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AZERBAIJAN: State tells Muslims when to pray

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

"If we pray according to the calendar we believe is correct, they'll arrest us," one Muslim tells Forum 18 about the Shia-oriented unified calendar the state imposes on all Muslims. Azerbaijan's Georgian Orthodox – after nearly a year – should soon have a resident priest again.

Muslims who are not part of Azerbaijan's state-backed Caucasian Muslim Board, particularly Sunnis, have objected to the state-imposed calendar which dictates when they are allowed to pray and celebrate Muslim festivals. "This is a serious issue for us," one Sunni Muslim from the Baku area told Forum 18. "If we pray according to the calendar we believe is correct, they'll arrest us." The Muslim noted that the state does not impose compulsory calendars on Christians, Jews or members of other faiths.

The Muslim added that if they pray and observe festivals as they see correct, spies in the mosque would soon notify the institutions that they report to: the State Security Service (SSS) secret police, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, the local Administration or the state-backed Muslim Board. Arrest and punishment could follow, the Muslim noted.

State officials and the Muslim Board reminded all Muslims on 26 May that they must abide by the official calendar ahead of the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in early June.

Specific restrictions on Muslims

Azerbaijan imposes tight state restrictions on everyone's exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights – in defiance of its international human rights obligations. Both Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed in recent years for exercising their freedom of religion and belief, their fellow prisoners of conscience including many secular human rights defenders. Muslims are singled out for special restrictions. The government gives the Muslim Board a monopoly on all Muslim activity, and will not give the compulsory state registration to any mosques not subject to the Board. The state has closed down many Sunni Muslim mosques. Those who lead mosques have to be Azerbaijani citizens who have gained their Islamic education in Azerbaijan. The regime attempts to counter discussion of its human rights violations with outright denials and claims of "inter-religious harmony", "religious tolerance" and similar assertions (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

Among Azerbaijan's other recent violations of freedom of religion and belief, the judge who upheld a large fine on a Jehovah's Witness for attending a worship meeting rejects the victim's argument that the fine violates the European Convention on Human Rights, telling Forum 18 his "decision is correct" (see F18News 2 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2184).

"God orders us when to pray, not [Muslim Board head] Pashazade"

A member of a different Sunni Muslim community told Forum 18 that in mid-May, an official of the local administration came to the mosque to instruct them about the days when Ramadan starts and finishes according to the official calendar. "He said that we must follow this," the mosque member complained to Forum 18. "I responded that God orders us when to pray, not [Muslim Board head Allahshukur] Pashazade."

The mosque member noted that while the Muslim Board has issued its own calendar for many years, "this year state officials have spoken far more loudly about how this must be followed."

The reminder that the state chooses when Muslims can and cannot pray and observe festivals comes amid continuing raids on religious meetings in homes. Such raids often result in fines for "illegal" religious activity. Victims of such raids include Jehovah's Witnesses and Sunni Muslims who use the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi to deepen their understanding of their faith (see F18News 2 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2184).

However, Azerbaijan's two state-registered Georgian Orthodox parishes may soon be able to hold regular liturgies again after nearly a year. The parishes have been without a resident priest since June 2015, when the Azerbaijani authorities denied re-entry to the

country to the last parish priest (see below).

"The state doesn't interfere"?

Asked why Muslim communities cannot decide for themselves when they should pray and observe festivals, Bahar Muradova, head of the Human Rights Committee in the Milli Majlis (parliament), said that she was not informed about the issue. "The state doesn't interfere in religious issues," she claimed to Forum 18 from Baku on 27 May.

Asked why Azerbaijan's Georgian Orthodox have been prevented from having a resident priest for nearly a year, Muradova claimed not to be able to hear and put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

State-imposed Muslim calendar

At a meeting at the Muslim Board in Baku on 26 May, both State Committee and Muslim Board officials reminded all Muslims of the state-backed calendar that they must follow.

Addressing the meeting was Siyavush Heydarov, a deputy chair of the State Committee (who worked for the KGB and then Azerbaijan's then National Security Ministry secret police from 1986 to 2011). He warned that his Committee would be monitoring mosques over Ramadan to ensure that they abide by the official calendar, according to remarks quoted by APA news agency the same day. He claimed that the rules are necessary for national unity.

If any mosques were found to be using other calendars, they would face serious measures, he added. Any individuals caught distributing other calendars (including booksellers with the required state permission to sell religious literature) would face "a judicial evaluation". In the case of booksellers, "a guilty person awaits criminal responsibility".

"We ask everyone who discovers [that other calendars are being distributed] to tell us so that, together with law-enforcement agencies, measures can be taken," APA quoted Heydarov as declaring.

The Muslim Board issued a fatwa (religious ruling) requiring all Muslims in the country to follow the state-backed calendar and observe all Muslim festivals on the same day.

Forum 18 tried to reach Heydarov at the State Committee in Baku repeatedly on 27 May, but his colleagues said he was in a meeting or out of the office. An aide to Heydarov – who did not give his name – declined to discuss the imposition of the state-backed Muslim calendar with Forum 18 on 30 May.

"God won't accept our prayers"

Muslim theologian and Koran translator Elmir Kuliyeu says that having all Muslims in one location marking festivals at the same time is in accordance with Islamic traditions. "Attempts by religious centres of various states to come to a common system to determine dates can only be welcomed," he told Forum 18 on 31 May from Turkey, where he now lives and works. "All the more as not only theologians, but astronomers and members of scholarly institutions and observatories are involved in this initiative."

Kuliyeu did not comment on whether it is right or wrong for the Azerbaijani state authorities to impose one calendar on all local Muslims. He merely observed that in some countries such issues are decided by the religious centres themselves, in others – such as Turkey – such centres are subordinated to the state. "It all depends on the level of secularism the state grants," he told Forum 18.

The Baku-area Sunni Muslim complained that the state-imposed Muslim calendar can impose a difference of up to an hour on their five-times a day prayers. The official calendar also forces them to observe festivals one or two days apart from the date they believe they should be observed.

"Ramadan is due to start this year on 7 June, according to their, fixed calendar," the Sunni Muslim told Forum 18. "We will watch the moon, and it's possible it should start on 6 or 7 June, depending on what we see." Likewise, the Muslim said that their community believes it should mark the end of the Ramadan fast generally a day earlier than the state-backed calendar.

The Muslim insisted that prayer times are set very precisely and that praying at the correct time is essential. "If we pray at a different time, God won't accept our prayers."

However, the mosque where the Muslim worships has been forced to follow the timing of prayers and the date of festivals in the state-imposed calendar out of fear of punishment. "We had phone calls from the State Committee, the Muslim Board and the secret police last year [2015] to ensure we marked Ramadan on their dates."

Although the state-promoted Muslim calendar contains Shia commemorations which Sunni Muslims do not observe – such as the commemoration of the martyrdom of the Muslim prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Imam Ali on the festival of Ashura – the Muslim

told Forum 18 that so far their community is not being forced to hold such commemorations.

The Sunni Muslim regarded the imposition of a Shia-oriented calendar as part of state favouritism towards Shia Muslims and discrimination against Sunnis. "They take all our freedom from us," the Muslim complained. "You have to believe like us – that's their message. I've got nothing against them praying their way, but they should let us pray in ours."

Another Sunni Muslim, who lives in Baku, supported the idea of a unified Muslim calendar, but only if it was based on what he regards as the "norms of Islam". "But the one they have drawn up is distorted and does not set the correct times," the Muslim told Forum 18 from Baku on 31 May. "It will lead to dissatisfaction."

This Muslim added that it is unclear how far the authorities will go to impose the calendar on mosques. "I would be unhappy if it leads to pressure over the way Muslims observe their faith."

Georgian Orthodox liturgies to resume?

Nearly a year after the Azerbaijani authorities denied re-entry to Azerbaijan to the only Georgian Orthodox priest serving there, full liturgies could finally be about to resume at the two state-registered Georgian Orthodox parishes the Azerbaijani authorities allow to exist.

Fr Petre Khumarashvili has finally gained Azerbaijani citizenship, Bishop Demetre Kapanadze of the Diocese of Khornabuji and Hereti (who has oversight of Azerbaijan's parishes) told Voice of Georgia news website on 18 May.

The bishop named Fr Khumarashvili to serve in Azerbaijan months ago, and negotiations with the Azerbaijani authorities were already underway at the beginning of 2016 (see F18News 26 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2142).

In October 2015, Patriarch Ilya wrote to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev asking for Fr Khumarashvili to be given Azerbaijani citizenship. This was finally granted in May 2016. "This weekend he will conduct his last services in the Virgin Mary Church in Dedoplistskaro [in eastern Georgia], after which he will travel to Azerbaijan," the bishop was quoted on ingilo.ru as declaring.

The Azerbaijani authorities had refused to allow a resident Georgian Orthodox priest to serve the Gakh parishes since the abrupt denial of re-entry to Fr Demetre (secular name Levan Tetrushvili) in June 2015. Fr Demetre had taken over the Gakh parishes after the deportation of the previous parish priest, Fr Basile Gogilashvili, in July 2011.

In the year since Fr Demetre was banned from returning, the two parishes - St George's Church in Gakh and St Nino's Church in the nearby village of Alibeyli – have had only occasional pastoral visits by clergy from Georgia. They were thus deprived of the opportunity to hold regular Sunday liturgies, as well as weddings and other rites needing a priest (see F18News 26 January 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2142).

At Easter 2016, which the Church marked on Sunday 1 May, the Azerbaijani authorities allowed a short visit from Bishop Demetre Kapanadze. He had occasionally been able to visit the parishes on special feastdays over the previous ten months when the parishes had no resident priest. During his visit to mark St George's day, 23 November 2015, he served the liturgy in the churches and took the opportunity to conduct weddings and baptisms, which had had to be postponed in the absence of a priest (see F18News 18 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2135).

The authorities allow the Georgian Orthodox St George's Church in Kurmukh in the hills overlooking the valley to be used for worship only twice a year – on 6 May and 23 November (both St George's day, the church's patronal festival). The Georgian Patriarchate insists that when Patriarch Ilya met President Aliyev in 2005, a "verbal agreement" was reached that the Kurmukh Church would be able to function, according to a 20 October 2007 Patriarchate statement.

Another nearby parish – Holy Trinity Church in the village of Kotuklu – prepared a registration application in 2009 signed by 20 parishioners. But the State Committee has still not registered it by 2015, finding many alleged faults with the application (see F18News 8 September 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2097). Many belief communities have complained of arbitrary State Committee decisions and delays in dealing with re-registration applications required under 2009 changes to the Religion Law (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2081).

Rights of believers upheld "to the highest level"?

The aide to Heydarov at the State Committee in Baku confirmed to Forum 18 that Azerbaijan had given citizenship to Fr Khumarashvili. However, he refused to explain why the local Georgian Orthodox parishes had been denied a resident priest for nearly a year. "The rights of all believers in Azerbaijan are upheld to the highest level," he claimed, before putting the phone down.

An aide to Vafa Heydarova, deputy head of Gakh Regional Administration responsible for humanitarian issues, who did not give his name, insisted that the issue of a new priest for the Georgian Orthodox "is being resolved". Bishop Demetre has chosen the priest, Fr

Khumarashvili, and the choice was approved by Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilya, he told Forum 18 from Gakh on 24 May.

Although the aide insisted "there are no restrictions on our side", he was unable to say why the Georgian Orthodox parishes in Gakh have been waiting for months for Fr Khumarashvili to take up his service there. "We know what they want," the aide told Forum 18, "but we decide."

Mehman Ismayilov, senior north-west regional official for the State Committee, who is based in Zakatala [Zaqatala], declined to talk to Forum 18 on 27 May. (END)

For more 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.

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