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TAJIKISTAN: Churches, mosque confiscated, no sign of promised kindergarten

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

Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church's two buildings in northern Tajikistan have both been confiscated, one of them with a 2018 excuse that a kindergarten would open there - but in 2020 there is no still sign of the kindergarten. Similarly, Khujand's Nuri Islom Mosque has been turned into a cinema.

Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church's two buildings - in Konibodom and Khujand in northern Tajikistan – have both been sealed by the authorities and left empty since 2017 raids that led to the torture of Church members, the jailing of their Pastor, and the forcible closure of the Konibodom branch of the Church.

"After the 2017 raids and arrest of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, the number of worshippers in Khujand itself went down from roughly 500 people to about 100," a Tajik Protestant told Forum 18 on 19 February 2020. The fall in numbers was particularly noticeable after the buildings were confiscated. "People are afraid to go to church because of what happened" (see below).

The authorities confiscated the Khujand building in 2018, claiming that they wanted to turn it into a kindergarten. Yet there is still in 2020 no sign of the kindergarten. Officials have refused to discuss the issue. For example, Muhayyo Akmal Khojayeva, Head of Khujand's Education Department told Forum 18 on that "we asked the Education Ministry and other organs to transfer the building to us because we had a lack of kindergartens". Asked why the building is still empty and why kindergartens cannot be built on other sites, she then claimed: "I am very busy, and can only talk to you if you come to our office".

As well as ordering the building's confiscation, courts have refused to order compensation to be paid for the large financial sums the Church spent since 1995 to restore the now-confiscated building. Judges and court officials have refused to discuss their decisions or their legality (see below).

Sunmin Sunbogym's Khujand congregation now meets in a space made from two standard 40-foot shipping containers placed on the land around its building. "Church members are praying for a new building as they feel that they meet in a cage instead of a normal building," local Protestants complained. "Also, the Church has to pay a large electricity bill to keep the temperature inside the metal containers normal in the cold winter and hot summer months" (see below).

Sunmin Sunbogym Church is not the only religious community to have had its places of worship forcibly closed and confiscated without compensation. Another recent Khujand forced closure and confiscation happened to the Nuri Islom (Light of Islam) Mosque community, which has been confiscated and turned into a cinema (see below).

One local Muslim asked "why didn't the authorities instead restore the old Bahor Cinema building on Syrdarya Street [in the town centre], which is now empty and unused?" Mirzo Salimpur of independent Tajik news site Akhbor.com told Forum 18 that many local Muslims have protested against the confiscation, stating that "it is a sin to show films in the mosque building" (see below).

A Sugd Regional Administration official has variously claimed that the mosque "had become a breeding ground for suspicious people" and that "the Mosque community closed it". Officials have used this excuse before, and the Sugd official would not answer when Forum 18 asked why community members wanted to close their own mosque (see below).

A human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 "many of the closed-down mosques like Nuri Islom have been turned into libraries, culture houses, etc. This is just like in the old Soviet Union" (see below).

"To close down churches and take away their property"

Prisoner of conscience Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, who led a Protestant Church in Khujand, was jailed for three years in July 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2298) for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'".

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pastor Kholmatov in April 2017 after they raided his Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church in Khujand, and harassed and physically tortured its members. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276)

Pastor Kholmatov was freed on the morning of 17 December 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2530). Since then, his involvement in the Church has been restricted to taking part in but not leading meetings for worship as an ordinary member of the congregation, local Protestants told Forum 18 on 21 February 2020.

The authorities also closed the Sunmin Sunbogym congregation in the northern city of Konibodom in March 2017, after the NSC secret police forcibly closed it in March 2017 after raiding and physically torturing its church members also, as well as firing them from their jobs. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276)

"The church there remains closed," a local Protestant told Forum 18 in December 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2530).

At the time of the 2017 raids, officials "insulted the believers by shouting and swearing at them. They demanded that they renounce their faith and leave the Church", local Protestants said. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276) NSC secret police officers stated that their purpose "is to close down churches in Tajikistan and take away their property".

Impunity for torture

Contrary to Tajikistan's obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138), no official suspected of being responsible for torture in either Khujand or Konibodom has been arrested and put on trial for these crimes.

This is part of a pattern of impunity for officials in similar cases. Those tortured include current prisoner of conscience Muslim Khayriddin Dostakov (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2538), as well as Jehovah's Witnesses in February 2019 in Khujand and Konibodom (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2455).

"People are afraid to go to church because of what happened"

The building Sunmin Sunbogym Church itself built and owns in Konibodom – used by the Church until its branch in the town was forcibly closed - has been sealed by the authorities and left empty since the raids. The Church was warned not to try to use this building.

The authorities similarly warned the Church not to use its two-storey building in Khujand, which they sealed in March 2019. The building has since also been left empty.

"After the 2017 raids and arrest of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, the number of worshippers in Khujand itself went down from roughly 500 people to about 100," a local Protestant told Forum 18 on 19 February 2020. The fall in numbers was particularly noticeable after the buildings were confiscated. "People are afraid to go to church because of what happened."

Where's the kindergarten?

Sunmin Sunbogym was registered as a Church with permission to carry out missionary activity in 1993. It began a 49 year rent of its Khujand building from the Mayor's Office in 1995, and was re-registered by the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in 2009.

The Khujand building was a concrete building in poor repair on what a local person described as "derelict land" before the Church began renting it. After 1995 the Church spent "hundreds of thousands of Somonis" on both cleaning up and cultivating the land, and repairing and remodelling the two-storey building.

This was a heavy financial burden for Church members in a country where a local human rights defender estimates the current average monthly salary as about 1,500 Somonis.

However, Judge Rakhmonali Ismoilzoda, Deputy Chair of Sugd Regional Economic Court, claimed to Radio Free Europe (RFE) on 26 February 2019 that an August 2018 court order to confiscate the Khujand building and invalidate the agreement between the Church and Khujand Mayor's Office was made as the Education and Science Ministry wanted to use the building as a kindergarten.

The Court also refused to order any compensation to be paid to the Church for the loss of its building, or for the expensive repairs it made to the building.

Muhabbat Nozimova of the Ministry of Education and Science, who appeared in Court, claimed to RFE that "the Church building must be returned for education purposes as the 12th District of Khujand [where the building is] is densely populated and there is a lack of kindergartens."

Judge Ismoilzoda also claimed to RFE that the Mayor's Office rented the building to the Church for 38 years, although Church lawyer Ilyos Ismoilzoda explained that the rental period was 49 years and that the Court had decided against the law.

The Higher Economic Court upheld the August 2018 order on appeal at the end of 2018. Court officials, who refused to give their names, refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18 on 21 February 2020.

A local Protestant told Forum 18 on 20 February 2020 that there has been no sign of any activity by the authorities around the building since 2018, and no indication of any intention to transform the building into a kindergarten.

Minister of Education and Science Mahmadyousuf Imomov's Assistant (who refused to give his name) on 20 February refused to tell Forum 18 why the Ministry brought the claim against the Church in 2018, and why the building is in 2020 still empty and has not been turned into a kindergarten. "All questions must be sent to the Foreign Ministry, and if they think it proper they will send them to us," he claimed before putting the phone down.

When rung back on 21 February, as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself the Minister's Assistant stated that "we will not talk to you" before putting the phone down. The Ministry's Press Service also refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18.

Muhayyo Akmalhojayeva, Head of Khujand's Education Department (who Nozimova of the Ministry represented in Court), told Forum 18 on 21 February that "we asked the Education Ministry and other organs to transfer the building to us because we had a lack of kindergartens". Asked why the building is still empty and why kindergartens cannot be built on other sites, she then claimed: "I am very busy, and can only talk to you if you come to our office." She then refused to discuss the issue further.

Judge Sulaymon Kosimzoda, Deputy Chair of Sugd Regional Economic Court, refused on 20 January 2020 to answer any of Forum 18's questions on the legality of the confiscations, the refusal to order compensation to be paid to the Church, and the lack of any activity by the authorities to carry out their 2018 claimed intention to start a kindergarten.

"They meet in a cage instead of a normal building"

Sunmin Sunbogym's Khujand congregation now meets in a space made from two standard 40-foot shipping containers placed on the land around its building. A standard 40-foot shipping container is inside just over 12 metres (just under 40 feet) long, just over 2 metres (just under 8 feet) wide, and over 2 metres (just under 8 feet) high. Local Protestants have found that putting two of these shipping containers together allows a maximum of 100 people to meet for worship.

"Church members are praying for a new building as they feel that they meet in a cage instead of a normal building," local Protestants complained. "Also, the Church has to pay a large electricity bill to keep the temperature inside the metal containers normal in the cold winter and hot summer months."

Mosque closed, turned into cinema

Sunmin Sunbogym Church is not the only religious community to have had its places of worship forcibly closed and confiscated without compensation.

The authorities claimed to have closed almost 2,000 mosques in 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2356). Officials claimed they were closed at the request of local residents, but have not been able to explain why they only allow mosques with a capacity far below the possible numbers of worshippers.

Another recent Khujand forced closure and confiscation happened to the Nuri Islom (Light of Islam) Mosque community. The mosque community built their mosque in 1991 with funds it raised itself. Yet Sugd Regional Administration has now confiscated and closed the mosque.

Bakhtiyor Kosimov, who is responsible for cultural issues in the Regional Administration, told local media on 28 January 2020 that the Nuri Islom Mosque will now function as a cinema.

"It has 80 seats," Kosimov stated, "and will begin to function in March during the Novruz Spring festival. As well as films, we will organise here a club for movie fans. It is important to develop this sphere."

One local Muslim asked on Facebook "why didn't the authorities instead restore the old Bahor Cinema building on Syrdarya Street [in the town centre], which is now empty and unused?"

Mirzo Salimpur, Chief Editor of independent Tajik news site Akhbor.com, told Forum 18 on 20 February that many local Muslims have protested against the confiscation, stating that "it is a sin to show films in the mosque building".

Mosque community members Forum 18 has spoken to do not want to make any public comments. The state has now built a new state-controlled mosque with foreign donated funds.

"A breeding ground for suspicious people"?

Kosimov of Sugd Regional Administration claimed in response to the protests that "the old building had become a breeding ground for suspicious people, but the Mayor's Office renovated it and made it a culture centre. You should be thankful."

Kosimov gave a different reason when Forum 18 talked to him on 19 February. Asked why the Nuri Islom Mosque was forcibly closed, Kosimov claimed that "the Mosque community closed it."

Officials have used this excuse before, for example in 2017 in relation to the nationwide large-scale mosque closures (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2356).

Similarly, Khuseyn Shokirov, SCRA Deputy Head in Dushanbe, insisted to Forum 18 in April 2017 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276) in relation to the Sunmin Sunbogym congregation in Konibodom: "The Church was closed down because its members wished so, and it is their internal matter." He gave no evidence for his claim.

When Forum 18 asked Kosimov of Sugd Administration why community members wanted to close their own mosque, and whether they were compensated for the loss of the building, Kosimov did not answer.

Tajikistan commits serious violations of freedom of religion and belief, including imposing severe on any non-state public manifestation of Islam such as imposing severe limitations on the numbers of mosques – all of which must be state controlled. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)

Mukhsin Mirkamolov, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) official responsible for Khujand, refused to talk about the issue. "Put your questions to the Regional Administration. They are deciding the issue with the building," he told Forum 18 on 19 February. When Forum 18 persisted, he replied: "Don't you understand. I already explained to you. You should speak to the City Administration." He then refused to talk more.

SCRA officials in the capital Dushanbe also refused to talk about Khujand and Sugd Region to Forum 18 on 20 and 21 February, and also refused to reply when Forum 18 asked why the SCRA is not willing to discuss freedom of religion and belief issues.

"Just like in the old Soviet Union"

A human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 19 February that the "authorities are leading a process of de-islamisation of the country by having closed down thousands of mosques." (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2356)

The human rights defender added: "This means that hundreds of thousands of Muslims have been left without their Mosque communities. Some have joined other Mosques that still continue, but the majority have stopped attending Mosques and pray at home."

The human rights defender pointed out that "many of the closed-down mosques like Nuri Islom have been turned into libraries, culture houses, etc (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2356). This is just like in the old Soviet Union."

Commenting on the state building a new state-controlled mosque in Khujand, as well as similar mosques elsewhere, the human rights defender said that there were suspicions that this is "just decoration, and a way to launder millions of US dollars provided by foreign states and donors".

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2019 ranks Tajikistan poorly, at 153 out of 180 countries (<http://www.transparency.org/country/TJK>). (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY