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TAJIKISTAN: "Teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service

Twice in July, police in Tajikistan's northern Sugd Region detained Jehovah's Witnesses and prepared administrative punishments. Officers raided a meeting for prayer and Bible study in a flat, seizing Bibles, questioning those present at the police station and threatening them to renounce their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 News Service. Khurshed Barotov, Deputy District Police Chief who questioned those detained, defended his actions, claiming they were "teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat". A week later, police detained two women discussing their faith on the street with another woman. Police refused to tell Forum 18 if the woman worked for the police. The two Jehovah's Witnesses were "hit on the head and slapped" for refusing to sign a police report, though police denied this to Forum 18. Meanwhile, an Interior Ministry official in Dushanbe warned mosque-goers during Friday prayers not to leave early, which he claimed was a sign of adhering to non-Hanafi Islam. Human rights defender Rustom Gulov described these warnings as an "example of direct state interference in the private matters of faith of its citizens".

In mid-July Police raided Jehovah's Witnesses as they met for prayer and Bible study in a flat in Sugd Region in the far north of Tajikistan. Police have prepared charges against eight of those present, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 28 July, but more charges might follow. In another incident in Sugd Region in late July, police hit two female Jehovah's Witnesses, and are preparing administrative punishments against them. Because Jehovah's Witnesses do not have state registration in Tajikistan, "our believers face trouble from the authorities very often", Jehovah's Witnesses lamented.

Police defended the raid on the religious meeting, insisting the Jehovah's Witnesses were "teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat". An officer denied to Forum 18 that the two women were hit on the head while in detention.

The raid, detentions and physical abuse came as a senior Interior Ministry official warned Muslims at a central mosque in the capital Dushanbe during Friday prayers that they will face punishment if they leave prayers before they are completed. He appeared to suggest that all Muslims must follow the practices of the Hanafi school of Islam. He made clear that all mosques in Tajikistan are under state surveillance (see below).

Forms of Islam the government does not like have, like Jehovah's Witnesses, also been banned. These include Salafis and the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, and their adherents face possible criminal prosecution and imprisonment (see F18News 21 January 2015 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2030>).

Jehovah's Witness ban continues

Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly tried to have the nationwide ban on their activity overturned and regain state registration, with meetings in the Presidential Administration and the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA). However, the SCRA rejected their third attempt to lodge a registration application in September 2014.

The ban was imposed in October 2007. Officials claimed that it was because Jehovah's Witnesses distribute "propagandistic books on their religion", have conscientious objections to military service, refuse blood transfusions, and are "a destructive cult" (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553>).

SCRA officials promised Jehovah's Witnesses verbally in meetings in Dushanbe over the past year that the community may receive state registration once again in the near future. However, in a July meeting SCRA officials told the community that it is "not willing to do so because we do not want to deal with all these religious problems in the country", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

The officials who answered the phones between 25 and 28 July of SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda refused to say why Jehovah's Witnesses are being denied state registration. Nor would they explain why the authorities, who refuse to give them state registration, demand at the same time that they cannot meet in their homes for prayer and Bible reading without registration. They also refused to put Forum 18 through to Davlatzoda.

Administrative cases follow raid on religious meeting

On 18 July fifteen officials - including from Criminal Police, local Police, the local Administration as well as religious affairs officials - raided the home of Nazira Oripova, a Jehovah's Witness who lives in Bobojon-Gofurov District on the outskirts of the regional capital Khujand [Khojand]. The officials "climbed over the fence and broke into the home," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "They disrupted the prayers and Bible reading of the twelve believers." Confiscating the "few Bibles", Police took all twelve to the District Police Station for questioning.

Bobojon-Gofurov District Police then decided to open administrative cases against eight of them: the home owner Oripova, as well as Bimavlyuda Yokubova, Yusufjon Yakubov, Umeda Mansurova, Abdujamol Bobojonov, Tillakiz Yakubova, Kimarbon Bobojonov and Farogat Muhiddinova. After being held at the Police Station for "several hours", the Jehovah's Witnesses were released the same day.

The cases against the eight are under Administrative Code Article 474, Part 1. This punishes "violation of the Religion Law", including by conducting any religious activity (including giving religious teaching) without state permission or in locations not approved by the state. Punishments for individuals are fines of between seven and 10 Financial Indicators (FIs). Religious leaders face fines of between 20 and 30 FIs. Legal entities face fines of between 100 and 200 MFIs.

One Financial Indicator remained unchanged in the 2015 budget at 40 Somonis (50 Norwegian Kroner, 6 Euros or 6 US Dollars).

Although prosecutors have given the eight Jehovah's Witnesses copies of the indictments, it appears the cases have not yet been sent to court.

Threatened to renounce their faith

While at the Police Station on 18 July, the twelve were questioned by Khurshed Barotov, Deputy Chief of the District Criminal Police, as well as Manucher Ergashev, Criminal Police Officer, who also participated in the raid. The officers "threatened the believers that they must renounce their faith," told them that "if they could act on their free will, they would make jihad against them since they betrayed Islam", Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Officer Barotov adamantly denied that he and his colleague Ergashev threatened any of the twelve Jehovah's Witnesses. "We are a democratic state, and the authorities themselves fight against jihadists, what are you saying?" he brushed off Forum 18. Asked why the authorities raided Oripova's home and why cases were opened against eight of those detained, Barotov replied: "They were teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat."

Asked why Jehovah's Witnesses cannot meet in their own homes for prayer and Bible reading, Barotov insisted: "We have freedom of religion in Tajikistan but they must not violate the Law."

More charges to follow?

At the moment the Jehovah's Witnesses are being charged with "teaching religion in an unauthorized location", Barotov told Forum 18. But depending on the result of the religious "expert analysis" of the Bibles, he added, the charges may be changed. Additional charges may be brought for "use of illegal religious literature".

Seyidjon Omonov, Expert of Bobojon-Gofurov District Administration's Religious Affairs Division, who is responsible for the "expert analysis" of religious literature, said he had not seen the literature confiscated from the Jehovah's Witnesses. "But I will study it and give my opinion within two or three days," he told Forum 18 on 28 July. "If only Bibles were confiscated then we will not give a negative opinion," he added. "But if there are different Jehovah's Witness magazines we have to see what is written in them. As a rule in the past we did not evaluate Jehovah's Witnesses literature as extremist."

Police detained, hit and threatened two women

On 26 July, Police in the city of Khujand in Sugd Region detained on the street two female Jehovah's Witnesses, Gulnora Tegniyeva and Chaborkhon Bozorboyeva. They took them at about 6 pm for questioning at the city's Sohili-Rost (residential area) Police Station. Cases were opened against the two women, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18, and they believe that the entire incident was instigated by the Police.

At the Police Station, Officer Azamot Bobokhudjayev, Chief of the Station, pressured the two women to sign the Police report, which they refused to do, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Then the Officer "hit both of them on the head and slapped them," threatening that he would "lock them up for fifteen days". Though Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva "felt pain and very bad" they refused to sign the Police reports.

Officers then confiscated their passports, one Bible and one tablet device. They then released the two women at about 10 pm, four hours after they were first brought there, Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

"We acted on complaints from their neighbours that they illegally propagate their faith among their neighbours," Officer Bobokhudjayev claimed to Forum 18 on 28 July. He adamantly denied he hit the two women. "Who is telling you these lies?" he asked Forum 18, with what sounded like a nervous laugh.

Asked what charges are being brought against the two women, Bobokhudjayev said that an "administrative case may be opened". Asked why he confiscated the two women's passports, Bobokhudjayev was quick to respond: "We are ready to return their passports."

Did police instigate cases?

The trouble for Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva began several days before their 26 July detention. "One woman, who introduced herself as Farzono, phoned the two ladies several times and told them that she is interested in their faith, and that she wants to meet them on the street and talk to them," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

They met on 26 July at 5.30 pm at a bus stop near Sohili-Rost Police Station. Farzono "immediately began talking to them, behaving as if she has known them for a long time. She began loudly speaking about women wearing the hijab [Muslim women's headscarf]."

As soon as she began speaking about the hijab, two cars approached, and four Police officers got out. They showed their identification documents and asked Tegniyeva and Bozorboyeva to get in the car. When the two refused, the officers "forced and pushed them into the car". The two were then taken to the Police Station.

Asked who Farzono is and whether a case was also opened against her, Officer Bobokhudjayev did not answer. When Forum 18 asked whether Farzono works for the Police and, if so, why Police instigated a case against the two Jehovah's Witnesses, Bobokhudjayev refused to respond. "I will not talk to you further over the phone. Please send your representative to our office," he said.

Punishment threatened for not complying with Hanafi rules

Meanwhile, during Friday prayers on 3 July in the central Khodji Yokub Mosque in Dushanbe, Police Colonel Barotali Khamidzoda, who represents the Interior Ministry's Special Forces controlling "religious extremism" cases, warned attendees that "anyone leaving Tajikistan's mosques before Friday prayers are fully read will be punished." However he did not specify what the punishments would be.

Colonel Khamidzoda explained that those who leave early do "not respect Hanafi Muslim teachings (..) and divide Tajikistan along sectarian lines", Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service noted on 3 July. He insisted that "we cannot allow the influence of various Islamic groups and teachings".

Khamidzoda warned that the law-enforcement agencies "observe to ensure order and discipline during the namaz [Muslim prayer] in all the country's mosques and will spare no effort for the sake of peace and security of believers during prayers."

Leaving mosque early a crime?

Colonel Khamidzoda defended his warnings to mosque attendees. "Sometimes Salafis or people from other Muslim movements banned in Tajikistan may attend a mosque and leave in the middle of the prayers, and we would like to identify those," he told Forum 18 on 23 July.

Asked why all Muslims are being forced to accept the Hanafi school of Islam and how the Police will determine who those who leave early are, Colonel Khamidzoda did not answer. "I will not tell you this over the phone." Asked what the punishments will be, he referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry's International Affairs Section. "I will give no further comments," he said.

Colonel Zumrat Soliyeva, Head of the Interior Ministry's International Affairs Section, told Forum 18 on 23 July: "I do not know why Colonel Khamidzoda made those comments, or why he referred you to us." She then referred Forum 18 to the Ministry's Press Secretary.

Asked why Colonel Khamidzoda or the Ministry are pressuring Muslims to adhere only to the Hanafi school of Islam or follow all its rules, Press Secretary Jaloliddin Sadriiddinov also told Forum 18: "I do not know why he those statements. Let him explain his own statements."

Huseyn Shokirov, a newly-appointed official who oversees mosques at the SCRA in Dushanbe, dismissed Colonel Khamidzoda's statements. "Religious issues are not in the competence of the Interior Ministry," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 23 July. "Anyone is free in democratic Tajikistan to leave the mosque at any time."

"Example of direct state interference"

Rustom Gulov, an independent human rights defender from Khujand, described Colonel Khamidzoda's statements and warnings as an "example of direct state interference in the private matters of faith of its citizens".

Some Muslims do not remain in the mosques until all the prayers are read, Gulov explained to Forum 18 on 23 July. They think that they need stay only until the main part of the prayer is done and then do the rest at home privately. "Who can guarantee that the Police will not begin catching innocent people who leave prayers early because they have to leave urgently for important reasons, or think they may do the rest at home?" (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=1553.

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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Tajikistan>.

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