

13 May 2004

UZBEKISTAN: Sufism used for Uzbek propaganda in the USA

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, is common in Uzbekistan, and the government uses Sufism in propaganda outside Uzbekistan, especially in the USA, to claim that the state supports Sufism as an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism. The reality is rather different. Although Sufism is not as persecuted as in Soviet times, the NSS secret police keeps a close watch on the movement, and regards a central part of it, the system of "myuridism", or spiritual direction, as a possible terrorist organisation.

The Sufi Naqshbandi order (translated literally, an engraver of wooden stamps) is quite common in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan. In order to establish to what extent the rights of Muslims belonging to this branch of Islam are upheld, Forum 18 News Service visited Bukhara [Bukhoro] in western Uzbekistan. This is where the order's founder, Bagauddin Naqshbandi, spent his life. "Today, of all the Sufi movements that are active in Uzbekistan, the Naqshbandi has the greatest number of followers. At least 25 per cent of Muslims in Uzbekistan practise elements of Naqshbandism in their religious lives," Forum 18 was told on 7 May in Bukhara by Dr Gulchekhra Navruzova, a specialist in Sufism.

Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam, rooted in the attempt to reach God through personal experience. The first Sufis are said to have been ascetics who lived in Iraq and Syria at the end of the 8th and beginning of the 9th centuries, who strove to comprehend the "hidden" sense of the Koran's revelations, and strictly followed the Koran's instructions, holding vigils, taking vows, and observing additional fasts. Sufism typically employs a system of "myuridism" (from the Arabic word for pupil). Anyone who follows Sufism becomes a "myurid", and follows unquestioningly the wishes of his teacher (called a "sheikh" or "pir", and similar to a guru in Hinduism). A teacher can only acquire his own pupils after the death of his own teacher. Sufi believers make active use of meditation methods that are in many respects very similar to those of Buddhists and Hindus. The name of the movement is believed to derive from the Arabic word "suf" - meaning wool - as the Sufis wore cloaks made out of coarse wool.

From its origins in Bukhara, the Sufi Naqshbandi order has followers in all Muslim countries. During the 19th century war in the North Caucasus against Russian forces, and the Russian colonisation of Central Asia, it was members of the Naqshbandi order, not local feudal lords, states and the armies of local rulers, who led resistance. In 1940-42, an uprising against Soviet authorities was also led by the Naqshbandi order.

Abdugafor Razakov, a representative of the (state-controlled) Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan for Bukhara region, and the imam-hatyb of the central Kalyan mosque in Bukhara, claimed to Forum 18 that "I myself am a Sufi believer of the Naqshbandi order, and so I can declare with complete confidence that today Sufi believers do not experience any pressure from the Uzbek authorities. In the Soviet era Sufi believers were certainly persecuted by the KGB. The communists used Bagauddin Naqshbandi's mausoleum as a store for mineral fertilisers, but today, praise be to Allah, things are different, and Bukhara's central street (formerly Lenin Street) now bears the name of Bagauddin Naqshbandi. In 1991 Naqshbandi's mausoleum was reopened, and the authorities built an elaborate memorial complex there. Thousands of believers go on pilgrimage to this holy place," Razakov told Forum 18 in Bukhara on 8 May.

Razakov is at least partially correct. The Uzbek authorities' main fear is Islamic fundamentalism, whose followers call for Islam to be cleansed of regional customs, and for a return to what they see as the original Islam of the time of the prophet Mohammed. Sufism, with which regional customs are closely entwined, is seen as a relatively effective alternative to fundamentalism. For example, according to popular belief, one must enter Bagauddin Naqshbandi's mausoleum with the left foot. Near the mausoleum are the remains of an ancient tree which superstition declares grew when Bagauddin Naqshbandi was alive and is believed to be mystically connected with his fate. It is said that if one goes around the remains of the tree three times, one's wishes will definitely come true.

But the Uzbek authorities' claimed support for Sufism is far from genuine. For example, despite the wishes of members of the Naqshbandi order, the authorities are unwilling to open a "khanaka" (a form of monastery which wandering Sufis use). Because of the lack of khanakas, Sufis have to meet in private apartments. Naqshbandi followers, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police keep an eye on these meetings, and warn believers that

religious meetings are not allowed in private apartments. The NSS takes a very suspicious attitude towards the "myurid" system and sees it as a possible terrorist organisation. After the recent terrorist attacks, many sheikhs and pirs have been called in for questioning by the NSS (see F18News 13 April

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=298).

It appears that Uzbek state support for Sufism is more for propaganda purposes in the USA than anything else. The Uzbek government supports close ties with the Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA), which embraces Naqshbandi followers in the USA, and plays up its supposed popularity in the Islamic world. Although the number of ISCA members is relatively small, Uzbek propaganda represents ISCA as being one of the most influential Muslim organisations in the United States. ISCA leaders have visited Uzbekistan, meeting President Islam Karimov.

The Uzbek government invited ISCA representatives to act as observers at the presidential elections in January 2000, which ISCA described as Uzbekistan's "second democratic elections since its emancipation from communism". In sharp contrast, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) refused to send observers "because of the absence of a credible choice available to voters". President Karimov's token rival, Abdulhafiz Dzhalalov, admitted that he himself had voted for Karimov.

The ISCA also states on its web-site (www.islamicsupremecouncil.org) that: "In January 2002, the Islamic Supreme Council of America was honoured to have been the only American Muslim organisation to be invited to observe Uzbekistan's constitutional referendum. The invitation was a result of the ISCA's long-standing commitment to working with the moderate government of President Islam Karimov and supporting Uzbekistan's fight against religious extremism." Local human rights activists denounced flagrant abuses such as, for example, the absence of a secret ballot in the referendum due to the use of a Soviet-style "voting" technique. Those voting in favour of Karimov's proposals had to drop an unmarked voting slip into a ballot box, under the eyes of government officials, without going into a polling booth. But those voting against had to go into a polling booth to mark the ballot paper before voting.

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY