



This article was published by F18News on: 3 September 2010

TAJIKISTAN: Officials choose Ramadan to impose controls

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On the first full day of Ramadan, the Chair and other officials of the Tajikistan government's Religious Affairs Committee, as well as the Justice Ministry and the National Security Committee secret police, visited the Dushanbe headquarters of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) to order it to halt using its offices for prayers. "We do not officially call it a mosque but do pray in it. However, the officials take a different view on this," Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 News Service. Officials agreed to allow prayers there but only for the rest of Ramadan. Presidential Senior Advisor Mansur Sayfutdinov told Forum 18 that according to the law, no political organisation may establish a mosque. Authorities in a town in Sughd Region chose the start of Ramadan to ban the use of loudspeakers to broadcast Muslim prayers. The Religious Affairs Committee has reaffirmed the 2009 ban on children taking part in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca. And the investigator has refused to tell Forum 18 whether the criminal case against 17 Jehovah's Witnesses will be sent to court.

Just as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan was beginning in mid-August, the authorities in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe ordered the Islamic Revival Party to stop holding prayers in their party headquarters, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After discussion, officials agreed to allow them to continue, but only until the end of Ramadan. The authorities in a town in the northern Sughd Region also chose the start of Ramadan to ban Muslim prayers via loudspeakers. The government's Religious Affairs Committee - which controls the Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca - has reaffirmed for this year the ban on children taking part first imposed for the 2009 pilgrimage. Also it is not clear how the criminal case reopened in May against 17 Jehovah's Witnesses is developing.

Tajikistan has imposed ever-tighter controls on religious activity in recent years. Jehovah's Witness activity was banned entirely in 2007, while officials claim that the Muslim Jamaat Tabligh movement was banned in 2006 (the ban does not appear to have been published). In 2009 the Salafi school of Islamic thought was banned. A restrictive new Religion Law was adopted in 2009 involving new limits on the numbers of mosques and restrictions on preaching. The new Law required the re-registration of all religious communities amid tight new restrictions. Dozens of members or alleged members of various Muslim movements have been given long prison terms (see F18News 19 May 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446>).

The latest moves come amid a crackdown on private teaching of Islam and government pressure on parents of students studying Islam abroad to bring them home. "Teaching religious knowledge without [state] authorisation" is an offence under Article 474 of the Code of Administrative Offences, and a number of such cases have been brought in recent months (see F18News 2 September 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1483>).

Islamic Revival Party told to stop prayers in their building

Officials of the State Religious Affairs Committee have ordered the Islamic Revival Party (IRP) to stop praying at their Dushanbe headquarters. The order came during a 12 August visit to the party headquarters by Abdurahim Kholiqov, Chair of the Committee, with his officials, together with officials from the Justice Ministry and National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, the IRP's Hikmatullo Saifullozoda told Forum 18 on 19 August.

"We agreed that Party members would be allowed to carry on prayers during the holy month of Ramadan, and hold talks afterwards," he added. "We have a cultural centre at the headquarters, and hold prayers in that centre. We do not officially call it a mosque but do pray in it. However, the officials take a different view on this."

The visit came on the first full day of Ramadan. Forum 18 has been unable to find out what will happen when Ramadan ends on 9-10 September.

Mansur Sayfutdinov, Senior Advisor to President Emomali Rahmon, insisted to Forum 18 that according to the law no political organisation may establish a mosque. Asked that why the IRP members may not hold prayers in their office given that, according to Islamic canons, prayers do not have to be said in a mosque, Sayfutdinov referred Forum 18 to the Religious Affairs Committee.

Officials at the Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18.

Loudspeakers banned for Muslim call to prayer

Just before Ramadan began, the authorities in Panjakent in Sughd Region prohibited Muslim prayers via loudspeakers. The authorities said that "it could cause confusion and disturbs the peace," RFE/RL's Tajik bureau reported on 10 August.

Presidential Advisor Sayfutdinov said that this was done at the request of the local population. "There are also people who are not religious and who would not like to be disturbed by the noise," he told Forum 18. Forum 18 could not independently verify Sayfutdinov's claim.

Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether the ban will continue after Ramadan is over.

Haj restrictions reaffirmed

Abdughaffor Yusupov, head of the Religious Affairs Committee's Haj Department, has reaffirmed that his Committee is maintaining the ban on children taking part in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which this year begins in mid-November. The haj pilgrimage is obligatory at least once in their lifetime for Muslims who are able to perform it (there are exemptions, for example for ill health) within Dhu al-Hijja, the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar.

In August 2009 ahead of that year's haj, the religious affairs department, then part of the Culture Ministry, announced that no-one younger than 16 nor older than 80 could take part. When government control over religious activity was passed from the Culture Ministry to the new Religious Affairs Committee in the wake of its establishment in March 2010, control of the haj was also transferred to the new body.

Yusupov told RFE/RL on 20 August that only citizens between the ages of 18 and 80 would be able to go on the haj, as well as the umra, the shorter pilgrimage to Mecca that can take place at any other time of the year. He added that the Religious Affairs Committee would record the income of applicants to ensure they could afford it.

He also said that the quota allocated to Tajikistan by the Saudi Arabian authorities has risen this year from 5,000 to 5,500.

Jehovah's Witnesses indefinitely under criminal investigation?

It remains unclear at what stage the reopened criminal case against 17 local Jehovah's Witnesses in the Sughd Region is. The case was originally brought in September 2009 to punish them for a meeting held in a private home in June 2009, but was dropped on 27 October 2009 when prosecutors found no evidence of any criminal offence.

However, the case was revived in May. The Sughd regional department of the NSC secret police sent letters to the 17, warning them that criminal cases against them were re-opened for additional investigation. The letter, signed on 7 May by NSC Senior Lieutenant F. Kurbonov, gave no reasons for renewing the investigation (see F18News 19 May 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446>).

The case claims that the 17 violated Criminal Code Article 159 ("organisation of political parties, social organisations or religious organisations infringing the personality and rights of citizens") and Article 189, Part 2 ("inciting national, racial, or religious hostility"). A conviction under Article 159 is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment, while a conviction under Article 189, Part 2 is punishable by imprisonment of from five to ten years.

On 19 August, Investigator Kurbonov refused once more to tell Forum 18 when the investigation is likely to be completed and when the case might reach trial, referring Forum 18 - as he had done in May - to the Jehovah's Witnesses' lawyers. Refusing to give any other information, he put the phone down.

Jehovah's Witnesses from Almaty, Kazakhstan told Forum 18 on 19 August that none of the 17 has been summoned for questioning since the case was reopened. (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

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

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