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Tajik court sentences four convicted as members of banned faith

Radio Free Europe (11.12.2014) <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik-court-sentences-four-convicted-as-members-of-banned-faith/26737689.html> - A court in Tajikistan has sentenced four men to prison after convicting them of being adherents of a banned branch of Islam.

The Supreme Court said on December 11 that a court in the southern city of Qurghon-Teppa had sentenced three followers of Salafi Islam to five years in prison and a fourth defendant to six years and two months in prison.

Relatives of the convicts said the charges were trumped up and that the defendants are not Salafists.

They told RFE/RL that the verdicts, handed down on December 10, will be appealed.

The Salafi branch of Islam was branded as extremist and banned in Tajikistan in 2008.

Salafists follow a strict form of Sunni Islam and do not recognize other branches of Islam, such as Shi'a and Sufism. It is frequently referred to as Wahhabism, although Salafis reject this as derogatory.

The overwhelming majority of Tajiks are followers of Hanafia, a more liberal branch of Sunni Islam.

Tajikistan: State control of Islam increasing

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (03.03.2014) - Tajikistan continues to increase state control of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate, all others having been closed. An imam fired by the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Also, President Emomali Rahmon has decided that imams must wear a uniform and be paid by the state. Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, SCRA Deputy Chair Solehjon Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It

was a decision of the Council of Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda from Sogd Region told Forum 18 that "I do not think it is state interference". He went on to claim that "military men have their uniforms, so do the police and other state officials. The imams need to have their official uniform".

Tajikistan is continuing to increase state restrictions on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service notes. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) is allowed to operate by the authorities, all others having been closed down. An imam fired by the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in July 2013 remains unemployed, and in February 2014 the SCRA ordered sermons on one topic to be preached in every mosque where preaching is permitted by the state. Also, President Emomali Rahmon has decided that imams must wear a standard uniform (which the imams have to pay for themselves) and be paid by the state.

Other existing state limitations on freedom of religion or belief include: a total ban on all participation by people under the age of 18 in all religious activity, apart from funerals; a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; sweeping limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted; limitations on the right to share beliefs; tight government censorship; and state appointment and dismissal of imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Tajikistan's Constitution claims in article 8 that "no state ideology or religion may be established" and that "religious organisations are separate from the state and may not interfere in governmental affairs". Yet this does not stop multiple violations of these claims in the Religion Law, the Code of Administrative Offences, and in official actions. The life of the Islamic community is mainly restricted from inside its structures by the state, notably through the Council of Ulems, and the lives of other communities tend to be restricted from outside their structures (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Only one madrassah allowed

After the 2009 Religion Law was brought in, the authorities ran nationwide campaigns, codenamed "Operation Madrassah" with fines and police raids, to stop all Islamic religious education of any kind that did not have state permission (see eg. F18News 28 June 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1586). Only one madrassah – in Tursonzoda near Dushanbe – is still allowed by the authorities to function in all of the country. All other madrassahs remain closed and have not been allowed to reopen.

Mavlon Mukhtarov, then Deputy Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) claimed to Forum 18 that the closure by July 2013 of almost all madrassahs was not permanent. In December 2013 he claimed that after changes to their curricula and legal documents, madrassahs would resume their work "as soon as the changes are ready and approved by us" (see F18News 4 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903).

Solehjon Zavkiyev, Deputy Chair of the SCRA responsible for overseeing the work with mosques, told Forum 18 on 26 February 2014 that he cannot say when they will be re-opened.

Zavkiyev was previously Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. In that capacity in May 2009 he denied all knowledge of a Supreme Court ban other officials claimed had been imposed on the Jamaat Tabligh Islamic missionary movement (see F18News 15 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1297).

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has criticised Tajikistan's restrictions on

religious education – and other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief – in August 2013. It stated that Tajikistan should "should repeal or amend all provisions" of the Religion Law, the Parental Responsibility Law and the Administrative Code "that impose disproportionate restrictions on the rights protected by article 18 ["freedom of thought, conscience and religion" of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]" (see F18News 4 December 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1903).

Imam dismissed by SCRA

Meanwhile Ubaydullo Khasanov, who was Chief Imam in Vossei District of the south-western Khatlon Region is still unemployed after being dismissed by the SCRA in July 2013. He was fired on the SCRA's instructions after a meeting of district imams summoned by the religious affairs official of the District. The imams then dismissed Khasanov in his absence., Asia-Plus news agency reported on 15 July.

Imam Khasanov told Forum 18 that the local authorities told him that he was dismissed because he allegedly gave "false information to the President". The Imam explained that, on 4 July he had asked President Rahmon in a public meeting for a plot of land to build a new mosque building. A private house is being used.

The Imam told Forum 18 on 26 February 2014 that he is "still unemployed". He has asked the local authorities for work as an imam in another mosque, or as a teacher in a madrassah.

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the dismissal decision was initiated by the SCRA. "The board of the district imams decided to dismiss him, and asked us to endorse their decision." Asked what the reason for the dismissal was, Zavkiyev claimed that "no reasons were indicated in their request." He claimed that "the Board of imams is not obliged to give reasons when requesting a dismissal."

Asked how imams are appointed, Zavkiyev said that, "they are elected by the local boards of imams and then we endorse the candidate. We look at the education and other qualifications of the Imam". In practice, the Council of Ulems appoints imams (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Zavkiyev of the SCRA would not answer the question when Forum 18 asked why the SCRA looks at reasons for appointing imams but not reasons for dismissing imams.

Centralised preaching imposed by SCRA

Another recent example of increasing controls on Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief is that imams across Tajikistan were instructed by the SCRA to preach against homosexuals and "nontraditional sexual relations". Grand Mufti Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda, head of the state backed-Council of Ulems, on 7 February at the Friday prayer in the Dushanbe Central Mosque delivered this message, and on the same day mosque attendees across the country heard it, Radio Free Europe reported on 7 February.

The Council of Ulems has long been a part of the state's control of Muslim religious activity. Islamic preaching is only allowed within state-designated "Cathedral mosques" (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, and why the SCRA issued an instruction on what to preach to all imams, Zavkiyev of the SCRA denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of

Ulems", he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." He went on to claim that "in most Muslim countries, like Egypt and Turkey, the texts of sermons are prepared by their Islamic centres and sent to all mosques". He further claimed that "we do not interfere in this as it is an internal affair of the Council of Ulems".

Zavkiyev also claimed that mosques "cannot preach their own sermons but must agree it every time with the Council of Ulems." He quickly added that this is "not state interference but an internal issue of the Council and the mosques under it."

Deputy Grand Mufti Haji Nigmatullo Olimov on 21 February, asked by Forum 18 why imams cannot preach their own sermons and must receive pre-written texts from the Council of Ulems, replied: "It's absolutely not true. The imams can preach their own sermons."

Olimov has in the past defended the authorities' demolition of mosques outside state-control in Dushanbe (see F18News 10 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1032).

Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda of Nuri-Islam Mosque in Khujand, Sogd Region, told Forum 18 on 21 February that he "does not see anything wrong" with mosques receiving pre-written texts of sermons from the Council of Ulems. "I do not think it is state interference", he told Forum 18. "Even in Egypt and other Muslim countries such texts are prepared centrally." He added that "If you compare today with Soviet times, this is a great achievement. We can read the Koran, attend mosques, and hear sermons."

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev became noticeably upset when asked by Forum 18 why the topic of homosexuality was chosen as a topic for a centralised preaching instruction, instead of another topic. He refused to answer the question and put the phone down.

Why state control?

Abdulkhakim Sharipov, the north-western Sogd Region's senior religious affairs official, was asked by Forum 18 on 26 February whether he thought increasing state control of Islam is being imposed. He replied: "Do you think western countries would allow just anybody to open any kind of religious organisation and teach anything they want?"

Sharipov explained that by "western countries", he meant any country in Western Europe or North America. Forum 18 noted that in such countries, unless some kind of financial or other state assistance is sought, anyone is free to - without state registration or any kind of state permission - form a religious organisation to teach their beliefs.

Sharipov then claimed that "we are not totally controlling religious activity, but we want some order in it."

State uniforms and salaries for imams

In a 4 July 2013 speech published on the presidential website, President Rahmon stated that the "Ministry of Finance and SCRA along with other relevant organs, were instructed to take measures for the institution of official salaries as of 1 January 2014 for the imams of Cathedral mosques". He also instructed the Council of Ulems to "pay serious attention to the question of moral image of its religious ministers, and prepare before the end of the current year [2013] and adopt a standard uniform for imams of Cathedral mosques with elements of national culture".

Grand Mufto of Tajikistan Saidmukorram Abdukodizoda, who chairs the Council of Ulems, told the islam.ru website on 15 January 2014 that salaries will be paid by order of

President Rahmon from 1 February, and imams will "begin wearing their new official uniforms from next week."

Forum 18 has learned from various imams who did not wish to be named that, as of the end of 28 February, the promised salaries had not been paid.

Why?

President Rahmon in his speech claimed that "today whoever wears the uniform of a religious minister, without regards to their level of knowledge and piety, is called an Imam." Speaking of the reasons for paying salaries to imams, SCRA head Kholikov told Asia-Plus that the President told the imams in the meeting that: "I ordered you to be paid salaries so that you would not be in need of the hundred Dollars they are paying or trying to pay you from abroad. Having given you a hundred dollars, they will demand a hundred services from you."

Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of Tajikistan's officially registered Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) on 25 February told Forum that the "by assigning salaries to the imams and obliging them to wear official uniforms, the state is aiming at exploiting them for its interests."

Sayfullozoda also said that the decision "violates the Constitution, which states the separation of state and religion." Religious organisations "cannot be integrated into state structures, and must not be paid salaries from the state budget".

Asked if the salaries and standard uniforms were meant to protect the state interpretations of Islam, both Zavkiyev of the SCRA and Imam Kalonzoda from Khujand stated that the activity of mosques needed to be centrally controlled.

Asked why standard uniforms were needed, Imam Kalonzoda replied that "every country has their traditional Muslim dress, and so we want to have our own uniforms". He went on to state that "military men have their uniforms, so do the police and other state officials. The imams need to have their official uniform."

Zavkiyev of the SCRA noted that imams "are obliged to buy their own uniforms."

How much?

Grand Mufti Abdukodirzoda told islam.ru that the imam of the Central Mosque in Dushanbe – i.e himself - will receive 2,000 Somonis (about 2,500 Norwegian Kroner, 300 Euros, or 400 US Dollars) a month. Imams of Central Cathedral mosques will receive 1,500 Somonis a month, and imams of Cathedral mosques 800 Somonis a month. He said that "around 300" imams will receive salaries.

Salaries in Tajikistan are very low, especially in rural areas. The minimum monthly salary is 250 Somonis (about 300 Norwegian Kroner, 40 Euros, or 50 US Dollars).

SCRA Deputy Chair Zavkiyev, asked by Forum 18 whether economically poor Tajikistan can afford this extra expenditure of possibly 4 million Somonis (about 5,017,000 Norwegian Kroner, 603,750 Euros, or 832,000 US Dollars) a year, replied that "if our distinguished President initiated this, he knows that we can do it."

Rajabali Odinayev, head of the section of the Finance Ministry dealing with salaries, told Forum 18 on 26 February that "we give salaries to state employees not imams". When asked whether salaries are being given or will be given to imams, Odinayev referred Forum 18 to the SCRA. "These questions are in their competition, and they must know all the details."

Salaries for other religious communities?

Zavkiyev of the SCRA told Forum 18 that other religious communities will not receive state financial support. He claimed that "we offered this to all registered religious communities, but they declined this".

Father Pitirim (Konstantin Tvorogov) of the Russian Orthodox Church's Diocese in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 24 February that "it would help us if we also could receive financial assistance from the state". He stated that "there were talks with the SCRA that they might pay salaries to three of our priests in Dushanbe, but that would not help us much."

Igor Samiyev of the state-registered Association of Evangelical Christians-Baptists told Forum 18 on 24 February that the SCRA "a couple of months ago" offered to pay "one or two ministers from each religious community a salary". Samiyev said that he declined the offer, as did other Protestant leaders in the meeting he attended. "We all think that with these salaries will come more state control and more demands on the communities. And the salaries would not help us much anyway."

Women fight mosque exclusion

By Humairo Bakhtiyor

Institute for War&Peace Reporting (28.02.2014) - The Tajik government's decision to pay wages to Muslim clerics has been criticised by women who resent having to subsidise imams when they themselves are banned from attending mosques.

From February this year, prayer leaders or "imam-khatibs" will receive monthly salaries ranging from the equivalent of 160 to 300 US dollars, depending on the importance of the mosque.

Abdurrahim Kholikov, the head of the government's religious affairs committee, said the money should be seen as a way of incentivising clerics to do a better job.

Others view the move with scepticism, since it appears to contradict the principle of separating faith from the secular state. It has been interpreted as the latest move to co-opt and control clerics by a government ever watchful of radical Islamic groups.

Criticism of a different kind has come from observant Muslim women, who question why their taxes should be used to pay a clergy that will not let them attend mosques.

The Council of Ulema, the country's highest Muslim body, introduced a ban on women attending services in 2005. This was ostensibly due to a lack of space for men and women to pray separately, although some argued it was really about government fears that women were taking a more active role in banned Islamic groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir.

Anora Sarkorova, a prominent journalist, reignited the debate this year in the context of the new payments to clerics. In a statement on her Facebook page which was widely republished in the Tajik media, she wrote that as a female taxpayer, she was furious to be subsidising mosque leaders who continued to prevent women from attending prayers.

"I am not only a dutiful taxpayer, but also a Tajik woman who is deprived from visiting mosques and attending religious worship by a decision taken by Tajikistan's Muftiate," Sarkorova wrote.

The religious establishment did not deserve financial aid, she added, arguing that underfunded areas such as pensions and help for low-income families should be prioritised in government spending.

She told IWPR that her letter had struck a chord with others who were annoyed with the initiative.

"Many people have written to me expressing solidarity, not just women but men as well," she said.

Parvina, a 39-year-old woman from Dushanbe, said she too was angry that she was unable to pray in a mosque.

"Why can adherents of other faiths visit their places of worship and churches, but we Muslim women cannot?" Parvina asked, pointing out that she had not experienced this problem in other Muslim-majority countries that she had visited.

Tojimiddin Asomuddinov, deputy head of the government's religious affairs committee, told IWPR that his organisation lacked the authority to involve itself in the question of female attendance in mosques.

Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, head of the Council of Ulema, reiterated that the main reason for the ban was the lack of suitable facilities to separate men and women.

"The majority of mosques in Tajikistan are located in one-storey buildings and have only one entrance. When all the conditions are in place to enable women to be present, the ban will be lifted," Abdulqodirzoda told IWPR.

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country where an Islamic party participates in mainstream politics. Saidumar Hussaini, a member of parliament from the Islamic Rebirth Party, told IWPR that the real reason behind the prohibition was the government's concern that women were becoming too drawn to religion.

"The authorities saw that more women were starting to attend mosques and show an interest in religion.... They therefore made haste to head off this trend," Hussaini said.

He disputed Abdulqodirzoda's account of the technical obstacles, insisting that most mosques in Tajikistan were in two-storey buildings with more than one entrance and exit to avoid the mingling of the sexes.

Zarafo Rahmoni, a legal adviser with the Islamic Rebirth Party, complained that mosque leaders had always failed to defend the religious rights of Muslim women.

"Now that the state is going to pay them salaries – which is against the law [in a secular country] anyway – they will be focused directly on carrying out the government's orders. Nothing good for women will come out of placing imams on the government payroll," she said. "A lot of devout women are telling us how indignant they are about this."

Muslim women in Tajikistan are unable to wear Islamic dress or hijab if they work in government offices and public institutions such as banks, and discouraged from doing so in schools.

"Why should the state pay wages to the imam-khatibs? They have never expressed concern or defended our rights when we have encountered difficulties that banned us from studying and working. They keep silent about that," Rahmoni said. "Now that they're going to get money from the state, they will keep their mouths shut even tighter."

WEA-RLC research and analysis report: Religious restrictions likely to worsen in Tajikistan

World Evangelical Alliance (11.02.2014) - Tajikistan shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, where a surge in Islamist activity is feared as the number of U.S. troops drops significantly in just a few weeks from now. This threat can provide a pretext to President Emomali Rahmon to get tougher with religious groups.

The former Soviet nation of Tajikistan is a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern, as per the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This designation refers to those governments that have engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom – violations that are "systematic, ongoing, and egregious."

Conditions for religious groups, including and especially evangelical Christians, might deteriorate even further as the drawdown of U.S. troops falls from 66,000 to 34,000 in Afghanistan in February possibly leading to a major Taliban push to retake power.

After 2014, the American presence in Afghanistan is expected to further come down to about 6,000-10,000 U.S. trainers and counterterrorism forces, assisted by about 5,000 partner forces performing similar missions.

"There are fears that the Taliban and other insurgents will achieve success against Afghan forces once the international force is reduced substantially by late 2014," acknowledged a Jan. 17 U.S. Congressional report, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy."

After the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan was reduced from 100,000 in June 2011 to about 66,000 by September 2012, consequences were evident. The civilian casualty toll there increased by 23 percent in the first six months of 2013, according to the U.N.

Presidential elections in Afghanistan are scheduled for April 5, but with President Hamid Karzai barred from running for a third term as per the nation's constitution and no successor in sight, one doesn't know what to expect after a new government is in place. While efforts are on to encourage the Taliban to participate in the elections, the insurgent group has thus far remained determined to obstruct the polls.

Tajikistan, which fears that the anticipated resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan will likely promote Islamic militancy within and around its territories, has already started preparing to fight the threat militarily. Russia, which protects the Tajik-Afghan border, is also reportedly increasing its military support to the Tajik army.

For Islamist extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Tajikistan has been a fertile ground for recruitment thanks to its large ill-educated, unemployed population. Therefore, the reaction of President Rahmon's government in Dushanbe, which has long been using the

threat of Islamic militancy as a pretext to impose severe restrictions on religious groups, is not difficult to predict.

Restrictions have existed in the nation, but they appear to be constantly growing.

Following its independence from the Soviet Union, Tajikistan witnessed a civil war waged by liberal democratic reformists and Islamists between 1992 and 1997, which resulted in the death of over 100,000 people.

Rahmon, a former Soviet Communist Party official, has been the nation's president since 1992. Like his counterparts elsewhere in the Central Asian region, he is seen as an authoritarian ruler, and as one who refuses to recognize citizens' basic human rights in the garb of protecting national security and social stability.

In 2003, Rahmon had a referendum in favour of allowing him to run for two consecutive seven-year terms beginning with the 2006 elections. He won the elections in November 2006, which were neither free nor fair according to the international observers, and began tightening religious restrictions. His government banned the Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre in Dushanbe in 2007.

In 2009, the Rahmon government enacted a highly restrictive religion law, misnamed as "The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations."

Under the law, unregistered religious activity and private religious education are banned, and so is proselytism. Religious instructions can be provided only after state permission, and children must have a written permission from both parents to receive instruction that has been approved by the state.

The legislation also states that religious literature can be imported only after the government has approved its content and quantity. Religious groups importing literature need to pay the government for checking its content. And religious groups cannot invite foreigners without prior approval from the government.

The penalties under the law range between a prison term up to 12 years and heavy fines to the tune of US \$1,600.

In July 2012, the government introduced new penalties for receiving religious education abroad, preaching and teaching religious doctrines, establishing connections with foreign religious organizations, or conducting activities not listed in a group's registration charter, according to the USCIRF.

In 2011, the government enacted the "Parental Responsibility Law," which prohibits almost all religious activity, including attendance at worship service, by children. The law also restricts parents from choosing certain names for their children.

The country's criminal code also penalizes extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities even if they do not involve violence or incitement to imminent violence. And the code doesn't define what extremism is, leaving it open for the authorities to use their own discretion.

Of Tajikistan's population of about 7 million, roughly 6.6 million are Muslim, mostly Sunni from the Hanafi school of Islam. There are about 74,000 Christians, mostly Russian Orthodox, and around 7,000 evangelicals, according to Operation World.

While the government maintains tight control over all religious groups and their activities, it views Christianity, especially the evangelical faith, as a foreign or Western religion that is not compatible with the nation's culture.

Tajikistan has reasons for concern about the threat of Islamic militancy due to the forthcoming pullout of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. For example, the nation's authorities detained 118 members of alleged terrorist and extremist groups in 2013, media quoted Deputy Interior Minister Abdurakhmon Buzmakov as saying earlier this month – though we do not know on what basis these arrests were made.

The perception of the threat, however, does not justify restrictions or a crackdown on religious practise by its people. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to which Tajikistan is party, states, "OSCE participating States have committed themselves to non-discrimination on the issue of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion, or Belief for all within their territory, without distinction as to race, gender, language or religion."

International organizations and human rights groups need to watch and address these serious developments in Tajikistan.
