Religion Law was adopted in 2009 involving new limits on the numbers of mosques and restrictions on preaching. The new Law required the re-registration of all religious communities amid tight new restrictions. Dozens of members or alleged members of various Muslim movements have been given long prison terms (see F18News 19 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446).

The authorities in Sugd Region also banned Muslim prayers via loudspeakers at the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began on 11-12 August. The authorities in Dushanbe, the capital, asked the Islamic Revival Party to stop holding prayers in their party building. Also it remains unclear how the criminal case reopened in May against 17 Jehovah's Witnesses is developing (see F18News 3 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1484).

Restrictions and penalties

Article 8 of the 2009 Religion Law guarantees the right to take part in religious education individually and collectively, but also requires state permission for such education. It also appears to restrict this right to registered religious organisations without extending the right to registered religious communities, which are smaller. The Article specifies that "centralised cathedral five-time mosques" and "cathedral five-time mosques" have this right, but pointedly does not include ordinary mosques. Article 12 of the Law appears to require state registration for religious educational establishments.

Article 8 also specifies only that children between the ages of 7 and 18 have the right to obtain religious education in non-school hours with the written permission of their parents, implying that children younger than that do not have this right.

The 2009 Religion Law does not specify any requirement for state permission for those studying religion abroad, but officials insist such permission is required from the Religious Affairs Committee.

Article 474 of the Code of Administrative Offences ("Violation of legislation on religious organisations") specifies "teaching religious knowledge without [state] permission" as one such "violation". For first time offenders, the Article prescribes a fine on individuals of 7 to 10 state Financial Indicators, 20 to 30 on religious leaders and 100 to 200 on religious organisations. One Financial Indicator is currently 35 Somonis (50 Norwegian Kroner, 6 Euros or 8 US Dollars). Fines are higher for those who commit the same "violation" within one year.

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Speaking on 25 August in front of residents of Farhor District, 200 km (125 miles) south of Dushanbe, in remarks which were also broadcast on national television, President Rahmon seriously warned parents about the dangers of sending their children to study Islam in foreign countries. He called on them to return children from foreign Islamic education institutions, local news agencies reported.

"I ask all the parents who have sent their children abroad to study in religious schools, to call them back because most of these schools are not religious in essence," he was quoted as saying. "Your children will become extremists and terrorists, that is, in future they will be enemies of and betray the Tajik nation."

President Rahmon claimed that parents who send children abroad to study Islam want them to become imams to "make money and live on that". "We ourselves, the government and the Religious Affairs Committee will decide how many religious ministers are needed for the country, and will send students to those religious education institutions which do not pursue extremism," he was quoted as saying.

Mansur Sayfutdinov, Senior Advisor to President Rahmon, told Forum 18 on 1 September that the President in his speech did not mean all students who are studying abroad, but only those "studying in violation of the new Religion Law". Sayfutdinov did not comment on why President Rahmon thought that these students would become extremists or terrorists.

RFE/RL's Tajik Service noted that officially, some 2,000 Tajiks are currently studying at religious schools in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Pakistan, though the actual number is thought to be higher.

Why should the State control religious studies abroad?

Presidential Advisor Sayfutdinov insisted to Forum 18 that each student wanting to go abroad to study religion "must collect certain documents and be interviewed by the Education Ministry and the State Religious Affairs Committee, and apparently those students have not done so." Asked how many students abroad were in conflict with this requirement, Sayfutdinov said, "I do not have those figures, but if the President spoke about it he must have serious arguments." He also did not know the number of students studying religion abroad with official permission. He referred Forum 18 to the government's Religious Affairs Committee.

Told about the religious communities' complaints about the requirement that they must get the Religious Affairs Committee's consent before sending students to study abroad and asked why the State should control who wants to study religion abroad, Sayfutdinov responded: "We need to make sure these people will not pose threat to the country's security."

Asked if he did not think this created too many bureaucratic barriers for the peaceful students of religion, Sayfutdinov said that the authorities will "allow anyone" to study religion abroad as long as they are "ready to go through the legal procedures." Asked what the legal procedures were and what documents must be collected, Sayfutdinov referred Forum 18 to the Religious Affairs Committee.

The response of Mavlon Mukhtarov, Deputy Head of the State Religious Affairs Committee, to the same question was different from that of Sayfutdinov. Asked why the President asked all the parents to return their children studying religion from abroad, Mukhtarov told Forum 18 on 31 August that President Rahmon "recommended those families with limited budgets to send their children to Islamic schools in Tajikistan". Asked if those who still wanted to go abroad to study Islam were allowed to do so, he said "No one has banned that."

Mukhtarov could not be reached on 1 September for further comments on this issue. He put the phone down twice after Forum 18 introduced itself, saying that he could not hear well. He did not answer subsequent calls.

Raids on private Koran lessons

Amid a growing government crackdown on private Koranic lessons which it regards as illegal, the Interior Ministry launched an apparently nationwide "Operation Madrassah" at the beginning of May to stop such lessons. Such religious education for children in mosques or private homes increases during the school summer holidays.

On 26 May, Sugd Regional Police raided the home of Maruf Rozikov, a 34-year-old resident of Surkh in Isfara District, fergana.ru reported on 13 July. The police found that Rozikov was "illegally" teaching the fundamentals of Islam in his home to twenty children between 8 and 16 years of age. The police opened a case against Rozikov under Administrative Code Article 474. The case was handed to Isfara city Court, but Forum 18 has been unable to find out whether he was punished.

Elsewhere in Sugd, in Istravshan District an administrative case under the same Article was brought against a 39-year-old woman (whose name is not given) for teaching the Koran to four children in her home. Cases under the same Article were also brought against several others in Bobodjongafur, Isfara and Mastchoh Districts, ferghana.ru reported.

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Moreover Prosecutors in Mastchoh, Istaravshan and Isfara Districts opened cases under the Criminal Code Article 164 ("preventing from receiving basic compulsory general education") against parents who hindered children to attend secondary schools. If their guilt is proven those parents will be given fines between one and two thousand times the minimum monthly wage or up to two years' imprisonment.

Mavlavi Abduqahor, a madrassah leader in Rudaki, in Khatlon Region south of Dushanbe, was detained with several of his students in early July as part of the Interior Ministry operation and then freed, RFE/RL reported, citing his relatives. He was again arrested on 1 August, together with dozens of his students. Interior Ministry spokesman Mahmadullah Asadulloev told RFE/RL that Abduqahor was arrested for teaching without a licence, charging tuition to his students, failing to adhere to school health and hygiene regulations, and for teaching children under 7 years of age, which Asadulloev said is the worst offence.

Officials deny, defend crackdown

Saidmukhtor Jalolov, Head of the Education Department of Sugd Region, said that under the Education Law, every child must complete the 9-year general education programme. "When parents hinder children from going to school we ask the law-enforcement agencies to prevent such cases," he told Forum 18 on 1 September. Jalolov said that in 2009, the number of such parents was 229, and the figure has gone down to 69 this year.

Nasriddinov, Deputy of Fateh Karimov, Prosecutor of Istaravshan District (he did not give his first name), flatly denied that any cases were opened in his district against private teachers of the Koran or parents who did not send children to secondary schools. Asked what measures would be taken against any parents who might in future do so, "We have no such cases or inclination in our district," he told Forum 18 on 31 August.

Police officer Israfilov (who did not give his first name), Deputy to Rauf Yusupov, Chief of Sugd Regional Police, denied that any police operation was underway against the teachers of the Koran in the region. "We have only identified and stopped illegally acting mullahs who have no licence to teach the Koran," he told Forum 18 on 26 August. Asked what was illegal in the fact that they taught the Koran to children he said, "Ask the relevant organs." He further refused to talk to Forum 18.

Asked if this was not interference in the private life of the families, Jalolov of Sugd Region Education Department said, "No one is against the families teaching their children religion in their free time but they must attend the schools." Asked what he thought about the parents who were facing possible punishments, Jalolov said that "parents who do not let their children attend school must be punished according to the law."

Jalolov also said that he approved of the raids against the "illegal" private Koran lessons. "Everything must be done according to the law, and all those illegal groups and organisations must be stopped," he said referring to unregistered religious activity.

Asked about the police raids on private Koran lessons, Mukhtarov of the Religion Committee in Dushanbe first denied that any cases have been opened against the imams or parents. However, told that Sugd Regional Police had confirmed such raids to Forum 18, he insisted: "Teaching Koran privately is not banned, but those who do it must be licensed by the State Committee. Let those mullahs ask the Committee for a licence." (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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki.

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