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More than half of religious communities to be 'illegal'?

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 News Service (11.12.2009) / HRWF Int. (12.12.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Less than a month before the re-registration deadline of 1 January 2010 imposed by Tajikistan's restrictive new Religion Law, officials have conceded to Forum 18 News Service that less than half the religious communities in the country have been re-registered. Under the Law, communities which do not want to register or fail to gain re-registration will be illegal. Deputy Culture Minister Mavlon Mukhtarov and Idibek Ziyoyev of the Culture Ministry's Head Department for Religious Affairs (HDRA) - which oversees registration - told Forum 18 that unregistered religious activity will not be allowed, despite this breaching international human rights standards. Some mosques have already been refused re-registration, and many are waiting for registration along with the Baptist Union and the country's only synagogue. When re-registering some non-Muslim communities the HDRA has imposed territorial restrictions on their activity. If the number of mosques in a local area exceeds the Law's mosque quotas, Deputy Culture Minister Mukhtarov told Forum 18 that "we will close down mosques which exceed the quotas."

With less than a month left before the re-registration deadline of 1 January 2010 imposed by Tajikistan's restrictive new Religion Law, officials at the Culture Ministry's Head Department for Religious Affairs (HDRA) have conceded to Forum 18 News Service that fewer than half the religious communities in the country have been re-registered so far. Under the Law, communities which do not want to register or fail to gain re-registration will be illegal.

Deputy Culture Minister Mavlon Mukhtarov told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 8 December that mosques which are above the quotas determined in the new Law will be closed down. He denied that the quotas for mosques - and the closure of those above this number - violates people's religious freedom.

Idibek Ziyoyev, Chair of the HDRA, was equally blunt. He told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 9 December that mosques which carry on functioning without registration after the New Year will either be closed down or fined. Forum 18 notes that such penalties are likely to be imposed on non-Muslim communities too which do not want to register or have been unable to do so.

Despite the country's international human rights commitments, both Mukhtarov and Ziyoyev told Forum 18 that unregistered religious activity will not be allowed in Tajikistan. This clear breach of the country's international human rights commitments has led to a Baptist church which chooses not to seek state registration being banned. Officials had earlier warned church members they must seek registration, but church members refused.

Communities already refused registration

Forum 18 has learnt that some mosques have already been refused re-registration. Amongst religious communities still waiting for re-registration are some non-Muslim religious organisations, including Tajikistan's Baptist Union and the country's only synagogue. When re-registering some communities, the HDRA has imposed territorial restrictions on their activity, allowing them to function only at their official legal address.

Ziyoyev of the HDRA told Forum 18 that of 3,500 mosques across Tajikistan, only 1,500 have been re-registered so far. He said the rest are still being processed. Of the 84 non-Muslim registered organisations, he said "fewer than ten" have yet to be re-registered. He was reluctant to give these figures, and refused to give more specific information.

Ziyoyev said that, unlike in the past, all registered religious organisations wherever they are located must now be re-registered at the central level by the HDRA in Dushanbe. He

said his Department has been flooded by re-registration applications from the approximately 3,500 religious organisations that had registration under the old Law. "This is because the five-fold mosques, which in the past only needed to register with local authorities in the regions, now need to register at the central level according to the new regulations," he explained to Forum 18.

Ever-tighter state controls

Re-registration is required as part of the highly restrictive new Religion Law which came into force in April 2009. This imposes tight restrictions on the number of mosques that can be opened depending on the number of residents of any location; gives the state the responsibility to appoint all imams; imposes state censorship on all religious literature; imposes a complicated and bureaucratic registration procedure; bans state officials from being among the founders of a religious community; requires state approval to invite foreigners for religious visits or to travel abroad for religious events; and restricts children's religious activity and education.

Restrictions on religious activity have become ever tighter in recent years. All Jehovah's Witness activity was banned in 2007. The Supreme Court banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in 2009. Many members of the Muslim Jamaat Tabligh movement have been arrested in 2009. Many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation. Criminal cases were lodged against a number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand in autumn 2009. In October a Dushanbe court ordered a ban on a Baptist church which chooses not to seek state registration. Officials had earlier warned church members they had to seeking registration, but church members refused.

1 January 2010 deadline

The new Religion Law demands that all registered religious organisations re-register with the State by 1 January 2010.

Under the Law, all communities need to gain written confirmation from their local hukumat (administration) that they exist before submitting their application to the HDRA in Dushanbe. A number of communities complained to Forum 18 that some hukumat officials were slow at issuing such certificates because they had no experience of doing so, while others deliberately refused to do so under various pretexts for communities which they did not like.

Asked whether the HDRA would manage to re-register all the organisations by the deadline, Ziyoyev claimed that the process is "going very well". He said the HDRA is "ready to facilitate" the timely re-registration of any organisation submitting their documents.

Deputy Culture Minister Mukhtarov told Forum 18 that if the HDRA is unable to re-register all the organisations needing re-registration in time, re-registration will continue after 1 January. He would not explain to Forum 18 by what authority he could extend a deadline set out in the Law.

Asked what would happen to communities which are not re-registered before the deadline, Ziyoyev said they will need to register as new organisations. Asked what practical difference it would mean for those organisations, he explained: "The only difference would be that first they would need to halt their activity before being registered anew, and pay the state registration fee of around 280 Somonis (371 Norwegian Kroner, 44 Euros or 64 US Dollars)."

Slow re-registration of mosques

Given the reluctance of HDRA officials to give detailed breakdowns of re-registration figures, Forum 18 tried to find statistics from local officials and religious communities.

In Khujand, Tajikistan's second biggest city, Hamzaali Pulodov, religious affairs official at the town hukumat, said that of the 45 mosques in the town that currently have registration, none has yet been re-registered. He insisted that all will be re-registered. "No mosques which already existed before the new Law will be closed down," he claimed to Forum 18 on 9 December. Told of Deputy Minister Mukhtarov's comment that mosques which fail to re-register will be closed, he said nothing like this has happened in Khujand so far.

In Istaravshan, which is close to Khujand, religious affairs official Dilovar Azimov said that of the 98 registered mosques, 65 have been re-registered. He told Forum 18 on 9 December that documents for 33 others have been returned recently "since they have errors in them", such as missing signatures. He insisted however that all these mosques will also be re-registered. Azimov did not say whether the ten other mosques have applied for re-registration.

An Ismaili imam from the autonomous Badakhshan Region, in mountainous eastern Tajikistan, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of reprisals, told Forum on 7 October that his mosque has been re-registered but several other mosques in his area have not been registered. "Those mosques also applied for registration two years ago but the authorities did not register them," he complained. "And now the local authorities are saying that they will not be registered at all since their number exceeds the quotas determined by the new Law."

The imam also said he was aware that the problem of mosques not being registered also existed in other districts of the Autonomous Region. The imam said that although the unregistered mosques in his area continue to function, the imams of those mosques could "only" lead prayers but not preach. He added that there is concern that authorities could "at any time" close down these mosques.

Abdullo Khudoyberdiyev, Deputy Head of Badakhshan Administration told Forum 18 on 9 December that it is the central authorities in Dushanbe, who "decide" which mosques to register. "There is a special representative of the Minister of Culture in the region who directly submits to the Minister."

Sardar Azorabekov, the Ministry of Culture Special Representative on religious affairs in Badakhshan declined to talk to Forum 18 on 9 December.

Ziyoyev of the HDRA told Forum 18 that he is not aware of any mosques in Badakhshan functioning without registration. "It may be that they did not receive a registration as a cathedral mosque but as a five-fold mosque," he suggested.

In the Badakhshan Region district of Vandj [Vanch] a district official, who said he was head of the administration but refused to give his name, told Forum 18 on 10 December that all of the 14 registered mosques in the district have been re-registered. Vandj district has a population of over 98,000 people. Asked who decides which mosques are registered as cathedral mosques, and by what criteria, he said that "the Ministry of Culture does it based on the Law." He could not specify any concrete criteria.

Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the Islamic Renaissance Party also told Forum on 26 November that he knew of a mosque in Rasht District near Dushanbe, which had been refused re-registration.

Farhad Aliyev, an official overseeing religious affairs in the southern city of Kurgantube [Qurghonteppe], said that out of twelve registered mosques only one has not been re-registered. "It is a central cathedral mosque," he told Forum 18 on 10 December, "the founders have already prepared the documents, and will soon submit to the HDRA in Dushanbe." Aliyev said that 12 mosques for Kurgantube with 72 thousand people, is "enough" at the moment. "Not everyone in the town is a praying Muslim," he stated.

Muslim leaders seem unable or unwilling to predict how many mosques will fail to re-register by the deadline. Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chairman of the state-backed Council of Ulems, told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 2 December that he does "not know exactly" how many mosques still need re-registration since the Council has "not provided" the information. He referred Forum 18 to the HDRA.

What will happen to mosques not re-registered?

The Religion Law's Article 11 states that one central cathedral mosque may be established by cathedral mosques in each city or regional district to carry out religious rites and other needs of believers. A cathedral mosque may be established in residential areas with a population of between 10,000 and 20,000 - the figure defined for Dushanbe is between 30,000 and 50,000; a five-fold mosque may be established in areas with a population of between 100 and 1,000 - the figure defined for Dushanbe is between 1,000 and 5,000. A five-fold mosque in Tajikistan is where Muslims gather five times a day to pray, and imams and others are banned by the Religion Law from preaching in them.

Deputy Culture Minister Mukhtarov claimed to Forum 18 that his officials "are ready to give any assistance" to re-register or register mosques which submit their documents. However, he added that the number of mosques in local areas "must" correspond to the quotas. "We will close down mosques which exceed the quotas," he declared bluntly.

By contrast, Ziyoyev of the HDRA denied to Forum 18 that any restrictions exist on the number of five-fold mosques. "We can register as many five-fold mosques as the local residents want to have," he claimed, despite the provisions set out in the new Law.

In Khujand, Hamzaali Pulodov, religious affairs official at the town hukumat, insisted - against the Law - that the limitation on the number of mosques will affect only new mosques.

Re-registration difficulties

Many religious communities have complained to Forum 18 about the bureaucracy involved in preparing, lodging and often negotiating with the HDRA over their re-registration applications.

Mahnoz Janmahmadova of Tajikistan's Baha'i Community said that they could not submit their founding documents to the HDRA for a long time after re-registration started. "We had no professional legal assistance to collect and prepare our documents," she told Forum 18 on 10 December. "The HDRA returned our charter yesterday [9 December] so we could make some minor changes to it but they promised to register us without any problem."

Several Protestant Churches also told Forum 18 that it took them two to four months to finalise their founding documents for submission to the HDRA, and get re-registered. They complained that each time the HDRA demanded that the churches amend their charters to limit their activity.

Concerned also with the deadline was Alexandr Werwai, Chairman of Tajikistan's Baptist Union. "Four of the seven officially registered Baptist Churches have been re-registered but the HDRA does not want to register the Union yet," he told Forum 18 on 3 December. "Based on the Law, the Union may be registered as 4 out of 7 officially existing churches want it." The Religion Law's Article 9 point 2 states that a religious centre on the central level may be registered if half of the existing organisations, which wish to set up the centre, have been officially registered.

However, Nazira Dodkhudoeyeva of the HDRA objected to this by saying that "in reality" the number of Baptist congregations across Tajikistan is "much" higher. "We are not against re-registering the Union but will do so only after we re-register at least all the officially existing Baptist Churches."

Wervai confirmed there are many more Baptist congregations across the country, however, he said that those are not registered churches, and that the Baptists are waiting until 2010, when he said registration of new organisations will start once more.

Rabbi Mikhail Abdurahmanov of Tajikistan's only synagogue in Dushanbe also said they are still waiting for the HDRA to register the community in their new building. "We hope that we will get registered before the New Year as we were recently promised by the Department [HDRA]," he told Forum 18 on 7 December.

Despite international protests, the authorities bulldozed the Dushanbe synagogue in June 2008 without compensation. A private businessman (and a brother-in-law of President Emomali Rahmon) provided the Jewish community with an alternative building in March 2009, which is where the community is hoping to register.

Geographic limitations imposed

Representatives of several religious organisations complained to Forum 18 they could not get national status when they re-registered. They insist that they should be allowed to determine for themselves where they will function, but say that they were forced to accept limitations imposed by the HDRA as the price of re-registration.

Article 10 points 9 and 10 of the new Law define religious organisations' status as national, city and district level organisations, depending on the territory their activity covers as shown in their charters.

Religious communities have told Forum 18 of their fear that, if they are involved in religious activity outside the territory shown in their charters, the authorities might accuse them of violating the Law.

Dilorom Kurbanova of the Hare Krishna Community said that when the HRDA re-registered it in October, it gave them a status which would only allow them to function in Dushanbe. She told Forum 18 on 25 November that her community is satisfied with the status at the moment, as they have fewer than 15 members. But she said it "will create difficulty" in future since the "only way to share our faith with others from outside Dushanbe from now on will be if and when we meet them in Dushanbe."

A member of the Word of Life Church in Dushanbe told Forum 18 that the HDRA at first did not want to give them national status, which would allow them to carry out activity across Tajikistan, but "after lengthy negotiations" they finally agreed to do so. However, he said that he knows of other Protestant churches which "could only register with a limited status, which will allow them to function only in the district where they are registered."

Father Vladimir Slepov, Dean of the Russian Orthodox Church in Chkalovsk, said he did not expect any territorial restrictions to be imposed on Orthodox parishes. He said that his parish only managed to prepare and submit to the HDRA the final version of its founding document on 1 December. "I do not know what status we will get, but I think Tajikistan's Law allows us to preach anywhere in the country," he told Forum 18 on 2 December.

Asked why some communities have been refused national status which would allow them to function across Tajikistan, Dodkhudoyeva of the HDRA told Forum 18: "The Law demands religious communities to have religious centres in more than one region of Tajikistan to receive national status, and those we refused do have members in only one locality." She did not clarify what provisions of the Religion Law demand so.

HDRA tries to impose other limitations on re-registering organisations

One Protestant leader told Forum 18 that the HDRA "wanted us to specify in our charter that we could only invite our members' children to our children's camps or receive literature from outside only in the amounts proportional to the number of our members." However, he said that they were able to re-register without those limitations.

HDRA officials would not explain to Forum 18 why they demanded such changes in the charters.

Will the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses be overturned?

Asked about the Jehovah's Witnesses, Deputy Minister Mukhtarov said the Culture Ministry is ready to assist Jehovah's Witnesses to receive official registration, but they must address the Supreme Court which issued a nationwide ban on their activity. "We cannot interfere with the Court," he said. Criminal cases continue against some Jehovah's Witnesses, after the police and National Security Committee (NSC) secret police raided a religious meeting in a private flat

"It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence"

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (28.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hamzaali Pulodov, the religious affairs official in the northern town of Khujand, has defended the criminal cases against up to 17 Jehovah's Witnesses on charges of inciting inter-religious hatred, which carry a sentence of between five and nine years' imprisonment. "When people break the law they are prosecuted," he told Forum 18 News Service. He says books confiscated during a June raid on a flat where they were meeting had "propagandised against the Constitution and incited enmity between citizens", but admitted he has not read them. Prosecutors and the secret police refused to say how many Jehovah's Witnesses face criminal charges and when cases will go to court. Zafar Rakhimov, who is among those facing prosecution, told Forum 18 he believes two or three of their leaders will be brought to court. "Prosecutor Muzaffarov told me that the accusation is based on the fact that we interpret the Bible differently from Protestants. It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence." Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Tajikistan.

Three months after police and secret police raided a religious meeting in a private flat which the authorities have told Forum 18 News Service was "illegal", prosecutors in the town of Khujand in Tajikistan's northern Sughd Region have opened criminal cases against up to seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly inciting religious hatred. If convicted, the Jehovah's Witnesses will face between five and nine years' imprisonment. Defending the prosecutions is Hamzaali Pulodov, the town's religious affairs official who took part in the June raid. "When people break the law they are prosecuted," he told Forum 18 from Khujand on 28 September. "They violated the law by meeting in an unapproved place."

Pulodov put the number facing criminal cases at sixteen, while local news agencies Asia-Plus and Avesta, citing unnamed officials, put the number at seventeen. An unnamed Prosecutor's Office official told Asia-Plus on 24 September that the Jehovah's Witnesses face charges under Article 189 Part 2 of the Criminal Code. This punishes "incitement to national, racial, regional or religious hatred" committed by a group in a "prior conspiracy" with imprisonment of between five and nine years.

The town Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 28 September that the investigation is being conducted by the Regional Prosecutor's Office. Forum 18 understands that Deputy Regional Prosecutor Shavkat Muzaffarov is leading the investigation. However, no-one at the Regional Prosecutor's Office was willing to put Forum 18 through to Muzaffarov or to reveal how many Jehovah's Witnesses are facing criminal cases, when the cases were launched and when they are likely to be presented to court.

Absolutely refusing to comment on 28 September were officials of the Sughd Regional National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, who took part in the June raid and who are involved in the case against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Zafar Rakhimov, a Khujand-based Jehovah's Witness who was not present during the raid but who was interrogated four days later and is among those facing prosecution, says nothing has been given to them in writing yet. "They've said they will launch criminal cases against us for inciting inter-religious hatred," he told Forum 18 on 28 September from the Polish capital Warsaw, where he is attending the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "Although seventeen of us have been threatened with prosecution, I believe they'll bring two or three leaders to criminal trial."

Rakhimov insisted that any accusation of incitement to inter-religious hatred is unfounded. "They have been looking at our confiscated literature to find religious hatred, but they won't find it," he told Forum 18. "However, Prosecutor Muzaffarov told me that the accusation is based on the fact that we interpret the Bible differently from Protestants. It seems that reading the Bible together is now a criminal offence."

Asked if he is ready to face possible imprisonment of between five and nine years if found guilty, Rakhimov told Forum 18: "Yes."

The Jehovah's Witnesses across Tajikistan had to stop meeting in the wake of an October 2007 Culture Ministry ban on their activity throughout the entire country, a ban they have tried to challenge through the courts. Their literature too has been confiscated.

The June raid on Jehovah's Witnesses and criminal cases

Trouble began for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand on 4 June, when officials raided a small meeting to discuss the Bible held in the home of Natalya Martynova, Rakhimov told Forum 18. Eleven local officials - including NSC secret police officers, Prosecutor's Office officials and the local religious affairs official Pulodov - forced their way into the flat in the town's 12th microdistrict and began filming those inside.

Fifteen of the seventeen Jehovah's Witnesses present were taken to NSC headquarters, where they were questioned for the next six hours, Rakhimov told Forum 18. "One woman in the group who was registered as a disabled person because of a recent head injury was threatened that if she did not answer their questions, she would be beaten and confined for ten days," they added. "She was released nine hours later only because the threats and abuse began to have a noticeable effect on her health."

Both Pulodov and Rakhimov said more than 100 books in Tajik and Russian had been confiscated from Martynova's home. Rakhimov said another Jehovah's Witness home in the town was searched the same day but nothing was confiscated. He said no warrant from the Prosecutor's Office was shown for either raid.

On 8 June, Rakhimov was summoned to the Sughd District NSC secret police, where he was insulted by the officer in charge, who began accusing him and his family of religious extremism and of inciting interreligious conflict. After Rakhimov refused to write a statement, he said one of the officers - whom he identified as Erkin Ergashev - became angry. "He hit me on the head and in the stomach and threatened to imprison me or get rid of me from Sughd Region." He said officers also threatened to detain his wife and three-week-old daughter if he refused to sign a statement.

Rakhimov told Forum 18 he is a Tajik citizen and cannot be deported from one region of the country.

Religious affairs official Pulodov rejected suggestions that the 4 June raid was a raid. "I and the law-enforcement officials merely came and looked," he told Forum 18. He said he could not remember how many officials were present, but did not dispute the Jehovah's Witnesses' account of eleven.

Pulodov said the books taken from the Jehovah's Witnesses had "propagandised against the Constitution and incited enmity between citizens". Asked whether he had read the books in the three months since their confiscation, he said he had not had time. Asked where the books are being held, he said "probably by the law-enforcement agencies", but he said he did not know if this was the secret police or the Prosecutor's Office. Rakhimov told Forum 18 that the Regional Prosecutor's Office is holding the books.

"Neighbours had complained that the Jehovah's Witnesses were violating social order - with some 15 people coming and going from the flat every day," Pulodov insisted. "They saw there were illegal people." Asked to explain how people might be "illegal" and how a private meeting in a private flat to discuss the Bible, the Koran or any other religious work might be illegal, Pulodov responded: "Discussing the Bible is not illegal, but it is against the law to conduct propaganda and agitation for a faith."

Rakhimov told Forum 18 that on 25 September he lodged a complaint about the raid and the possible criminal prosecutions to Zarif Alizoda, Tajikistan's Human Rights Ombudsperson. On 28 September Forum 18 was unable to reach Alizoda, who is also attending the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in Warsaw.

Unavailable for comment on 28 September were officials of the Culture Ministry or its Religious Affairs Department.

Ever tighter state controls on all religions

State controls on religious activity have been growing steadily tighter in recent years. The Supreme Court banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009, a ban which came into force in February 2009. Many members of the Muslim Jamaat Tabligh movement have been arrested in 2009. Many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the

country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation.

A harsh new Religion Law came into force in April 2009, imposing tight restrictions on the number of mosques that can be opened depending on the number of residents of any location; gives the state the responsibility to appoint all imams; imposes state censorship on all religious literature; imposes a complicated and bureaucratic registration procedure; bans state officials from being among the founders of a religious community; requires state approval to invite foreigners for religious visits or to travel abroad for religious events; and restricts children's religious activity and education. Religious communities that fail to re-register by the deadline of 1 January 2010 will become illegal.

Tajik authorities ban teachers from wearing beards and students, miniskirts

AsiaNews/Agencies (30.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (01.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan has banned school and university teachers under the age of 50 from wearing beards and limited the beard length to "no more than three centimetres" for older staff.

These "novelties are introduced as part of an ongoing school and higher education reform and are in line with the mentality and the customs of our people," Education Ministry spokesman Abdulkhamid Nozimov said.

The new rules also ban teachers from wearing Western-style clothes such as jeans, miniskirts and T-shirts.

Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon had earlier banned mobile phones from schools and universities and said students should not arrive to school in their own cars.

About 80 per cent of Tajikistan's seven million people are Sunni Muslims. Shia represent about 5 per cent.

Men in the mostly Muslim ex-Soviet republic often wear beards as an attribute of faith. However, long beards are often greeted with suspicion by the government, which sees them more as a symbol of Islamic extremism than ordinary religious piety.

The former Soviet Republic fought a bloody civil war against Islamist forces in the 1990s that left tens of thousands of people dead, a million displaced and an economy in ruins.

Islamic Party leader in Tajikistan says he supports secular system

RFE/RL (15.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the only officially registered Islamic party in Central Asia, wants to boost its two-seat presence in the Tajik parliament in the next elections, scheduled for February 2010. To achieve that goal, the party is seeking to shrug off its old image of a conservative rural party, recruiting many women and young technocrats.

RFE/RL correspondent Farangis Najibullah recently caught up with IRP leader Muhiddin Kabiri on the sidelines of the 19th Economic Forum in Krynica, Poland. Kabiri, a

businessman and professional handball player, discusses the party's stance on a secular state, the threat of religious extremism, and the ongoing debate over the hijab.

RFE/RL: The Islamic Renaissance Party currently holds two seats in Tajikistan's 63-member parliament. How many members does your party have and whom do you represent?

Muhiddin Kabiri: So far, we have 33,200 registered members and the number is increasing. In the past, we were known as a party representing certain rural areas with more conservative traditions, but we have transformed completely. In the 1990s, there were only two or three people with university educations among our party's leadership. Now all of our 49-member board of party leaders have university degrees and several of them have Ph.D.s in various fields. Women make up over 60 percent of our party members. And the majority of our party members are young people.

RFE/RL: The IRP is the only officially registered Islamic party in Central Asia. Does this bring additional responsibilities and put your party under scrutiny?

Kabiri: Being the only officially registered Islamic party bears lots of responsibility, as well as many challenges. People both abroad and inside the country watch us with suspicion. And there are forces that deliberately ignite these suspicions. But we try to break those stereotypes.

As the only officially registered Islamic party, we are somehow seen as representatives of Islam and all religious people. We have to be absolutely careful of every step we take, because there is no room for error for us. If we fail, if we make a mistake, it would make Muslims and Islam look bad.

Usually, when a secular party makes errors, no one would hold the entire secular vision responsible for that mistake. People would only blame the party itself. But if our party, or a member of our party, is involved in any wrongdoing, critics would say that mistake was the outcome of Islamic views. We understand and accept these responsibilities. It's one of our party's differences from other political groups.

RFE/RL: Do you seek to establish an Islamic state or Islamic republic in Tajikistan, as some of your detractors have suggested?

Kabiri: Our party complies with our country's constitution, which backs the [secular] system in Tajikistan. Our Sunni Hanafi sect of Islam does not support the idea of theocratic governments, meaning we believe no one should rule a country in the name of God. It's people who rule countries. Therefore, we are not seeking to create an Islamic state or an Islamic republic in Tajikistan. But we want to create an Islamic society. Governments can include technocrats or nonpracticing Muslims or others, but our most important goal is the creation of a society that lives with Islamic values.

RFE/RL: There are ongoing debates in Tajikistan over the ban on Islamic head scarves, or hijabs, in schools and public places. Your party has been criticized for politicizing the hijab issue.

Kabiri: For us, the hijab issue is about human rights. It's about freedom of choice, which is guaranteed by our constitution. The Education Ministry or any other bodies have no right to ban the hijab anywhere. The only exception is the military, where people have to wear uniforms.

Unfortunately, the hijab debate has been politicized, because some women came to us to complain and our party backed them. Well, what would the difference be between our party and others -- let's say the Communist Party -- if we didn't defend the hijab, Islam,

and Islamic values? Then we were criticized for giving a political character to the hijab issue, but it wasn't true. We had no choice but to interfere in this debate to back Islamic values, as well as to support our voters.

RFE/RL: Davlatmoh Ismoilova, a Tajik student who sued the Education Ministry over the hijab ban last year, claims that your party gave her money to hire a lawyer to defend her case.

Kabiri: Yes, she came to us and said she had no money to defend her rights. And, yes, we supported her financially. But even if somebody else, other Tajik citizens, were to ask our party to support them financially to sue an official who had denied their rights, we would offer such support -- even if their problems, their case, had nothing to do with Islam.

RFE/RL: Do you support the idea that there is a growing threat of religious extremism in Central Asia?

Kabiri: Yes, the threat of religious extremism is present and it is increasing, because our region, unfortunately, has all the necessary conditions for that. All Central Asian countries are among the 20 most corrupt countries in the world. All Central Asian countries are among the 20 most authoritarian nations. And poverty is widespread in most parts of the region. Under such circumstances, people become extremists. If people here were not Muslims, but Christians for example, under such circumstances they would become Christian extremists.

RFE/RL: How does your party take part in the fight against religious extremism?

Kabiri: The very fact of our party's existence contributes to the prevention of religious extremism. For its over 30,000 members, our party offers an opportunity to be involved in legal political activities within the framework of an Islamic party. Membership of a lawful party gives them legitimacy, as well as responsibilities, before the law. These people want to have religious and political activities. Where would they go if there wasn't our party?

Perhaps half of them would avoid politics, but I'm sure the other half would join underground Islamic groups, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Salafi, or Jamoati Tabligh movements. Or they would set up another illegal group. Therefore, our party's existence prevents the spread of religious extremism. Besides, using our religious and political leverage, we talk to people, especially to the young, and try to prevent them from pursuing extremist ideas.

RFE/RL: How is the IRP's relationship with other Islamic groups in Tajikistan, including Salafi or Jamoati Tabligh?

Kabiri: We have announced that anyone who wants to have political activities in Tajikistan should seek official registration and act within the law. Only then can we have cooperation with them. But we oppose groups that want to act underground, with disregard to the interests of our nation, state, and culture. We don't support the extremist view of the Salafi movement.

We also oppose to Jamoati Tabligh group, which is promoting elements of foreign culture in the name of Islam, such as the so-called religious dress code and beard. It gives a completely wrong impression about Islam.

RFE/RL: Parliamentary polls are scheduled to be held in February 2010. Taking into account Tajikistan's record of contentious elections, do you expect your party to add to the two seats it currently holds?

Kabiri: Our program and all our activities are focused on increasing our seats in the Tajik parliament through the next elections. This is our hope. However, as any other political party, we take into consideration the possibility of the February vote being rigged and unfair -- like the last parliamentary elections in 2005 and indeed all other elections in the past. That would be the worst-case scenario for us, but we are prepared for all situations.

RFE/RL: Assuming the February elections prove to be free and fair, how big a share of the vote would you expect your party to receive?

Kabiri: According to estimates, we would receive 30 percent of the vote.

Hijab ban prompts concern from parents in Tajik province

RFE/RL (15.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At the suggestion of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party, education officials are meeting with parents to discuss a ban on the wearing of the hijab, or Islamic headscarf, in schools in northwest Sughd Province, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Saidmukhtor Jalolov of the Education Ministry recently introduced a new school uniform that allows national scarves but forbids students from wearing the hijab.

Officials told RFE/RL on September 11 that the Education Ministry has received 10 complaints from parents who want their daughters to have their head covered while attending school.

High school student Nilufar Zohidova said she kept wearing her veil to school despite the ban and was expelled after four days.

Tajik newspapers last week quoted anonymous education officials who said that the rule against the hijab will also soon be enforced on teachers.

Several university students were expelled from school last year as well.

Non-Muslim communities not re-registering

RFE/RL (11.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (14.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajik officials say the re-registration of mosques, churches, and temples in the country is proceeding well despite a lack of participation by non-Muslim communities, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Sayidbek Mahmadulloev, the head of religious affairs in the Tajik Culture Ministry, told RFE/RL that just 10 non-Islamic communities have completed the re-registration procedure for their places of worship.

Mahmadulloev said that most of the religious communities in Tajikistan have no official license for the use of their land.

He said the Culture Ministry has asked the Land Committee to speed up the process of licensing the land used by religious communities.

Faridun Hodizoda, the head of the nongovernmental project "Religion and Dialogue," said that most religious leaders do not know how to proceed with re-registration.

The process was ordered by Tajik authorities this spring after ratification of a new law on religion in Tajikistan, which is considered to be very restrictive by many international rights organizations and Western countries.

Islam becomes mandatory study in secular Tajik schools

By Farangis Najibullah

RFE/RL (31.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (01.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Students in Tajikistan will soon encounter something never before seen in their schools -- religion.

The Education Ministry's introduction of "Knowledge of Islam" as compulsory coursework can be seen as a baby step; eighth graders will be schooled in the subject just one hour a week.

But it marks a first for Central Asia, a region made up of Muslim-majority states that have maintained secular education since the fall of the Soviet Union. The change in Tajikistan has led some observers to speculate whether others in the region might break with tradition.

And inside Tajikistan itself, opinions are sharply divided between officials and Islamic clerics over who should teach the new subject and what, exactly, should be taught.

The new textbook consists primarily of four parts: the history of Islam, Islamic principles, Islam's stance on science and knowledge, and Islam's role in Tajik society since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Qualified Teachers?

Some 400 Tajik literature and history teachers have undergone special training since April to prepare them to teach the new course. This, the Education Ministry says, is in keeping with rules that only qualified teachers work in schools.

But some religious leaders are suggesting that these instructors are not capable of appropriately teaching "Knowledge of Islam," and say that this should be reserved for Islamic clerics and Tajik Islamic University graduates.

Said Ahmadov, the former head of Tajikistan's Committee of Religious Affairs and one of the authors of the new textbook, says the ministry will eventually find a solution acceptable for both sides.

"It has to be a combination of the two. Secular scholars who specialize in religion and Islam are involved in this program. And alongside them, moderate Islamic clerics who distance themselves from fanaticism, have the right to be hired as teachers," Ahmadov says.

"However, this job should not be exploited for promoting extremist and fanatical ideas among students that would lead to new conflicts and fighting."

Authorized Islam

Stemming the influence of radical Islam is among the reasons given for the effort, spearheaded by a government that keeps tight control over religious matters and is keen to oversee the religious education of the country's younger generation.

Authorities have acknowledged the program was partially aimed at preventing the nation's young from seeking information about their religion "elsewhere."

By that, they mean the numerous unregistered religious schools or madrasahs that have emerged and hundreds of mosques that have sprouted up all over the country since independence in 1991.

In recent years, Tajik authorities have taken a tougher stance toward religious institutions.

Dozens of underground madrasahs have been raided by police and security officers amid allegations that they were promoting extremist ideas.

As Islamic head scarves became popular among many young Tajik women, the Education Ministry outlawed the hijab in schools as an "element of foreign culture."

Hundreds of unlicensed mosques have been closed down, prompting angry reactions by clerics.

...Or Still More Needed?

And while "Knowledge of Islam" is being introduced in part to address longstanding criticism from religious figures, some are calling for an even greater role for religion in schools.

In the past, education officials came under fire for what clerics called the "misinterpretation of Islam and distorting Islamic facts" in Tajik history textbooks.

Last year, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, a prominent cleric and politician, publicly said Tajik history textbooks had taken an irrational and sometimes "insulting and offensive stance" toward Islam.

Hoji Qalandar Sadriddinzoda, the head of the Islamic Revival Party in southern Khatlon province, has said that the introduction of "Knowledge of Islam" reveals government hypocrisy.

The authorities "pretend they are doing us Muslims a favor, saying, 'Look, we're teaching our religion in schools.' There is no need for a special textbook to teach Islam," Sadriddinzoda says.

"If they really want to teach Islam, they should include the Koran or Hadith in the school program. It's as simple as that."

Nazira Tashtemirova, a Bishkek-based expert on social affairs, says that other Central Asian countries could also find themselves tweaking their secular education systems to address religion.

But Tashtemirova does not see the introduction of Islam into school curriculums as a threat.

"It's just a part of our culture, our history," she says. "The younger generation would seek information and knowledge about their Islamic heritage, and we simply cannot ignore it."

State action against Jehovah's Witnesses threatens religious freedom for all in Tajikistan

JW Office of Public Information (30.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (06.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On the morning of June 8, 2009, Zafar Rakhimov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, received a summons to appear at the office of the Sughd District Committee for National Security (CNS) at 1 p.m. that same day. At the CNS office, Zafar was immediately insulted by the officer in charge, who began accusing him and his family of religious extremism and of inciting interdenominational conflict. The interrogation quickly deteriorated when Zafar refused to write a statement. Enraged at the refusal, a second officer began punching him in the head and stomach, threatening that he would not be allowed to live in Khujand or that he would be imprisoned.

Four days earlier, on June 4, a small group of Jehovah's Witnesses met together in the home belonging to one of them and were discussing Bible subjects. A knock on the door startled the peaceful group. Eleven local officials forced their way into the apartment and began filming those inside. Several in the group of Witnesses were taken to CNS headquarters, where they were questioned for the next six hours. One woman in the group who was registered as a disabled person because of a recent head injury was threatened that if she did not answer their questions, she would be beaten and confined for ten days. She was released nine hours later only because the threats and abuse began to have a noticeable effect on her health.

Incidents like these threaten the fundamental human right of religious freedom for all Tajik people, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to practice their faith without the fear of government surveillance or intrusion. Jehovah's Witnesses are known in over 235 lands as Christians whose activity contributes to family peace and the well-being of the communities where they live. Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed legal recognition within Tajikistan for 14 years, before October 2007. Since that date, their literature has been confiscated and public meetings for worship have been outlawed.

Plans are being made to contact Tajikistan's ambassadors to the United States and Belgium to express Witnesses' great concern over these alarming state actions and to help these officials understand the positive contribution that Jehovah's Witnesses make to Tajik society through their high morals and peaceful, law-abiding way of life.

U. S. Contact: Gregory Olds, telephone: (845)-306-0711
Belgium contact: Luca Toffoli, telephone: +32-2 782-00-15

Salafi Cleric Detained In Tajikistan

RFE/RL (25.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Police in Dushanbe have detained the alleged leader of the banned Salafi movement, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Eshoni Sirojiddin and 40 followers were performing evening prayers in a mosque in Dushanbe's Zarafshon District when police detained them on June 23.

Sirojiddin's spouse, Sayfura, told RFE/RL that two of her sons were among those detained. She said her husband is neither a Salafi leader nor a follower.

Salafi is a Sunni Islamic movement that reveres the religious leaders of early Islam as exemplary models. In January, the Tajik Supreme Court officially declared the Salafi movement extremist and banned it.

The detention of Sirojiddin and his followers was the first action against alleged Salafis conducted by Tajik authorities.

Religion Law's worst impact is on Muslims

By Mushfig Bayram,

Forum 18 (19.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (22.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The restrictive new Religion Law has already made a negative impact on Tajikistan's Muslim community. Although the new Law allows all officially registered mosques to hold sermons, Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 News Service that there is an "unwritten instruction from the authorities" that preaching should take place "only in Cathedral mosques". He said he did not know which government agency issued such an instruction. Forum 18 has been unable to establish how widely this ban is being enforced. An imam from a Dushanbe mosque, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of government reprisals, supported Saifullozoda's claim. He also confirmed that imams are often banned from preaching at weddings, but said "the ban on preaching at weddings already existed even before the new Law." He said police have warned a mosque in the city not to allow children to attend.

Several imams Forum 18 contacted to discuss freedom of religion or belief after the entry into force of the new Law in early April declined to discuss the issue, fearing reprisals from the authorities.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Minister of Culture, who oversees registration of religious organisations, specifically denied to Forum 18 that any ban has been imposed on sermons anywhere apart from in Cathedral mosques. "No one has banned imams from preaching," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 16 June. Asked if imams could preach in weddings and five-fold mosques Mukhtarov responded: "The Law does not explicitly prohibit it. What is not prohibited may be allowed." He refused to comment on why imams in certain cases have not been allowed to do so. "I can only talk to you and those people in person to answer."

Hoji Negmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chair of Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic Scholars), refused to comment to Forum 18 on 19 June on how the new Law is impacting their communities. Asked why preaching was banned anywhere apart from at Cathedral Mosques, he referred Forum 18 to the Fatwa Department of the Council. However, the telephone there went unanswered each time Forum 18 called.

The Russian Orthodox priest in the town of Chkalovsk in the northern Sughd Region (who also serves in the city of Khujand), Fr Vladimir Slepov, told Forum 18 on 19 June that he does not know what impact the new Law will have. However, he said he hopes that "good relations" with the local authorities will continue. He said he is preparing documents for re-registering the parish and only "minor issues" need to be resolved.

All religious communities must, under the Law, re-register by 1 January 2010.

Other religious communities – including the Baha'is and a number of Protestant churches - have told Forum 18 that they will wait to see what consequences the New Law will bring.

Some religious minority communities were banned by the authorities even before the new Religion Law. The Jehovah's Witnesses this month confirmed to Forum 18 that they still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. 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.

Preaching outside Cathedral mosques not allowed

Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 that imams are no longer allowed to preach in five-fold mosques. A five-fold mosque in Tajikistan is where Muslims gather five times a day to pray.

The Religion Law divides mosques into three categories – the largest ones are designated Central cathedral mosques, medium sized ones as Cathedral mosques, and the smallest as five-fold mosques. A five-fold mosque by definition based on the Law's Articles 9, 11 and 13 is a religious community that may be established in residential areas with a population of 100 to 1,000 people, or – in the case of the city of Dushanbe - with population of 1,000 to 5,000, and registered with the local executive authorities.

"Now even imams who were loyal to the government complain of this," Saifullozoda told Forum 18 on 16 June from Dushanbe. "Only state-endorsed imams can preach and only in officially registered mosques," he complained, pointing to the new Law's Articles 4 Part 9 and 11 Part 6. "This seriously limits the propagation of Islam."

Article 4 Part 9 of the new Law states that only officially registered religious communities may engage in "mass propaganda". Article 11 Part 6 states: Imam-khatibs and imams of the mosques are selected (elected) by the approval of the appropriate state bodies in charge of religious affairs.

Saifullozoda added that the authorities also "closely monitor" weddings now. "They warn people planning to invite an imam to preach that they may be barred from holding the ceremony," he maintained. He said he knows of concrete cases across Tajikistan where the authorities directly told people so.

Imam Shamsiddin (he did not give his last name) of Amindjon Cathedral Mosque in Dushanbe's Firdavsi District said imams can only preach in officially registered mosques. "All the five-fold mosques in our area are registered, as far as I know," he told Forum 18 on 18 June. "I cannot say if imams are allowed to preach in unregistered five-fold mosques." He claimed that "probably the authorities would allow an educated imam to preach even in an unregistered mosque."

However, a Muslim who attends the same mosque, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of reprisals from the authorities, told Forum 18 on 17 June that he "only prays" in Amindjon Mosque. "Imams do not preach in our mosque. People go to a Central Cathedral Mosque in our area to hear sermons." The Muslim said he also has heard of preaching being "banned" in weddings as well. "Local authorities have ways to monitor this," he told Forum 18.

Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda in Khujand in Sughd Region said he has not heard of problems with preaching in their province yet. "I cannot positively say this about everybody but imams are generally allowed to preach at weddings here," he told Forum 18 on 16 June.

Restrictive new Religion Law still criticized

Imam Kalonzoda said that the new Law is "not very clear" about preaching and other issues. "We as law-abiding citizens must comply with the New Law but it is highly criticized," he stated.

The imam from Dushanbe said he could not say "how much worse" the new Law made "the already bad situation of religious freedom" in Tajikistan. "Women were banned from attending mosques already more than a year ago, before the new Law came in," he complained to Forum 18 on 19 June from Dushanbe. He added that only Cathedral mosques are allowed to use loudspeakers for the call to prayer.

In mid-June, the imam from Dushanbe told Forum 18, the Police went to the mosque near the meat market in central Dushanbe and told them to stop children under 16 from attending. "I don't know if this is connected with the new Law," he told Forum 18.

Tajikistan's government has made contradictory statements about whether or not the restrictive new Religion Law will be changed. The Law was condemned by a wide range of Tajik and international human rights defenders.

Other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Female Muslim students have also faced difficulties wearing the hijab, the Islamic headcovering, in educational institutions. Tajikistan State University had expelled "up to four" students for wearing the hijab, Vice-Rector Latofat Nazirova told Forum 18. She claimed that this was "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code".

However, the University now states it has readmitted the expelled students. Nazirova told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on 16 June that eight students were readmitted because of "an understanding of women's role in Tajik society." However, she added the contradictory comment that students should "consider" the government's ban on traditional Islamic clothing such as the hijab.

Forum 18 has learnt that passport photos of men with beards and women wearing headscarves continue to be rejected by officials.

Students readmitted to Tajik University with head scarves

RFE/RL (16.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (17.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Eight women students expelled from Tajik State University for refusing to remove their head scarves have been readmitted, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

The women all say they will continue to wear their head scarves, or hijab.

Gulnora Bobonazarova was expelled from the university's Journalism Department in May for wearing her traditional Islamic head scarf. Seven other female students were also later expelled.

Bobonazarova thanked RFE/RL for reporting on her expulsion, which she said led human rights organizations to react to her case and bring it greater attention.

Tajik State University's Deputy Rector Latofat Nazirova told RFE/RL that the decision to readmit Bobonazarova was based mainly on "an understanding of women's role in Tajik society."

But she added that the students should, by the same token, consider the government's ban on traditional Islamic clothing such as head scarves.

Muslims and Protestants are the latest official targets

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (12.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (13.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - After Tajikistan's adoption of a restrictive new Religion Law the Muslim community appears to be the main target of official hostility, Forum 18 News Service has found. Officials have told Forum 18 the NSM secret police is preparing the so-far unspecified charges against 93 members of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement, who were detained by the authorities in April and May. Tajikistan State University has expelled "up to four" Muslim students for wearing the hijab. The Vice-Rector claimed to Forum 18 that they were expelled "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code." Meanwhile attacks on the property of religious communities continue, with the Protestant Grace Sunmin Church in the capital Dushanbe having lost its legal battle to stop the authorities evicting it from its own church building. The Church has been given a deadline of 1 July to leave its building.

Female students who want to wear headscarves in university or school, followers of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement and the Protestant Grace Sunmin church in the capital Dushanbe are among the latest victims of the government crackdown on freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Up to four female students of Tajikistan State University in Dushanbe were expelled for wearing the hijab – an Islamic headscarf for women – to lectures. Prosecution of some 93 followers of the Jamaat Tabligh movement arrested in April and May continues. The press officer of the National Security Ministry (NSM) secret police, who did not give his name, refused to tell Forum 18 on 9 June how long the investigation of the detained followers would last and when any trials might take place. And Grace Sunmin church has lost its battle in the courts to retain its building and has been given a final deadline of 1 July to vacate it.

In the wake of the expulsion of the female students from Tajikistan State University for wearing the hijab, officials from the University and Education Ministry and the Presidential Administration have given conflicting remarks whether or not wearing hijab to universities is banned. Meanwhile some parents do not send their daughters to school because girls are not allowed to attend classes in hijab.

Hijab-wearing students barred from educational institutions

Latofat Nazirova, the State University's Vice-Rector responsible for educational and disciplinary matters, said the University expelled "up to four students this year" for wearing hijabs. "I do not remember the names of the students or what grade they were in," she told Forum 18 on 8 June from Dushanbe.

About the reasons of the expulsions, Nazirova said, it was "not because of religion but because the university had a dress code," according to which female students are not allowed to wear "totally black or dark apparels, and those that would tightly cover them." Asked whether the expelled students could be restored to the University, Nazirova responded: "They could if they gave up wearing hijabs."

Among those who said they had been expelled from the State University this year was Gulnora Bobonazarova, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajik Service reported on 26 May. She was quoted as saying that "the university administration did not admit her to the exams because she wore a hijab."

However, Nazirova claimed to Forum 18 that Bobonazarova, who she said is in her last year of university, was admitted to the final exams recently. "I had the order for her expulsion also but did not sign it when I found out she was about to graduate and was a diligent student," Nazirova claimed to Forum 18. She also claimed that Bobonazarova should be able to receive her diploma in September.

Forum 18 was unable to independently verify Vice-Rector Nazirova's claims about Bobonazarova between 8 and 11 June.

In 2007, another student of the State University Davlatmoh Ismoilova had challenged in the court the ban on wearing hijabs. However, she lost the case, and did not return to the University, reports RFE/RL.

Schoolgirls are also not allowed to wear hijabs to classes, as Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the officially registered Islamic Revival Party complains. "I know of many friends and acquaintances that do not send their daughters to schools because of this," he told Forum 18 on 11 June.

Dushanbe resident Makhmadjon Muhammadnuri told Forum 18 his eight-year-old daughter does attend any school because "it is against his convictions" for his daughter to attend classes without a hijab. He told Forum 18 on 11 June that he knew "the state secondary schools would not accept" his daughter in hijab and therefore he tried to place her in a private school, Sarparast, in 2008. "But they turned us down because of the hijab," he said. Muhammadnuri told Forum 18 that he knew of other parents who also would not send their daughters to school, because they were banned from wearing the hijab.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Sarparast school.

Schoolgirls wearing hijabs in northern Tajikistan have in the past been barred from receiving school leaving certificates.

Why is the hijab banned in university and school?

Claiming to Forum 18 on 8 June that there is a ban on wearing hijab in the education institutions, signed by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon and the Education Minister, was an employee of the State University's Admissions Department, who did not give her name.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Abdulfatoh Sharipov, the Head of the President's Press Service, on 9 and 10 June. However, two different officials of the Press Service, neither of whom gave their names, insisted to Forum 18 that President Rahmon had not signed any ban on wearing the hijab. Both of them refused to comment on the claims of the official ban on the hijab and the expulsions of the students. "The ban comes from the Education Ministry," one Press Service official told Forum 18 on 10 June.

Jaloliddin Amirov, an official of the Education Ministry, denied to Forum 18 there was a "ban". He said there were merely two decisions of the Board of the Education Ministry from 3 July 2007, No.14/2 and No.14/3, which instruct students of higher education institutions and schoolchildren respectively to wear uniforms to universities and schools.

"With the decision we have also provided universities and schools with photographs of up to six different models of uniform," Amirov told Forum 18 on 10 June. "So obviously when women wear a hijab to the university, they violate the dress code."

Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party argued that the Education Ministry instructions were "specifically against" Islamic religious apparel. "The dress models given by the Ministry include traditional Tajik head-scarves for female students provided the neck must not be covered, but the hijab covers the neck," Saifullozoda explained to Forum 18. "I am sure the women were against showing their necks according to their religious convictions, and therefore insisted on wearing hijab to classes."

Asked if all students followed the Education Ministry's dress code instructions, Amirov of the Education Ministry responded: "I would say 90 percent of the students do." He said there are those who "sometimes break the rules and come to classes in casual dress like jeans but they get warned immediately." Asked whether students who insisted on wearing casual dress to classes could also be expelled, Amirov asked, "Why should we expel students for that?" Amirov evaded the question why the State University expelled students for wearing hijabs. "I am not aware of that," he responded.

Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic scholars), which replaced the former Muftiate or Spiritual Board of Muslims, refused to comment to Forum 18 on 9 June on the expulsion of students or the ban on hijab. Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chairman of the Council, referred Forum 18 to the Islamic University of Tajikistan. The phones at the University went unanswered between 9 and 11 June.

The Council of Ulems has in the past supported the authorities actions in penalising Muslim schoolgirls for wearing the hijabs. It has also supported government actions more recently.

Prosecution of Jamaat Tabligh members continues

Although Tajikistan's General Prosecutor's Office had earlier told Forum 18 that it was about to bring charges against the arrested Jamaat Tabligh members, officials there and at the NSM secret police made it clear that it is the NSM secret police which is now leading the prosecution.

Dushanbe City Division of the NSM secret police is leading the case of the arrested Jamaat Tabligh members, according to Sobirjon Isoboyev, Senior Official of the General Prosecutor's Office. "The Ministry of National Security is preparing charges against them," he told Forum 18 on 9 June. Isoboyev said he did not know how many Jamaat Tabligh members are being prosecuted.

One Jamaat Tabligh member had given Forum 18 the number of those arrested at 93, but officials had claimed that the number was much smaller. However, the officials refused to state who is being held or why. Officials claimed the movement was banned in Tajikistan in 2006, but a Supreme Court official and civil society sources told Forum 18 that they were unaware of the ban.

The NSM secret police's Press Officer told Forum that he could not say anything on the case. "I have not received any information on the case yet," he stated. Asked when NSM would announce the results of the investigation, he said he did not know and hung up the phone.

The Supreme Court banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009. The ban came into effect on 9 February.

Isoboyev could not say what exactly the members of Jamaat Tabligh or the banned Muslim Salafi movement had violated. Isoboyev also said he does not know of any prosecution of Salafi members since they were banned.

Tightening controls over religious activity and loss of places of worship

The last few years have seen increasing official controls on religious activity. Jehovah's Witnesses still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other - Ehyo Church - was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008.

Religious communities have little security that they can retain their own places of worship. As well as Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin church, many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation. The Jewish community received no compensation for its synagogue bulldozed in Dushanbe in June 2008. Although the state did not compensate the Jewish community for demolishing the synagogue, a private businessman (and a brother-in-law of President Rahmon) provided the Jewish community with an alternative building in March 2009.

Grace Sunmin church members told Forum 18 on 12 June that the church's final appeal to the High Economic Court of Tajikistan to restore their property rights yielded no results. On 11 June the High Court upheld the previous court decisions to strip the church's property rights. The church has been given a final deadline of 1 July to vacate the building (see forthcoming F18 News article).

Meanwhile the recently adopted new Religion Law has made its impact on the Muslim community. Although a number of religious communities – among them Baha'is and Protestant Christians - told Forum 18 that there have been no new raids or checkups since the new law, the Islamic Revival Party's Saifullozoda claimed that the authorities already watch the funeral ceremonies and weddings so there is no unauthorised preaching. "According to the New Law, preaching from the Koran may only take place in Cathedral mosques," he stated.

Tajikistan's government has made contradictory statements about whether or not the new Law will be changed. President Rahmon has stated that it "will not be changed" as it is "well-defined and clear". However, Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Ministry of Culture, has told Forum 18 that the Law is "not a dogma" and may change. Muslim, Christian and Baha'i religious communities have complained to Forum 18 that, since 2006, almost no religious organisations have been given state registration, the head of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department confirming that "only" new non-Muslim religious organisations were denied registration since 2006.

Eleven Hizb Ut-Tahrir suspects charged In Tajikistan

RFE/RL (02.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (03.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajik police in the northern Soghd province have detained 11 suspected members of the Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir group, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Local prosecutors told RFE/RL that those arrested were officially charged with igniting ethnic and racial hatred and attempting to oust the Tajik government.

The officials said the suspects possessed books calling for the overthrow of the government.

Last week seven other locals in Soghd were found guilty of associating with Hizb ut-Tahrir and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, which declares a goal of Islamic rule but has officially rejected violence, is banned throughout Central Asia.

Why are around 93 Muslims being detained?

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (15.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (18.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Some 93 followers of the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement are being detained in Tajikistan, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Officials have claimed to Forum 18 that the number is "much smaller than 93", but have refused to state who is being held or why they are being held. Officials claimed to Forum 18 the movement was banned in Tajikistan in 2006, but a Supreme Court official and civil society sources have told Forum 18 that they were unaware of the ban. An independent human rights defender who is familiar with the group's followers in Tajikistan described it to Forum 18 as "peaceful" and said "they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements (..). This is exactly what Tajikistan needs." One Jamaat Tabligh follower questioned why, if the authorities think the group is harmful, its followers were able to preach openly. He told Forum 18 that "there were no attempts to stop our activity until now. We gathered in various mosques once a week with the invitation and permission of the mosques' imams."

At least 93 Jamaat Tabligh followers in Tajikistan have been held in police detention centres since 14 April, Forum 18 News Service has been told by a Jamaat Tabligh follower, who wanted to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals. The 93 are held in the capital Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob. Officials have refused to give the names or the exact number of those arrested. Jamaat Tabligh, whose name means the Society of Preachers, is an Islamic movement promoting Muslim values.

The authorities are refusing to say exactly why the 93 have been arrested. Humayro Mirova, the Interior Ministry's Press Officer could not tell Forum 18 on 13 May under which law the Jamaat Tabligh followers were arrested, but stated that they would face criminal charges for extremism. Muhammedjon Khayrulloev, an official of the General Prosecutor's Office, told Forum 18 on 12 May that they would charge the arrested people with "engaging in illegal religious activity."

Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) – the only legal religious party in Central Asia – suggested that "the government may have felt threatened" by the movement's influence. "Because their [Jamaat Tabligh's] numbers grew in thousands, the government decided to put a stop to the movement now," he told Forum 18 on 14 May from Dushanbe.

The arrests

Trouble began for Jamaat Tabligh followers on 14 April, when 113 people were arrested while listening to a sermon preached by a Jamaat Tabligh preacher in Dushanbe's Umari Farrukh Mosque. "The Deputy Police Chief of Dushanbe's Firdavsi District entered the mosque during the sermon, and told people in the mosque not to panic, but to quietly get into buses waiting outside for them," a Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18 on 12

May. "From there the people were taken to the Firdavsi Police Station to be questioned, and later to a police detention centre."

Shortly after the raid on the mosque in Dushanbe, National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, together with ordinary police began arresting people in Qurghonteppa and Kulob, in south-west Tajikistan. "Some were arrested in their homes, others at their work places and still others on the street," the Jamaat Tabligh follower said. "It took the NSC secret police about 15 days to arrest people in those two cities, the last one being arrested at the beginning of May."

How many are still detained?

Interior Ministry officials – including Interior Minister Abdurahim Kahhorov at a 22 April press conference - have admitted to only four arrests of Jamaat Tabligh followers. "Only four persons are being held in the Ministry's detention centre," Mirova of the Interior Ministry insisted to Forum 18 on 13 May. However, she did not disclose their names. "At first more people were arrested," she claimed without specifying when. "All but four were later released." Mirova refused to give the number of the released people.

Equally, Khayrulloev of the General Prosecutor's Office would not give the exact number of arrests. He told Forum 18 that it was "much smaller than 93."

But other sources have given much higher figures. Jamaat Tabligh followers state that 34 of their colleagues have been held since 14 April in Dushanbe, 47 are said to be held in Qurghonteppa and 12 in Kulob. This would bring the total number of detainees to 93. "All of them are being interrogated by police and NSC secret police investigators," Forum 18 was told.

The Jamaat Tabligh follower identified some of those arrested as: Khushbakht Davletov, Saidmashrab, Bilol, Safarali, Bakhrom, Nasriddin (last names unknown), who are held in Dushanbe; Nosir, Ikbolsho, Amirali, Talabsho, Churakhon (last names unknown) being held in Qurghonteppa; and Nurullo Sadriddin being held in Kulob.

Also contesting official claims was Saifullozoda of the IRP. He told Forum 18 that "up to twenty" Muslims might be charged for allegedly inciting people to religious intolerance in an organised fashion. "I heard that at first it was four persons but later, as the number of people arrested across Tajikistan grew, up to 20 people are said to face criminal charges," he told Forum 18.

Is Jamaat Tabligh banned?

Tajik authorities claim that Jamaat Tabligh was banned in 2006. However, other Tajik sources have told Forum 18 that – if the movement was banned in 2006 - the ban was not made public.

When Tajikistan banned the Salafi school of Islamic thought in January 2009, that ban was widely known and condemned at the time of the ban.

Asked for the reason for the arrests, Khayrulloev of the General Prosecutors Office claimed that the Jamaat Tabligh movement was banned by the Supreme Court on 30 March 2006. "The movement is on Tajikistan's official list of banned terrorist and extremist organisations, which includes Al-Qaeda," he told Forum 18.

Echoing Khayrulloev was Idibek Ziyoyev, Head of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department. He said his Department in 2004 gave an unofficial warning to the public that the Jamaat Tabligh was an extremist movement. "It was in 2006 that the official warning came with the Supreme Court decision," he told Forum 18 on 7 May. When asked why

Jamaat Tabligh followers were allowed to preach in the mosques regularly after the alleged ban, Ziyoyev claimed that they did it "without permission".

Asked why no court cases had been brought against the Jamaat Tabligh followers since the claimed ban, both Ziyoyev and Khayrulloev referred Forum 18 to the NSC secret police. "Please ask the NSC, which is leading the investigation," Khayrulloev said. However, the NSC secret police told Forum 18 on 13 May that they were "in no way involved in the arrests or interrogation of Jamaat Tabligh."

Supreme Court official denies knowledge of claimed ban

An official of the Supreme Court Chancellery (who would not give his name) said he knew nothing about a ban on Jamaat Tabligh. "If there was a decision about it in 2006, it would probably be in the archives," he told Forum 18 on 12 May. He referred Forum 18 to Solehjon Zavkiyev, Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. "He must know about the case, talk to him," he said.

Zavkiyev said he knew nothing about the ban and referred Forum 18 on 12 May to Farrukh Malakhov, the Supreme Court's Press Officer. Forum 18 unsuccessfully tried to reach Malakhov between 12 and 14 May. All calls went unanswered.

Civil society sources doubt ban's existence

A Jamaat Tabligh follower complained to Forum 18 that neither he or nor anyone else from the movement knew of the Supreme Court ban. "Since 2004 more than 200 Muslims have been detained by the police and NSC secret police at various times, questioned about Jamaat Tabligh religious activity and teachings, and then released," he said. "None of them were told of the existence of a ban."

A well-informed independent human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous, agreed. "When my organisation asked the Interior Ministry the reasons for the arrests, they told us that Jamaat Tabligh was banned," he told Forum 18 on 14 May from Dushanbe. "However they didn't produce any proof of the ban." He told Forum that he had "never heard" of the ban before.

Sayfullozoda of the IRP vaguely remembered that "a couple of years ago there was a notice in the press that Jamaat Tabligh movement along with IMU and some other Islamic movements" was banned in Tajikistan. "No one took any seriously notice of this, as people in Tajikistan were not even familiar with Jamaat Tabligh," he commented. "I can say that Jamaat Tabligh as a movement didn't even exist in Tajikistan then." Sayfullozoda then suggested that this could be the reason why the authorities "until now tolerated individual Jamaat Tabligh members."

CSTO ban

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which brings together seven of the former Soviet republics including Tajikistan, added Tabligh Jamaat and Salafism to its list of "extremist" organisations this year, press reports say. The CSTO list was first drawn up in November 2004 and included 22 organisations, but seven more were added this year.

What did the Jamaat Tabligh followers do?

It is unclear what actions by Jamaat Tabligh followers – or anyone else - triggered the arrests. Officials have repeatedly refused to name any specific incidents which caused the arrests. A Religious Affairs Department official who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 13 May that he could not say what exactly was wrong in the actions of Jamaat

Tabligh followers. He said that neither Ziyoyev nor anyone else was available to answer the question.

Attempts to persuade the General Prosecutor's Office or the Interior Ministry to comment were unsuccessful on 13 and 14 May. All calls went unanswered.

None of the arrested Muslims have in the past been criminally or administratively punished, the Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18. He stated that the names of their preachers were "well known" to the authorities. "They freely preached in the mosques, and there were no attempts to stop our activity until now," he pointed out. "We gathered in various mosques once a week with the invitation and permission of the mosques' imams."

The Jamaat Tabligh follower told Forum 18 that among those arrested "only ten to twelve people" had studied abroad in Iran, Syria, and India, while some others were educated in Tajikistan.

The human rights defender had heard Interior Ministry officials claiming that they had found Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan leaflets on Jamaat Tabligh followers arrested in the mosque in Dushanbe. "I personally don't believe the claims, since I know that Jamaat Tabligh is a moderate Islamic movement," he emphasised. Describing the movement as "peaceful," he told Forum 18 that he had personally met and talked to their representatives.

"Jamaat Tabligh followers explain to other Muslims the meaning of Sharia, and call on them to respect it. They do not call Muslims to violence or force their own viewpoint on others," he stated. "On the contrary, they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. This is exactly what Tajikistan needs."

Sayfullozoda of the IRP said Jamaat Tabligh in Tajikistan had "never got involved in politics, unlike some other Islamic movements. Jamaat Tabligh purely stuck to explaining the Koran and the five pillars of Islam." He said he did not know everybody within the movement, but "on the whole the movement in Tajikistan has been peaceful."

Salafi ban

Ziyoyev of the Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 that the actions against followers of Jamaat Tabligh had no connection with the January 2009 ban on the Salafi school of Islamic thought. "No Salafis have been arrested or brought before the courts since the ban," he claimed.

Saifullozoda of the IRP agreed with Ziyoyev's claim, stating that he also had not heard of any action being taken against Salafis since the ban.

Will or won't the Religion Law be changed?

Tajikistan's government is making contradictory statements about whether or not the new and restrictive Religion law will be changed, Forum 18 has noted. President Emomali Rahmon has stated that the Law "will not be changed" as it is "well-defined and clear". However, Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Ministry of Culture, has told Forum 18 that the Law is "not a dogma" and may change. "We are at the moment studying the law, and collecting recommendations on possible changes and corrections," he stated. Protests against the Law have continued within Tajikistan.

Tajikistan opens 'secular-religious' high school

RFE/RL (06.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (07.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The government has officially opened the "secular-religious" Imam Abu Hanifa high school in Dushanbe, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Said Ahmadov, a school official and former head of the state Religious Affairs Committee, told RFE/RL's Tajik Service that the school teaches Islamic and modern subjects according to a plan from the Education Ministry.

He said some 70 percent of students' time is spent studying Islamic subjects and 30 percent in classes such as English, Tajik, literature, and science.

The school, which is supported by the Swiss government, currently has about 20 teenagers attending it.

Student Hikoyat Safarova, who can recite most of the Koran in both Arabic and English, told RFE/RL that she has wanted to study Islam and modern subjects together since she was a child.

The first lessons in the school began in September.

Tajik expert Ghaffor Mirzoev said that secularism is not an enemy of religion, as some Tajiks believe, and such an example like the Imam Hanifa school can help find a compromise between the two.

Followers of Sunni missionary group detained in Tajikistan

Forum 18 (17.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (18.04.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Tajik Interior Ministry says that security forces have detained dozens of followers of Jamaat-ut Tabligh, a Sunni missionary group, in a mosque in Dushanbe.

Mahmadulloh Asadulloev told RFE/RL's Tajik Service that most of those arrested were released after being interrogated. "Only detainees suspected of being related to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) will go through further checks," he said.

Relatives and colleagues of the detainees told RFE/RL that they have not received any information about the detainees, and described those arrested as Jamaat-ut Tabligh members who only promote Islamic values.

Sayidbek Mahmadulloev, the head of the religion department in the Tajik Culture Ministry, said Jamaat-ut Tabligh is not officially registered and that he doesn't know much about it. But he pointed to the new law on religion that registers all approved religious groups, allowing them to promote their values.

Zubaidulloh Roziq, an Islamic Renaissance Party activist, told RFE/RL that he is aware of Jamaat-ut-Tabligh's existence in Tajikistan. He said former students of Pakistani religious schools belong to the group and promote Sunni values, not only in Tajikistan but also in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, and other countries.

Latest religious property eviction, Religion Law enters into force

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (03.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.04.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In Tajikistan's latest attack on religious property, the Protestant Grace Sunmin Church in the capital Dushanbe has been given 10 days to leave their church building. Claiming they do not want to "disturb" the church over Easter, the authorities subsequently extended the eviction deadline to the end of April. Church members strongly dispute the authorities' claim that they do not own their own church, as well as the "ridiculous amount offered" as compensation. Mosques, churches and the country's only synagogue have previously been demolished. The highly restrictive new Religion Law has now come into force, despite strong protests from local human rights defenders, religious communities, and international bodies including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the OSCE. Among other restrictions in the Law, the number of mosques is restricted, all imams must be appointed by the state, state censorship is imposed on all religious literature; and children's religious activity and education are restricted. State officials have described protests as "baseless" and those who share the concerns of international organisations as supporting "alien ideas."

Grace Sunmin Protestant Church in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe has lost its battle to retain ownership of its worship building it bought legally at auction in 1997. On 1 April, the church received a letter from the court ordering them to vacate their building within 10 days, church members told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 2 April. Alihon Nuraliev, the Bailiff who notified the church, played down their concerns over the abrupt departure, insisting the church has been given more time to prepare to move out and will be allowed to mark Easter this month in the building. Judges who took the decision to strip the church of its property rights have defended their decision, claiming that "changed circumstances" allow them to over-ride the law.

Grace Sunmin Church bought its building, a former unfinished construction originally intended to become a school, in 1997. The church received its certificate of ownership of the building in July 1998. It then began work to complete construction (the building had no roof) and interior renovation works. The church moved into the building only in 2000, the year after their previous place of worship was devastated in a bomb attack that killed nine people. Since 2002 the authorities have been challenging the church's ownership of its building.

Judge Karim Hakimov, the Chair of Dushanbe City's Economic Court, confirmed that the court on 14 March 2009 cancelled the court's 2004 decision to dismiss a challenge to the church's property brought by the City Prosecutor's Office. Judge Hakimov told Forum 18 on 3 April from Dushanbe that they could go back to their previous decision and cancel it "in view of the changed circumstances." Asked what circumstances had changed, he said Tajikistan's High Economic Court had made a decision to annul the original decision of Dushanbe City Mayor's Office and sales contracts.

Asked whether the church would get any compensation, Hakimov said he believed Grace Sunmin Church already received the original sum they had paid to buy the building. He said they could bring a claim to his court for additional compensation for the investments they made in the building and any extensions.

Judge Vaisiddin Fatkhuddinov of the High Economic Court, said the court declined Grace Sunmin's complaint to have the Court's Panel of Judges review its final decision from 2 December 2008, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen, upholding the Court's earlier

decision. "We did not see any reasons for the review," he insisted to Forum 18 on 3 April. "The court procedure was not in breach of regulations when it made the last decision."

Judge Fatkhuddinov said the church would only be compensated for the original sum paid to purchase the building. Asked about the additional investments made by Grace Sunmin, he said, "The church may go a civil court with a new claim to be compensated for." Asked whether the Dushanbe City Mayor's office that sold the building to Grace Sunmin would be made responsible, Fatkhuddinov responded: "It is totally different issue, and the church may raise the issue with the Prosecution bodies."

Grace Sunmin members told Forum 18 they have not asked for compensation of the original sum paid to purchase their building. They said the authorities have translated the original 1997 price of approximately 18 million Tajik Roubles into 18,000 new Tajik Somonis (31,000 Norwegian Kroner, 3,500 Euros, or 4,700 US Dollars). When the Rouble was replaced with the Somoni in 2000, the official rate was 1 Somoni = 1,000 Roubles.

"We do not want this ridiculous amount at today's values, compared to the substantial amount we invested in the property at 1997 values," they complained to Forum 18.

Bailiff Nuraliev said the church is in discussion with Dushanbe Hukumat's (Executive Authority) Capital Construction Board, and the Board has now extended the eviction deadline until the end of April, he told Forum 18 on 3 April from Dushanbe. He said the authorities do not want to "disturb" them while they celebrate Easter. "The authorities do not want to offend the church, and so the Capital Construction Board will continue negotiations with Grace Sunmin leadership after Easter."

Church members complained to Forum 18 that the Capital Construction Board did not give them more time to prepare. "The Board gave us an ultimatum that either the church asks the Board in writing that we have no further complaints in the case, and will vacate the building by the end of April, if we want to peacefully celebrate Easter in the same building, or we should start dismantling all the extensions made to the building, and return it to the original shape."

Grace Sunmin members are due to meet the Capital Construction Board on 6 April. Kurbon, Deputy Chief of Dushanbe Hukumat's Capital Construction Board (he did not give his last name), said that depending on the outcome of the meeting "we may give an additional 30 or 40 days for them to dismantle the extensions they have made to the building."

He insisted that property rights over the building belonged to his Board now. "If they want to further dispute for their rights they may sue those who sold the building to the church," he said. "We are just builders. We have been tasked to build schools and kindergartens for children. We are waiting for the church to vacate the building so we can refurbish or rebuild it."

Controversial Religion Law comes into force

The final order for Grace Sunmin church to vacate its building came as the highly restrictive new Religion Law entered into force on its official publication in the official newspaper Jumhuriyat on 1 April.

The Law was approved by both houses of Parliament in early March and signed by President Emomali Rahmon on 25 March, despite protests by local human rights defenders and religious communities, as well as international bodies, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The controversial Law imposes tight restrictions on the number of mosques that can be opened depending on the number of residents of any location; gives the state the responsibility to appoint all imams; imposes state censorship on all religious literature; imposes a complicated and bureaucratic registration procedure; bans state officials from being among the founders of a religious community; requires state approval to invite foreigners for religious visits or to travel abroad for religious events; and restricts children's religious activity and education.

State claims concerns are "baseless"

On 30 March, the Culture Ministry, the Presidential Administration, the presidential Islamic Studies Centre and the Journalists' Union organised a roundtable meeting in Dushanbe to discuss the new Law, ahead of its entry into force.

At the meeting, officials rejected all criticisms of the controversial Law, the BBC Tajik Service reported the same day. Saidmurod Fattoev, advisor to President Rahmon on social affairs, described international concerns as "baseless" and called criticism by such agencies as the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as a "sort of intervention in the lawmaking affairs of Tajikistan". He claimed that the new Law respects different religions and denominations and promotes tolerance towards them.

Culture Minister Mirzoshokhrukh Asrori claimed that some independent publications within Tajikistan "have misinformed the public" about provisions of the Law. He denied that hundreds of mosques would be closed because of the limits on the numbers of mosques allowed in each residential district. He claimed that only newly-founded mosques will be registered and existing mosques will not be formally registered

Speaking to Forum 18 the day after the President signed the Law, Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Culture Minister who oversees religious affairs in the government, denied that the Law imposes any restrictions on religious activity. Asked why the new Law imposes limitations on where and how many mosques may be opened, imposes state censorship of religious literature, and enforces state restrictions and control on religious education, Mukhtarov denied to Forum 18 that these restrict religious activity.

At the government's roundtable, Muradulo Davlatov, head of President Rahmon's Centre for Islamic Studies, accused independent publications which share the concerns of international organisations about the Law as supporting "alien ideas". Davlatov formerly headed the government's Religious Affairs Committee.

Journalists from independent media pointed out that they had covered both the government's claims about the new Law and concerns by religious communities, human rights defenders and the international community, while government-owned media had not reported any criticisms and had presented the new Law as "flawless". Adolat Mirzo, editor of the independent "Millat" publication, complained that officials refused to discuss the Law with journalists, despite repeated requests.

Tightening religious activity controls, bulldozing of places of worship

The last few years have seen increasing official controls on religious activity. Jehovah's Witnesses still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other - Ehyo Church - was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008. On 9 February 2009 a ban on the Salafi school of Islamic thought imposed by the Supreme Court came into effect.

Religious communities face little security over their places of worship. As well as Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin church, many mosques or Muslim prayer halls, the country's only synagogue and Protestant churches have been closed, bulldozed or threatened with confiscation. The Jewish community received no compensation for its synagogue bulldozed in Dushanbe in June 2008. Although the state did not compensate the Jewish community for demolishing the synagogue, a private businessman (and a brother-in-law of President Rahmon) provided the Jewish community with an alternative building in March 2009.

Tajikistan's new religion law sparking questions

By Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda

RFE/ RL (03.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (07.04.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The preface of the law says that everybody in Tajikistan has a right to pray, follow any religion, and that every faith is equal. But it also states that Tajikistan is a secular state and the role of the Hanafi branch of Islam in the life of Tajiks must be taken into account.

A leading member of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party, Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, questioned the law's preface in a recent article, saying the terms "secular state" and "role of the Islamic Hanafi branch" contradict each other.

Farukh Umarov, an analyst at the Presidential Center for Strategic Studies, told RFE/RL that the law mentions the Hanafi branch to exclude such strict Islamic branches as Wahhabism and Salafism.

He added that the population of the Badakhshan region is predominantly Ismaili Shi'a, but that their number is small and they do not pose any threat to the country.

Islamic Renaissance Party deputy head Said Umar Husaini told RFE/RL that the law's clause allowing prayer only at mosques or in homes is the biggest restriction for followers of Hanafism.

He added that the Tajik government tried to promote pre-Islamic Zoroastrian values in the past but failed. Husaini says that now the authorities have turned to traditional Hanafism while simultaneously promoting secularism, but that such an approach is full of contradictions.

(by Fakhriddin Kholbekov in Dushanbe and Iskandar Aliev in Prague)

President signs repressive Religion Law

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (26.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan's President, Emomali Rahmon, has signed a repressive new Religion Law, but Presidential Administration officials refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why the Law was signed when it violates the Tajik Constitution and the country's international human rights obligations. Akbar Turajonzoda, a member of Parliament's Upper House and a former Chief Mufti told Forum 18 that "I regret very much that the President signed this Law, which will severely restrict the rights of both Muslims and non-Muslims." He said he is already drafting amendments to the Law, which he hopes to

submit to the Lower House of Parliament within the next month. Deputy Culture Minister Mavlon Mukhtarov, who oversees religious affairs in the government, claimed to Forum 18 that: "There are no restrictions on religious activity in the new Law." Asked why the new Law imposes limitations on where and how many mosques may be opened, imposes state censorship of religious literature, and enforces state restrictions and control on religious education, he denied that these restrict religious activity. The Law has been criticised by many, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Tajikistan's President, Emomali Rahmon, signed the controversial new Religion Law on 25 March, the presidential website reported the same day. Officials at the Presidential Administration refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why the president signed a Law that violates the Tajik Constitution's guarantees of religious freedom as well as Tajikistan's international human rights obligations. Condemning the move is Akbar Turajonzoda, an independent member of Parliament's Upper House and a former Chief Mufti. "I regret very much that the President signed this Law, which will severely restrict the rights of both Muslims and non-Muslims," he told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 26 March. He said he is already drafting amendments to the Law which he hopes to submit to the Lower House of Parliament within the next month.

Equally critical is Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the opposition Islamic Revival Party (IRP), which has two deputies in Parliament's lower house. He expressed surprise that the new Law was adopted so quickly. He said there were various views on the new Law in society, "mostly negative". "I believed the President would have paid attention to these concerns and would have returned the Law to Parliament," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 26 March. "But he didn't. The influence on him of other circles was greater."

Saifullozoda attributed the adoption of such a restrictive Law on secularists with a heritage in the Soviet-era atheist establishment "who don't particularly like religion, especially Islam".

But defending the new Law is Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Culture Minister who oversees religious affairs in the government. "There are no restrictions on religious activity in the new Law," he claimed to Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 26 March. Asked why the new Law imposes limitations on where and how many mosques may be opened, imposes state censorship of religious literature, and enforces state restrictions and control on religious education, he denied that these restrict religious activity.

Mukhtarov insisted that the new Law was the initiative of Parliamentary deputies. "It's their right – no one can tell them not to adopt such a Law." He agreed that the Constitution is higher than Parliament and conceded that the President should not sign any Law that violates the Constitution. Asked why the President had signed it, given the contradictions with Article 26 of the Constitution – which guarantees freedom to practice any faith or none – and the country's international human rights obligations, Mukhtarov repeated his assertion that the new Law does not contain restrictions and does not violate the Constitution.

Nargis Zokirova, who heads the Dushanbe-based Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, told Forum 18 on 26 March that the requirement for permission for foreign religious contacts, to take only one example, is a violation of human rights. "Both Muslim and non-Muslim religious organisations have got the impression that this Law is aimed at controlling Islam, and that all other faiths will likewise fall under control."

Zokirova pointed out that the President signed the Law despite concerns within the country and from abroad, including earlier this week from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. She argues that to avoid further such restrictive laws

being adopted in future, Tajikistan must allow more accessible and open discussion especially with groups who are directly affected by any Law.

Human rights defenders and religious communities have expressed concern to Forum 18 ever since this Law was sent to Parliament by the President in November 2008. Despite such complaints, the Law was approved by the Lower House on 5 March and by the Upper House on 12 March. The new Law replaces the Religion Law first adopted in 1994 and amended in 1997, 1999 and 2001.

Criticism by UN Special Rapporteur and the OSCE

The new Law has been criticised not only by human rights defenders, religious communities and some politicians within Tajikistan, but also by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Jahangir told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on 12 March – the day the Law was finally approved in Parliament - of her "serious concerns" about it, pointing out that this was not the first time she had expressed such concerns. She warned that enacting such a Law "could lead to undue limitations on the rights of religious communities and could impermissibly restrict religious activities of minority communities".

Special Rapporteur Jahangir also criticised the current situation, particularly condemning "violent attacks" on places of worship and obstruction to their building, obstruction to setting up religious schools and difficulties religious communities already face gaining legal status.

"We have not seen the law as signed, but the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), at the request of the government, provided comments on the draft of the law last year," Jens Eschenbaecher of the ODIHR told Forum 18 on 26 March. "According to the ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, many provisions of the draft law did not meet international standards" (see http://www.legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/2660/file/Tajikistan_Comments%20on%20draft%20Law%20on%20Freedom%20of%20Conscience%20and%20Religious%20Associations%2031%20January%202008_eng.doc).

Eschenbaecher told Forum 18 that "the ODIHR stands ready to continue to work with the authorities in any further efforts to amend the law and make it fully consistent with Tajikistan's commitments as a participating State of the OSCE." The new Law is known to flagrantly breach the OSCE / Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief (see http://www.osce.org/odihr/item_11_13600.html).

Ambassador Vladimir Pryakhin, Head of the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, told Forum 18 on 26 March that he is "still hopeful that the Law will not be interpreted in a harsh manner and that the freedoms of all individuals and groups - whether religious or non- in this rather tolerant country will remain so." He also noted that that "my office is open to assist the government and civil society on this and other issues of importance."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Davlati Nazriev said that the Ministry had received comments on the Law from various international bodies, including from the OSCE and Jahangir at the UN. "But all we do is pass them on to the addressee, in this case Parliament," he told Forum 18 on 26 March. "It is not our job to lobby Parliament." Nazriev refused to discuss how the new Law meets Tajikistan's international human rights obligations, including as a member of the OSCE.

Secrecy around Law's provisions, concern at known text

The Law was passed through Parliament without information about it being made publicly available, which also attracted much criticism. It is still unclear what the detailed wording of the text as signed by the President is.

Many of an earlier draft's detailed provisions – which are thought to be very close to the provisions of the final text – caused great concern among human rights defenders and religious communities, both nationally and internationally.

The most prominent aspects of the Law to have attracted criticism are:

Special role of Hanafi Islam

The recognition in the preamble to the new Law of the "special role of the Hanafi school of Islam in the development of the national culture and moral life of the people of Tajikistan" has already drawn opposition. "I do not understand why a certain school of Islam should be given any preference," an Ismaili imam told Forum 18 in mid-March. Ismailism is a branch of Shia Islam and most Ismailis live in the Mountainous Badakhshan Region.

Registration restrictions imposed

Legal founders of a religious organisation seeking registration must show a document from their local executive body certifying that they have lived in their territory for at least five years and adhered to the religion. State officials are not allowed to become legal founders of religious communities.

Literature censorship tightened

The government must now approve all published or imported religious literature, which can only be in an "appropriate quantity". Religious communities have already complained to Forum 18 about the existing difficulties in obtaining literature.

Children's religious activity and education restricted

Written permission from both parents is required before children can take part in religious education. Police already try to stop children attending mosques. And as a Protestant pastor has pointed out to Forum 18, "according to this Law even if children come to a religious service, not classes, it may be interpreted as involving children in religious education".

Muslims singled out for extra restrictions

The new Law singles out the Muslim community for special restrictions, limiting the number of mosques of different types depending on the local number of residents and imposing state interference in the appointment of imams (though other faiths appear free to appoint their own leaders). Turajonzoda, the parliamentarian, complained to Forum 18 that prayers can only take place in mosques, homes and cemeteries, not at places of work or on the streets around mosques when mosques are full. "Many people turned away because mosques are full will be banned from praying."

Turajonzoda complained that while at present any mosque can establish study classes on the Koran, in future only central mosques with a licence from the Culture Ministry will be allowed to do this. "Such classes will return underground, just as they were in Soviet times," he warned. "This is very bad – all this should be out in the open."

Contact with foreign co-believers needs state permission

Religious organisations must get the consent of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee to invite foreigners or attend religious conferences outside the country

Government rejects all criticism

Deputy Culture Minister Mukhtarov rejected the idea that under the new Law religious education, publishing specific literature or inviting foreigners for religious purposes requires permission from the Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee. "They can do all these with the agreement of the government – that's not the same as getting permission," he claimed. Asked whether if the Committee does not agree a religious community can go ahead with such activity, he responded: "We never refuse anyone."

Despite such bland assurances, his Committee has already stripped the Jehovah's Witnesses of legal status. However, he defended this, claiming that they had violated their statute. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other - Ehyo Church - was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008.

Mukhtarov acknowledged that religious books have been halted in Customs when communities – including Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses – have tried to import them. However, he tried to blame the Customs authorities for the decision. "It's a problem between these communities and Customs." He dismissed the characterisation of government control over religious literature as censorship, repeating earlier assertions that this is merely "agreement".

Jewish community not compensated for synagogue demolition

Meanwhile, Dushanbe's Jewish community has received a building on 18 March that they can use as a synagogue. It will replace their former synagogue, bulldozed without compensation by the city authorities partially in February 2006 and completely in June 2008.

However, the new building has been provided not as compensation by the city authorities but by a private businessman (and President Rahmon's brother in law), Hasan Asadullozoda, the local Asiaplus news agency reported on 26 March.

Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told the agency that work is going on to make the building ready to use as a synagogue. They hope the work will be ready by Passover, which is marked on 8 April, so that the community can hold the official opening soon after. "Since the synagogue – the only one in Tajikistan – was demolished last June on the orders of the city authorities, the Jewish community has had practically nowhere to conduct religious rites over nearly nine months," he complained.

Other violations of freedom of religion or belief

Tajik authorities have also been violating freedom of religion or belief independently of discussions of the new Law.

The authorities have continued to close down and demolish Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship in Dushanbe. Unregistered mosques have been closed down by city authorities, the country's only Jewish synagogue has been bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship.

A ban on the Salafi school of Islamic thought came into effect on 9 February 2009, even though no convictions have been obtained linking crimes to the school of thought. The ban, imposed by Tajikistan's Supreme Court, is against Salafism and the import and distribution of Salafi literature. Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told

Forum 18 on 14 January that he was concerned about the consequences "if the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship".

The authorities have denied that they have violated the right to freedom of religion or belief. Dushanbe Executive Authority told Forum 18 on 14 January that the mosques they closed were public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there. The authorities strongly denied to an OSCE conference that it had closed religious communities and demolished places of worship, a claim which the communities themselves strongly disputed.

Tajikistan criticised over restrictive religion law

By Roman Kozhevnikov

Reuters (26.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan, a Muslim nation bordering Afghanistan, introduced a new religion law on Thursday which the United States has criticised as highly restrictive. The law empowers the government to impose stricter control of religious groups in the former Soviet republic which tolerates only the state-approved version of Islam.

The law was signed by President Imomali Rakhmon on Thursday and will come into force after its official publication.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said the law would only "legalise harsh policies already adopted by the Tajik government against its majority Muslim population".

"The picture for religious freedom in Tajikistan is growing dim," the commission, which advises the U.S. government on religious freedom in the world, said ahead of the signing.

"The passage of this problematic new law could severely limit religious freedoms in Tajikistan," it said in a report.

Countries across former Soviet Central Asia, including Tajikistan, have been criticised in the West for using the threat of extremism as an excuse to crack down on political dissent and religious groups outside state-sponsored Islam.

In Tajikistan, religion has been a particularly thorny issue since Rakhmon's Moscow-backed forces defeated an alliance of Islamists and liberals in a bloody 1990s civil war.

Ever since, Rakhmon has tolerated little dissent and tightened his grip on power. Worried about resurgent Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan, he says his main goal is to maintain political and economic stability in his impoverished homeland.

The law imposes censorship on religious literature and restricts performing rituals to state-approved venues. It makes it harder for new religious communities to get registration.

Like elsewhere in Central Asia, most people in Tajikistan, a mountainous Persian-speaking nation, practice the Sunni branch of Islam but there is also a substantial Shi'ite minority.

The opposition, which is weak and carries little weight in domestic politics, criticised the law as too harsh.

"People's religious rights are violated in every article of this law," said Khikmatullo Saifullozoda, one of the leaders of the main opposition Islamic Revival Party, told Reuters.

"It would have been more accurate to call this law not 'Law on the Freedom of Consciousness' but 'Law on its restriction'." (Writing by Maria Golovnina).

New Religion Law in Tajikistan Concerns USCIRF

USCIRF (20.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (24.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned that Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon is preparing to sign a highly restrictive religion law – with numerous provisions that may violate Tajikistan's international legal commitments.

The law was hastily adopted by Tajikistan's Parliament earlier this month and it is before the president.

If signed, the law will legalize harsh policies already adopted by the Tajik government against its majority Muslim population, including the closure of hundreds of mosques and limiting the religious education of children. Moreover, the law will impose state censorship on religious literature, restrict the conduct of religious rites to officially-approved places of worship and allow the state to control the activities of religious associations.

"The picture for religious freedom in Tajikistan is growing dim," said Felice Gaer, Chair of the federally mandated, independent U.S. Commission. "The passage of this problematic new law could severely limit religious freedoms in Tajikistan. President Rakhmon must consider his country's international commitments as he considers whether to sign the bill."

Ms. Gaer noted that running rough shod over Tajik citizen's rights will not pass unnoticed.

"The Commission is actively examining the status of Tajikistan to determine whether it qualifies for the 'Watch List,'" said Ms. Gaer. "We call on the Obama administration to make our concerns known."

Tajikistan is a signatory of the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the ICCPR provides for religious freedom. Also, Tajikistan belongs to the 56-state Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which has additional religious freedom commitments.

The new religion law places onerous restrictions on the Muslim community, such as limiting the number of mosques based on the number of local residents and imposing state interference in the appointment of imams. The preface to the law singles out the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam for its "special role" in the development of Tajikistan's "culture and moral life," downplaying the significance of the Shi'a Ismaili minority, which lives in Tajikistan's Mountainous Badakhshan Region.

The law will also cause difficulties for Tajikistan's other religious minorities by dramatically increasing the numerical threshold for registration requirements, as well as

requiring the founders of a religious group seeking registration to certify that they have lived in their territory for at least five years and adhered to the religion. The law also requires that a religious community obtain consent of the Religious Affairs Committee to invite foreigners or attend religious conferences outside the country.

And there are other religious freedom concerns. The Tajik government has already closed many unregistered mosques and prayer rooms. While they are often permitted to reopen, in 2007-08 the government demolished three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe. The government also indirectly controls the selection of imams. Since 2007, the Ministry of Education has prohibited girls from wearing the hijab, an Islamic head covering, at public schools and universities.

Concerning minority faiths, the government continued to ban the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as two Protestant congregations. Authorities continue their attempts to expropriate the property of Grace Sunmin Church in Dushanbe. In June 2008, the country's only synagogue was bulldozed to clear the grounds for a new presidential palace in Dushanbe, and inadequate land was offered in "compensation."

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner or expert on Tajikistan, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov This e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it or (202) 523-3257. tcarter@uscirf.gov

This Law will worsen the situation with religious liberties

By Mushfig Bayram and Felix Corley

Forum 18 (12.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (19.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan's restrictive new Religion Law, approved by both Houses of Parliament with little debate this month, could go to President Emomali Rahmon for signature within days, Akbar Turajonzoda, an independent member of Parliament's Upper House, told Forum 18 News Service. "This Law contradicts Tajikistan's Constitution and international norms," he insisted. "I voted against." Protestant communities are also concerned, with one pastor telling Forum 18 that "this Law will worsen the situation with religious liberties". The new Law favours the Hanafi school of Islam over other schools, restricts the number of mosques, requires the state to name all imams, restricts religious education, imposes compulsory censorship of religious literature and imposes wide-ranging state control over the activity of all religious associations. Officials reject the possibility of allowing debate on the Law. "We have already had enough public debates," a parliamentary official told Forum 18. "What we need is just to finally adopt it."

In a sudden move, Tajikistan's proposed new Religion Law – approved by the Lower House of Parliament on 5 March – was adopted today (12 March) by the Upper House also, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Law could now go to President Emomali Rahmon for signature "next Monday, maybe even before",

Akbar Turajonzoda, Tajikistan's chief mufti in the early 1990s and now an independent member of Parliament's Upper House, told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 12 March. "This Law contradicts Tajikistan's Constitution and international norms," he complained. "I voted against, and one other parliamentarian voted against. All the rest were in favour. I appealed to them to reject the Law and send it back, but I failed." He said that in adopting the Law, members of Parliament were also rejecting the views of other political parties, non-governmental organisations and religious communities.

Protestant communities are also concerned. "I understand the purpose of adopting new laws in democratic societies is to enhance the situation with civil rights," one Protestant pastor who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 12 March. "But this Law will worsen the situation with religious liberties."

Mavlon Mukhtarov, the Deputy Culture Minister, refused to say how long the President is likely to take to decide whether to sign or reject the new Law. "He is the President and no one can interfere with his duties," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 12 March. "It is up to him - whenever he decides, only then will the Law be signed."

Religious communities have told Forum 18 of their concerns that the new Law would bar all but a few mosques – and possibly many places of worship of other faiths – from gaining legal status, restrict religious education, impose compulsory censorship of religious literature and impose wide-ranging state control over the activity of all religious associations.

Despite many provisions in the new Religion Law that violate Tajikistan's Constitution and its international human rights commitments, Deputy Culture Minister Mukhtarov insisted to Forum 18 that some of the comments provided on an earlier draft by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had been taken into account. He did not say what comments by individuals and communities within Tajikistan had been taken into account.

Concerns at secrecy and repressive provisions

Many members of religious communities have criticised not only the restrictive provisions in the Law but what they regard as its hasty adoption, as well as what they regard as the secrecy and lack of consultation. An Ismaili imam from Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region – who asked not to be named - said he was surprised to hear that the Law had already passed through Parliament. "We only hear about it from you," he told Forum 18. "We know absolutely nothing about what is going on with the Religion Law."

The Ismaili imam was also surprised to learn that the new Law's Preamble recognises the "special role of the Hanafi school of Islam in the development of the national culture and moral life of the people of Tajikistan". The Hanafi school is the oldest school of Sunni Islam and the most widely followed in Tajikistan. "I do not understand why a certain school of Islam should be given any preference," the imam told Forum 18. Ismailism is a branch of Shia Islam and most Ismailis live in the Mountainous Badakhshan Region.

Hikmetullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party – which has two deputies in Parliament's Lower House - said they are "not happy at all" that Parliament "rushed through the procedures to adopt the Law quickly" and complained that the whole process of adopting the new Law is hidden from the public. He attributed the haste to President Rahmon's speech at a recent conference dedicated to Imam Azam (also known as Abu Hanafi), regarded as the founder of the Hanafi school. "The President urged Parliament to prepare the necessary legal basis for arranging the upcoming first ever international religious Conference in September to celebrate Imam Azam," Saifullozoda told Forum 18 from Dushanbe.

Saifullozoda said his party's own draft Religion Law was ignored, while the government's version was pushed through. "The whole process was ridiculous. We had only two or three public discussions, and much of what the religious organisations or foreign experts said was ignored. Yes they listened to our comments, but in the end disregarded them."

Text of the Law unavailable to the public

Reached before the Upper House had approved the Law, Olim Salimov, the Deputy Head of the Parliamentary Committee on International Relations, Public Organisations and Information, which had worked on the Law, refused to give Forum 18 the text of the draft as approved by the Lower House. "Parliament cannot reveal the text to anyone until it is signed by the President." Asked why Parliament could not make the draft available to the wider public, he responded: "We have already had enough public debates. What we need is just to finally adopt it."

Asked why the Hanafi school is singled out in the Law's Preamble as having a "special role", Khosim Mukhtarov, Advisor to Salimov, insisted to Forum 18 on 12 March that all religions are treated equally in the law. "It is just a decoration and has no legal implications," he said. "We just wanted to emphasise our traditions, just as they did in Russia's and Kazakhstan's laws."

Law adopted in secrecy without much debate

The Dushanbe-based Asia-plus news agency reported that the Lower House of Parliament on 5 March adopted the draft Religion Law "without any essential debates". It said the law-makers who made comments mainly supported the draft. "The religious radicalism, nihilism and some Islamic movements foreign for our people occasioned the adoption of a new Law," it quoted Culture Minister Mirzoshokhrukh Asrori as telling the Lower House. The Ministry of Culture is one of the co-authors of the draft.

Asrori claimed that Tajik experts and theologians as well as OSCE experts, political parties and non-governmental organisations had taken part in the two-year long preparation of the draft.

Payam Foroughi, Human Dimension Officer at the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, says he has yet to see the version of the draft Law which was voted on by the two houses of parliament. "When I called the parliament after the Lower House had voted on it, I was told that the draft cannot be released to anyone," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 12 March. "Still, the OSCE member states' general commitments on this issue are clear: In the Budapest 1994 document, for example, all member states, including Tajikistan, committed themselves to ensuring freedom of conscience and religion and to foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers. What we hope is that what will likely be a new law on freedom of conscience and religious unions in Tajikistan will also uphold all such commitments."

Foroughi's colleague, Michael Unland, Media Officer at the OSCE Office, stressed all OSCE participating states' commitment to "democratic practices of freedom of information" and public access to information. "Public discussion, and ease of access to information prior and during the parliamentary discussions, are democratic standards," he told Forum 18 on 12 March, "and in this case particularly important given the significance of the Law for Tajikistan."

Concern at the Law's content

Human rights defenders and religious communities have expressed concern to Forum 18 ever since this latest draft Religion Law was sent to Parliament by the President in November 2008.

Although the version approved by Parliament has removed or softened a handful of provisions that had caused particular concern, much of it remained unchanged. However, the Dushanbe Protestant pastor sees a trick. "The same restrictions as seen in the previous draft remain in this one too, though it is worded more cleverly to hide the underlying implications," he told Forum 18. "For example, the previous draft said

explicitly that foreign citizens and those without citizenship may not become leader of a religious organisation. But now saying they may participate in a religious organisation implicitly means they may not be appointed as leaders. In order to reinforce this, the Law requires founders to indicate their nationality when asking for registration."

Turajonzoda of the Upper House of Parliament complained to Forum 18 of the ban on state officials being able to become legal founders of religious communities. He also complained that religious rites can only take place at official places of worship, cemeteries and private homes. "Why not in offices where people work?" He pointed out that while Tajikistan describes itself as a "secular state", even in other secular states prayer rooms are allowed at places of work. "Why are they allowed there but not here?"

Religious literature restrictions

Turajonzoda also objected to the censorship to be imposed on all religious literature. "I am against this," he told Forum 18. "There are too many restrictions."

The Dushanbe Protestant pastor said churches had enough problems obtaining religious literature in the past with the current Law, which was much more lenient on this issue. He pointed out that in 2008 the Baptists had to send back a huge shipment of Christian literature since they were not allowed to receive it. "The authorities will now by law openly curtail the quantity of literature produced or imported," he told Forum 18. "The draft Law says literature is permitted with permission 'in an appropriate quantity'. How is the appropriateness of the quantity determined?"

Religious education of children restricted

Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party criticised the requirement that written permission from both parents is required before children can take part in religious education. He believes this will "practically ban children from any religious activity". He told Forum 18 that police have already checked children at some mosques trying to identify what schools they go to. "Now this Law will directly allow police to be present at any mosque to stop children from going in."

The Dushanbe Protestant pastor also touched on religious education of children. "According to this Law even if children come to a religious service, not classes, it may be interpreted as involving children in religious education."

Particular restrictions placed on Muslims

The new Law singles out the Muslim community for special restrictions, limiting the number of mosques of different types depending on the local number of residents and imposing state interference in the appointment of imams (though other faiths appear free to appoint their own leaders).

"Why should the state appoint imam-hatips and imams?" Saifullozoda asked. "Mosques are supposed to have councils responsible for electing their imams, but they are a mere formality. In reality the State already appoints imams."

Saidbeg Mahmadulloev of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 on 12 March that mosques are treated in a special category because of the deep Islamic traditions of the country. "More than 90 percent of the country adheres to Islam, so we need to take that into account." Commenting on the division of mosques into categories, he said: "Under Sharia law not every Muslim is required to perform Friday Prayers, so not every district or believer needs to have a cathedral mosque providing Friday Prayers. Fivefold mosques would suffice for many." Mahmadulloev refused to explain why children are restricted from participating in religious activity.

Obstacles isolating believers from foreign co-religionists

The Protestant pastor from Dushanbe criticised the provision that religious organisations must get the consent of the Religious Affairs Committee to invite foreigners or attend religious conferences outside the country. "This is direct interference by the state," he told Forum 18.

Registration restrictions

The pastor complained that the founders of a religious organisation seeking registration must show a document from their local executive body certifying that they have lived in their territory for at least five years and adhered to the religion. "How can they do that? How will they know if someone has believed in some religion for that many years? I am afraid they will not give such a certificate, saying it is outside their competence. And then the Religious Affairs Committee will excuse themselves, saying it is not their fault they cannot register."

Official hostility to freedom of religion or belief

Tajik authorities have also been violating freedom of religion or belief independently of discussions of the new Law.

The authorities have continued to close down and demolish Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship in Dushanbe. Unregistered mosques have been closed down by city authorities, the country's only Jewish synagogue has been bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship.

A ban on the Salafi school of Islamic thought came into effect on 9 February, even though no convictions have been obtained linking crimes to the school of thought. The ban, imposed by Tajikistan's Supreme Court, was imposed on Salafism and the import and distribution of Salafi literature. Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 on 14 January that he was concerned about the consequences "if the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship".

Jehovah's Witnesses still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan, following an October 2007 ban on their activity. Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other - Ehyo Church - was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008.

The authorities have denied that they have violated the right to freedom of religion or belief. Dushanbe Executive Authority told Forum 18 on 14 January that the mosques they closed were public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there. The authorities strongly denied to an OSCE conference that it had closed religious communities and demolished places of worship, a claim which the communities themselves strongly disputed.

Islamic school of thought banned

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (23.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (26.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Even though a Tajik official has admitted to Forum 18 News Service that adherents of the Salafi school of Islamic thought have committed no crimes, the country's Supreme Court has banned Salafism and the import and distribution of

Salafi literature. Saidbeg Mahmadulloev of the state Religious Affairs Committee insisted to Forum 18, however, that Salafis may be "harmful" in future. Tajikistan's Supreme Court – which has refused to release the text of the decision – reportedly imposed the ban to protect the constitutional order, strengthen national security, and prevent conflict between religious confessions, even though restricting freedom of religion or belief for these reasons is impermissible under Tajikistan's international human rights commitments. An Ismaili imam, who did not wish to be identified, told Forum 18 that "Salafis do not constitute any threat for the country. It does not matter whether one is Sunni or Shiite, Ismaili or Salafi, we are all Muslims." Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party told Forum 18 that he was concerned about the consequences "if the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship." The ban on the Islamic school of thought comes into force on 9 February.

In the wake of the ban by the authorities on the Salafiyya Islamic school of thought, Tajikistan's Assistant General Prosecutor Ahmad Sharifov insisted to Forum 18 News Service that Salafiyya adherents found actively propagating their ideas will be punished. Even though the authorities have reported that Salafis have not committed any crimes, they made it clear that they will hold them responsible for any propaganda. "Depending on their actions they will receive punishment," Sharifov told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 19 January. Asked whether Salafis will now be imprisoned or fined, Sharifov refused to say how exactly the authorities will punish them. "We have laws, and we will make them answerable," he responded. Also banned in Tajikistan are the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Saidbeg Mahmadulloev of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee insisted that even though Salafis have not committed crimes yet they may be "harmful" for society in future. "Salafis may create instability in the country and disturb public order," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. Mahmadulloev reported that his Committee has collected a large dossier on the Salafis, and has a negative opinion of the movement. Asked concretely what their findings are, Mahmadulloev said he could only share that information in his office in Dushanbe.

Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned the Salafiyya school of thought on 8 January on the basis of a suit brought by the General Prosecutor's Office. Local press reports say prosecutors argued that this was necessary to protect the constitutional order, strengthen national security, and prevent conflict between religious confessions. The court is similarly reported to have justified its decision on this basis, even though restricting freedom of religion or belief for these reasons is impermissible under Tajikistan's international human rights commitments. The court decision also prohibited the import and distribution of Salafiyya literature in Tajikistan.

Forum 18 has been unable to get a copy of the court decision. Ikrom Kadamov from the Court chancellery told Forum 18 on 23 January that they cannot provide a copy nor explain what is in it since it has not entered into force. Another Supreme Court official, who did not identify himself, told Forum 18 on 22 January that the ban would enter into force on 9 February.

Another impending restriction on freedom of religion and belief is a new draft Religion Law being considered by the Parliament. If adopted, the Law would impose sweeping controls on religious activity and religious associations, particularly on mosques. All registered religious organisations will have to re-register by 1 July 2009. Those that fail to do this or who no longer meet new more restrictive registration criteria will lose their legal status.

Bobodjon Bobokhonov, Tajikistan's General Prosecutor, said that "the Salafiyya - just like Wahhabis and Hizb-ut-Tahrir - is a reactionary movement". "Wahhabi" is a term widely

and inaccurately used by officials in Central Asia to describe religious groups they do not like. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a banned radical Islamist party.

"Salafis disturb other believers with their bodily gestures and shouting during the prayers in mosques," Bobokhonov told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. "This is a manifestation of hooliganism." Asked if the Prosecutor's Office clarified who exactly were responsible for disturbances in mosques, Bobokhonov said they are "not stupid," and they know who the Salafis are. Asked why the Prosecutor's Office would not investigate individual cases, he responded: "It is our internal matter." Bobokhonov then put the phone down.

Bobokhonov claimed at a press conference in Dushanbe on 13 January that the adherents of the Salafi movement pose a threat to Tajikistan's security, the local Asia-Plus news agency reported. "Although no crimes have been committed by the Salafis, and therefore no criminal charges were brought against concrete members of this organisation, this movement over the short of time of its existence managed to carry out active propaganda," Bobokhonov was quoted as saying.

He claimed that Salafis are seeking to overthrow the constitutional order in the country. He likened the current situation to that in the early 1990s at the beginning of Tajikistan's civil war, which he said started when Wahhabis began fighting first in Kulyab [Kulob], and then across the whole country.

Amanullo Nematzoda, the Head of Tajikistan's Council of Ulems (Islamic scholars), a state-backed advisory board, welcomed the ban on the Salafis. He told the Kyrgyz-based Stan.tv channel on 15 January that, in the wake of the court ruling, they had gathered all imam-hatibs (chief imams of mosques) from across the country. "I told all the imams to work with the attendees of their mosques, and explain the court decision to people," Nematzoda was quoted as saying.

Tajiks are mostly adherents of the Hanafi school of Islam, and people "do not accept" other branches and movements of Islam, Mufti Nematzoda was reported as saying. "The State and Court deemed Salafis as dangerous for the country and people. Today, we see in some families, parents are Hanafis and their sons are Salafis. Who can guarantee that tomorrow they will not rise against each other? By banning the activity of Salafiyya, the Court prevented many conflicts and contributed to the strengthening of public order. We, as representatives of traditional faiths are very happy for the ban." He did not define which "traditional faiths" he was claiming to speak on behalf of.

Forum 18 could not clarify with Mufti Nematzoda how the activity of Salafiyya could disturb public order if, as he claims, Tajik Muslims do not accept other Islamic movements. The phones at the Council of Ulems went unanswered on 19 and 22 January.

An Ismaili imam from the south-eastern Badakhshan region, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that he saw nothing wrong with Salafis. "Salafis do not constitute any threat for the country," he objected. "It does not matter whether one is Sunni or Shiite, Ismaili or Salafi, we are all Muslims." However, the imam said, despite what happened to Salafis, Ismaili followers can still function in Tajikistan. Asked whether he thought the Ismailis' activity could also be seriously constrained in future, the imam responded: "You need to ask officials in Dushanbe."

Ismailis are of a branch of Shia Islam led by the Aga Khan. In Tajikistan they are concentrated in the mountainous Badakhshan region.

Echoing the Ismaili imam was Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the Islamic Revival Party, who said he did not see how Salafis could be a threat to public order. Objecting to the

conclusion of Bobokhonov about the reasons of civil war in Tajikistan, Saifullozodo told Forum 18 on 14 January: "It is just the opposite. If the authorities keep repressing people like this and not allow them to peacefully meet and worship, this may result in some kind of civil disobedience."

Salafiyya is not a unified movement, but a school of thought. Modern Salafi beliefs grew from a reform-oriented approach among Muslims of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In line with other puritanical Islamic teachings, Salafis generally believe that the Quran and the hadith (oral traditions attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammed) are the ultimate religious authority, rather than later commentaries by Islamic scholars that interpret these sources.

The ban on the Salafiyya school of thought came as the authorities continued to close down and demolish Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship in Dushanbe.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses from Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 19 January that they still cannot officially meet for worship in Tajikistan. The Culture Ministry banned the Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the whole of Tajikistan on 11 October 2007, a decision the Jehovah's Witnesses have challenged through the courts.

On 29 September 2008, the Military Tribunal of Dushanbe City Garrison upheld the ban. The Shokhmansour District Court on 24 December 2007 had transferred the case to the Military Tribunal, allegedly because of the Customs Security Division's involvement, the Jehovah's Witness reported.

Two Protestant communities in Dushanbe also faced "temporary" bans. Abundant Life Christian Centre closed down in the wake of the ban, while the other – Ehyo Church – was officially able to resume its activity in late 2008.

No rights to organise prayers

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (22.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tajikistan is continuing to close down places of worship in the capital Dushanbe, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Unregistered mosques have been closed down by city authorities, the country's only Jewish synagogue has been bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship. Defending the closures, Shamsiddin Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority told Forum 18 that the mosques they closed were public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there. Members of Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Protestant Church told Forum 18 that they may be evicted from their building "within a couple of weeks". The Jehovah's Witnesses and three Protestant organisations are still suspended, under decisions imposed in late 2007. The Tajik parliament is still considering a new draft Religion Law, which would impose sweeping restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

The authorities in the Tajik capital Dushanbe have continued to close down places of worship in the city, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Mosques not registered with the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee have been closed down by special commissions of the city authorities. Defending the move, Shamsiddin Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority, who headed the commissions, told Forum 18 on 15 January that the places they closed down were so-called public halls, and people had "no rights to organise prayers" there.

The country's only Jewish synagogue in Dushanbe has been confiscated and bulldozed, while Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses find it difficult to use their places of worship. Members of Dushanbe's Grace Sunmin Protestant Church told Forum 18 that if their last-ditch appeal fails, they may be evicted from their building "within a couple of weeks".

The Tajik parliament is still considering a new draft Religion Law. If adopted, it would impose sweeping controls on religious activity and religious associations, particularly on mosques. All registered religious organisations will have to re-register by 1 July 2009. Those that fail to do this or who no longer meet new more restrictive registration criteria will lose their legal status.

Abdukayumi Kayumzod, a local journalist from Dushanbe, told Forum 18 on 15 January that a majority of the 147 mosques in the city's Sinai district were closed down between 2006 and late 2008. In October to December 2008 alone, he said, the special commissions closed down and sealed several mosques in the district and sacked the imams. Kayumzod said he has personally seen the seal placed by the authorities on some of the buildings. He added that the special commissions warned imams of some others not to hold prayers in their mosques, although they did not seal their buildings.

Kayumzod told Forum 18 that the special commissions - established in 2006 by order of Mahmadsaid Uboydulloev, the Head of Dushanbe's Executive Authority - include representatives from the City Executive Authority and district police officers. "The commissions went around the city and found that many places of worship used by Muslims in the city did not have official registration," he said.

Kayumzod told Forum 18 he knows of several imams who, in the wake of the mosque closures, were fined 50 to 150 Somonis (102 to 306 Norwegian Kroner, 11 to 33 Euros or 14 to 43 US Dollars) for their religious activity.

One imam of a closed mosque in Sinai's 33rd micro-district (suburban area) confirmed to Forum 18 on 15 January that he had been fined, but refused to discuss the fine and closure for fear of the authorities. His mosque had been closed and sealed in late October 2008 and he was sacked as imam.

Another imam in Sinai district told Forum 18 that city officials warned him in late December that people should stop gathering in their mosque. "They did not seal our mosque but warned us that we should not meet there," the imam - who asked not to be identified - complained to Forum 18 on 15 January. Despite the warning they have continued their prayers in the mosque, the imam added. "Our mosque has existed since Soviet times," he said. "The people built it with their own funds, and I don't understand why we shouldn't use the building for our prayers."

Nuriddinov of the City Executive Authority - who headed the special commissions until December 2008 - told Forum 18 that he does not remember how many imams were fined or their names. Yet he insisted the imams were fined for "illegal" activity as the "public halls" were not authorised for worship but were designed for recreation and games for the public.

Local journalist Kayumzod disagreed, explaining that although these places were registered during Soviet times as public halls and had not received official registration from the Religious Affairs Committee since Tajikistan's independence in 1991, it was "clear" to everyone that people used them as mosques. "The commissions gave permission only to some of the halls to continue as mosques for prayers five times a day but closed most of them down," he told Forum 18.

Nuriddinov rejected criticism of the closures, pointing to the 57 cathedral mosques as well as many other mosques in Dushanbe where prayers are recited five times a day. "I

cannot say how many praying Muslims there are," he told Forum 18, "but I believe those mosques could accommodate all the Muslims wishing to attend for prayer."

Saidbeg Mahmadulloev of the Religious Affairs Committee likewise insisted that there are plenty of mosques for Muslims in the city. "No one has complained to us about their mosques being closed down," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 14 January. "People attending public halls for worship do not necessarily need registration from the Committee but they must get the consent of the local administrations."

The government strenuously denied to an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that it had closed religious communities and demolished places of worship, a claim which the communities themselves strongly disputed.

Mahmadulloev of the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that the closure of the mosques was unrelated to the ban on the Islamic movement of Salafiyya, handed down by Tajikistan's Supreme Court on 8 January (see forthcoming F18News article).

Akbar Turajonzoda, Tajikistan's former Chief Mufti who is now a member of the upper chamber of Tajikistan's Parliament, however, rejected Mahmadulloev's claims. He reported that scores of people have complained to him about the enforced closures. "People from many mosques even collected documents and submitted them for registration, only to be turned down by the Religious Affairs Committee," he told Forum 18 on 15 January.

Turajonzoda reported that the authorities have closed down hundreds of Muslim places of worship since 2004. Asked why the authorities are closing mosques, he said he believed there was "an instruction from above" not to allow the number of mosques in the city to increase. He would not state who the instruction came from.

The authorities' action to close mosques violates people's rights, Turajonzoda said. "There are many old people who pray in these so-called public places," he stressed to Forum 18. "These people are not able to travel far, and the mosques are in their quarters or yards, usually next to their houses."

Many mosques have also been demolished in recent years.

The enforced closure of mosques took place against the backdrop of similar moves against minority faiths. The authorities bulldozed Dushanbe's synagogue in summer 2008, leaving the community nowhere to worship.

Grace Sunmin Protestant Church of Dushanbe is on the verge of losing its building. Vladimir Kim of the Church complained that their attempts to challenge the High Economic Court's decision overturning the ownership of the church building have yielded no result. "We are still holding church services in the building," he told Forum 18 on 19 January from Dushanbe, "but within a couple of weeks we will probably be evicted."

On 29 August 2008 Tajikistan's High Economic Court made a decision to nullify the original 1997 sales contract and ruled to transfer the building to the City Hukumat (Executive Authority). Grace Sunmin members told Forum 18 in October that they were very disappointed with the court decision. After spending a large amount of money – which they calculate in hundreds of thousands of US Dollars – and energy in restoring the half-finished building they say it is hard for the church to accept this.

On 16 October the Court had upheld its first decision from 29 August, and rejected the Church's appeal. The Church lodged a further appeal, but in a 2 December 2008 ruling, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, the High Economic Court rejected the Church's cassation appeal and upheld its earlier decision.

Kim said they have one last chance to complain to the Supervisory Board of the High Economic Court, which they will do. "This Court is the highest possible instance dealing with property rights," he maintained. "However, we have very slim hopes of getting anywhere."

The Jehovah's Witnesses had to stop meeting in the wake of an October 2007 Culture Ministry ban on their activity throughout the entire country, a ban they are trying to challenge through the courts. Three Protestant organisations were also given a "temporary" ban in September 2007 for "three months", which has still not been lifted.

Supreme court of Tajikistan outlaws Salafi Islam

Asia News (08.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (12.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The importation and distribution of its religious material and its practice of worship have been outlawed. The fundamentalist origin of the movement could "threaten" order and national security. Political experts see its faithful as the true opposition to the central government.

"The current of Salafi Islam has been outlawed." The announcement was made yesterday by Makhmadali Ioussoupov, spokesman of the supreme court of Tajikistan. The country's highest legal body has ordered the interdiction of activities by the Salafi current, and has prohibited the importation and distribution of its religious material in the country.

The religious authorities of Tajikistan see Salafism as a potential threat, capable of dividing society both because of its worship practices, and because of the fundamentalist heritage that determines its particular traits. They invite the Salafi faithful to come to the mosques for prayer, and to get used to the customs of the Sunni Hanafi majority, in order to avoid conflict or division between the two Muslim movements in the country. Islamic terrorism, especially in the Sunni world, is rooted in Salafism, a literal attachment to the tradition of the past and to those who have gone before (salaf), and a rigid interpretation of doctrine.

According to some local political experts, the Salafis are the true heart of opposition to the government, promoters of popular "discontent," and "could at any moment promote a struggle to overthrow the established order."

The Salafi community, although it is not officially registered, numbers about 10,000 faithful, although its leaders say it has more than 20,000 practitioners. Tajikistan has a population of about 7.5 million inhabitants, 83% of whom are of the Sunni Islamic religion. 13.9% say they are agnostic, while Christians are about 2.1% of the total.

Independent, Tajiks revel in their faith

By Sabrina Tavernise

NYT (03.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The crowd in the airport parking lot was jubilant despite the cold, with squealing children, busy concession stands and a tangle of idling cars giving the impression of an eager audience before a rock concert.

But it was religion, not rock 'n' roll, that had drawn so many people: the Tajik families were waiting for their loved ones to land on a flight from Saudi Arabia, where they had taken part in the hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

This did not use to happen. Tajikistan, a Muslim country north of Afghanistan, used to be part of the Soviet Union. Religion was banned, and any public expression of it, like prayer or making the hajj, was harshly punished.

A resurgence of Islam began here almost immediately after independence, in 1991, but years of civil war kept outward reflections of it, like the hajj, from appearing much.

Now, though, expressions of faith are flowering. At least 5,200 citizens of Tajikistan went on the hajj in 2008, more than 10 times the number who went in 2000, according to this country's State Committee on Religion. Religious leaders have become important community figures, and Islamic political parties are permitted.

That enthusiasm was thick in the greeting crowd here, one of many that met the more than a dozen hajj flights in December. A woman whose first name is Marhabo, a 25-year-old mother of three, was waiting in the bitter cold with a 40-member extended family, most of them children.

"We're Muslims," she said brightly, hugging her small daughter closer to her in the cold. "Now there's no limiting. Before, there were no mosques. Now there are many."

It was close to midnight and the children were getting cranky. Marhabo's sister-in-law bounced her own daughter, Medina, a small girl in a pink snowsuit, who was starting to cry.

There were many Medinas in the crowd, actually, named after another holy city in Saudi Arabia, in a fad that began here after the Soviet collapse.

The group was largely segregated, with women in bright scarves standing in clusters with the children behind the main arrivals area, where the men, some in traditional velvet robes, waited with camcorders to record the moment of arrival.

One old man with a long gray beard said he first made the pilgrimage in 1998. He took a bus that went through Iraq, "before," his friend pointed out, "George Bush showed up."

It used to be hard to be a believer here.

A man in his 30s whose first name is Akbar remembered running away from the Soviets when they caught him praying. His teacher ridiculed him for it, leaving him with a distinct dislike for school.

"Everyone was looking at me," Akbar said. "I felt like a criminal."

While the Tajiks' newfound faith is thrilling for some, it has alarmed others, who worry that Islam's popularity, combined with an economic crisis here, could lead to a surge of fundamentalism or militancy.

More than half the population lives on less than \$2 each a day, and the country is currently experiencing a reverse industrialization: 77 percent of its population lives in rural areas, compared with 63 percent in the mid-1980s, said Khojamakhmad Umarov, a professor at the Institute of Economic Studies here.

Now, with migrant Tajik workers, the single largest contributors to the economy, facing an uncertain future in Russia, experts like Muzaffar Olimov worry that religious leaders

will gain disproportionate power in society and that with the state education system in collapse, families will turn to religious schools for their children.

"The mullahs will make the weather," said Mr. Olimov, who is director of Sharq, a research center here. "We have a model: our neighbor Afghanistan."

But Tajik society is still strongly Soviet. New Year's, a holiday celebrated in Soviet times with a decorated tree and presents, is still cherished, even in observant Muslim families.

"It's not a Muslim holiday, but we like it," Marhabo said, her small daughter reciting poetry she had learned in school for the occasion.

Marhabo talked about the meal they would have when they arrived at their home — a baked sheep. The government recently issued a rule forbidding families to spend too much money on weddings and other celebrations, a directive she said they were observing.

The plane from Saudi Arabia finally arrived. People threw candies, as if at a wedding, when they met their loved ones. Marhabo's father, in a long white robe and a traditional hat, strode regally into their midst. He was met with an explosion of kisses.
