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TAJIKISTAN: Authorities targeting IRP and Jehovah's Witness unregistered worship

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Tajikistan is concentrating on trying to stop unregistered worship under the auspices of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Forum 18 News Service has found. IRP members have been ordered to stop unregistered prayers, party member Imam Zuboidullo Rozikov has been fined for leading them, and a fire has destroyed an IRP building used as a mosque for women. The ban on Jehovah's Witnesses continues, and "because all of this we live in uncertainty and fear, and cannot worship openly," a Jehovah's Witness in Khujand – where there is a pending criminal trial - lamented. Jehovah's Witnesses have been fired from public sector jobs because of their faith. Some religious communities suspect that the current re-targeting of official efforts against unregistered activity away from them may be only temporary. Referring to the ban on all unregistered religious activity, a Baptist commented that "we will go on with our worship, and are ready for any punishment or consequences".

Tajikistan is concentrating on trying to stop unregistered prayers under the auspices of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Forum 18 News Service has found. Other groups of Muslim and non-Muslim religious believers do not appear to be currently facing state obstructions to their meeting for worship – despite all unregistered religious activity being illegal under Tajikistan's controversial 2009 Religion Law. The authorities have refused to discuss this anomaly with Forum 18.

From the time the 2009 Religion Law came into force, officials have been insistent that they would stop all unregistered religious activity – without any exceptions - and were imposing extra-legal controls on the religious communities they registered (see F18News 15 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1431). The registration process has continued, but the authorities appear to have currently ceased – at least temporarily – trying to stop unregistered activity, with the exceptions of the banned Jehovah's Witness community and the Islamic Revival Party.

IRP members have been ordered to stop unregistered prayers in the party headquarters, and party member Imam Zuboidullo Rozikov has been fined for leading unauthorised Friday prayers and sermons in the party headquarters. A fire has destroyed the IRP's cultural centre in the capital Dushanbe which was used as a mosque for women. Party members have told Forum 18 that they think this was arson, but the authorities have claimed to Forum 18 that the fire was the IRP's fault.

Islamic public activity and ideas targeted

Islamic public activity outside state control has come under increasing pressure in recent months. The authorities chose the start of Ramadan to ban the use of loudspeakers to broadcast Muslim prayers, and also have reaffirmed a 2009 ban on children taking part in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time the authorities ordered IRP members to stop praying in the party headquarters (see F18News 3 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1484). The authorities are also targeting all forms of Islamic religious education outside state control, President Emomali Rahmon claiming that otherwise "your children will become extremists and terrorists" (see F18News 2 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1483).

Tajikistan has also prosecuted and jailed religious believers for their ideas, not their actions, 92 followers of the banned Jamaat Tabligh Muslim religious movement have been punished with lengthy prison sentences and huge fines (see F18News 19 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446).

The fine

Judge M. Sodirova of Dushanbe's Firdavsi District Court on 1 November fined Imam Rozikov 245 Somonis (330 Norwegian Kroner, 40 Euros, or 55 US Dollars) under Tajikistan's Administrative Code's article 474 part 1 ("violating the Religion Law"). He was specifically charged with leading unauthorised prayers and sermons in the IRP building.

The Administrative Code's Article 474 part 1 punishes carrying out religious activity without state registration; violation of the order

established in the law for organising and holding religious ceremonies; teaching religious doctrines without authorisation; and holding prayers, religious rites, rituals and ceremonies in places not established by law. The Religion Law imposes numerous restrictions on freedom of religions or belief – breaking Tajikistan's human rights obligations – including severely restricting where Muslims can preach and worship (see F18News 19 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1315).

Imam Rozikov said that he did not even want to hire a defence lawyer, and defended himself before the court. He told Forum 18 on 8 November that he told the court that "we have rights given by Tajikistan's Constitution to assemble for prayers" with their co-believers. "The Judge did not argue with me on this point but kept saying that I have violated the Religion Law," the Imam stated.

Telephones at Firdavsi District Prosecutor's Office went unanswered on 9 November. Judge Sodirova of the District Court on 9 November said that she has no time to explain her decision since she was going to a meeting. "Everything is written in the decision," she told Forum 18 before putting the phone down.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, Deputy Chair of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, which reports direct to President Rahmon, did not want to comment on the fine. "I just came back from Mecca," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 9 November, "and I need to find out about the court case."

Imam Rozikov said that he is not going to appeal because "it is of no use, and I know that both the appeal court and Supreme Court will uphold the decision." He said that this was the view of defence lawyers with whom he had discussed the case. He said he was going to pay the fine since he has "no time or nerves to waste" in courts. He also said that to avoid a repeat punishment from the authorities, which "could be harsher", he will no longer lead the prayers. However other people will take turns to lead them.

The raid

Ten days prior to the Imam Rozikov's trial on 22 October, Firdavsi District Prosecutor's Office, the police, and the Religious Affairs Committee raided the IRP's headquarters while party members were holding Friday prayers.

Imam Rozikov told Forum 18 that around 2,000 people were present. He said that the officials waited until the prayer was finished, and then "kept myself and some Party leaders and those who were selling religious books and disks for questioning" The imam said this took more than two hours, and that they were warned to stop holding prayers in the party building before being released.

Imam Rozikov said that sermons stick to Koran and Islamic tradition, and say nothing of a political nature.

Why?

Asked why the authorities were against IRP members praying in their party headquarters, Mukhtarov of the Religious Affairs Committee said that organised prayers "must be held in officially registered places." He then asked Forum 18, "Why don't they attend any mosque or cathedral mosque [the only mosques where the state allows sermons] for prayers?"

"We cannot leave our working place during the work hours on Fridays and go to other mosques, and also cannot tell others who join us for prayers to leave the building", Imam Rozikov replied to this comment on 9 November to Forum 18.

Asked why those who join the IRP for prayers do not go to Dushanbe mosques, the Imam said that: "They like our Friday sermons, and are not satisfied with what they hear in other mosques, where imams are unofficially appointed by the local executive authorities".

Mukhtarov of the Religious Affairs Committee refused to say what the further measures the authorities would take if IRP continued holding the prayers in the party headquarters. "They are educated people, and know the law," he replied.

The fire

Around 100 Muslim women used to meet to in the IRP's cultural centre, before it was burned down on 23 October. IRP officials told Forum 18 that they think this is linked to official pressure to stop the IRP holding Friday prayers.

Major-General Mahmadsait Karimov, Chief of Dushanbe City Fire Brigade, told Forum 18 on 11 November that the official investigation concluded that the fire was the result of "electric heaters left in the building unattended".

Shamsiddin Saidov, Chief of the Administration of the IRP, on 11 November told Forum 18 that he thought the fire was arson. "I see no technical reasons for the fire, because where the fire started there were no electric appliances or wiring," he stressed. "It is suspicious that the building was burnt down on 23 October, the day after the authorities raided Friday prayers on 22 October."

"We live in uncertainty and fear, and cannot worship openly"

The ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan continues, a Jehovah's Witness from the community told Forum 18 on 11 November. A criminal case opened against 17 Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand is "hanging in the air", and the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police are "neither leading an investigation on it nor closing it down" (see F18News 28 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1354).

"Because all of this we live in uncertainty and fear, and cannot worship openly," the Jehovah's Witness lamented. Because of the ban fellow believers in Khujand are trying to survive on private jobs. "Our believers are known in the society and they are not employed in the public sector," the Jehovah's Witness said. Recently a member of their community working for a state school left his job, under the pressure of law-enforcement agencies. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not want to discuss the details of this, due to fear of state reprisals.

Mukhtarov of the Religious Affairs Committee did not want to discuss anything to do with unregistered Muslim or non-Muslim religious activity on 15 November, asking Forum 18 to call back later. When Forum 18 called back, he repeatedly put the phone down.

Since being banned in October 2007 the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced raids and threats of prosecutions by the police and NSC secret police (see F18News 28 September 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1354). Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also had "temporary" bans imposed on them at that time. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down after it was banned, while the other - Ehyo Church - was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008 (see F18News 20 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1242).

Of all the former Soviet states and unrecognised entities, only Tajikistan and the breakaway republic of Abkhazia on the Black Sea have specifically banned the Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 7 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=308).

Ismaili mosques unregistered, but left alone

An Ismaili imam from the south-eastern Badakhshan Region, who asked not to be named for the fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 on 15 November that he had not heard of the authorities recently causing problems for unregistered activity in the Region's mosques. Badakhshan is a home to the majority of Tajikistan's of Ismaili Muslims, which is within Shia Islam. The authorities have "not raised the issue of registration or re-registration actively" in the region. "We have for instance two mosques in Khorugh [the regional capital], and they continue activity with no registration," he said.

Is re-targeting of official efforts temporary or permanent?

Some religious communities suspect that the current re-targeting of official efforts against unregistered activity away from them may be only temporary. A member of the capital Dushanbe's unregistered Baptist church told Forum 18 on 15 November that the ban on their church continues. The church belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists, which on principle refuses to seek state registration. It was banned for meeting for worship in a private home without state permission, in December 2009 (see F18News 2 December 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1381). Attempts to overturn the banning order have failed.

"We continue our worship, and normal activity despite the ban," the Baptist told Forum 18. Referring to the ban on all unregistered religious activity, the Baptist commented that "we will go on with our worship, and are ready for any punishment or consequences".

One of Tajikistan's two Baptist Unions, who do not work together, has been told to dissolve voluntarily. The Baptist Union chaired by Alexandr Werwai has previously been told by the authorities that it will not be registered, as the Association of Evangelical Christians-Baptists headed by Igor Samiyev (see F18News 15 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1431). However the Religious Affairs Committee is now saying that the Baptist Union should now dissolve voluntarily and re-register as a new Union, Werwai told Forum 18 on 12 November. "We have re-registered six churches, and need to register five other unregistered churches, which belong to our Union, and then we will go ahead with the registration of the Union itself," he said. "We have not had any problems with our unregistered churches so far," he said.

Tajikistan's only synagogue has not been registered due to a dispute over who owns the building. The Jewish community's former synagogue was bulldozed by the authorities without paying compensation – which was paid by President Rahmon's brother-in-law instead (see F18News 3 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1279). "But we can continue our prayers in this building," Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 on 15 November. (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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