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TAJIKISTAN: When is a mosque not a mosque?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Tajikistan has this month (January) closed many mosques in the capital Dushanbe and warned local Muslims not to engage in unregistered religious worship, Forum 18 New Service has found. Recent years have also seen closures and demolitions of mosques, churches and the country's only synagogue. Sources Forum 18 has spoken to put the number of closed mosques this month at more than 50. However, officials from the Dushanbe Mayor's office and state Religious Affairs Committee have claimed to Forum 18 that the closed mosques "are not mosques," and "cannot be used as mosques". It is unclear why the authorities claim that mosques should apply for registration, when the authorities have decided in advance that they cannot be used for worship. A Dushanbe imam, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 that he welcomes members of a closed mosque to his mosque, but "they want to have their own mosque". Officials would not tell Forum 18 what measures will be taken against imams or local Muslims if they continue worshipping in closed mosques.

Tajikistan has this month (January) closed many mosques in the capital Dushanbe and warned local Muslims not to engage in unregistered religious worship, Forum 18 New Service has found. Various sources Forum 18 has spoken to put the number of closed places of worship at more than 50. However, officials claim that "no Mosques were closed down", but that local residents in some mahallas (residential areas) have been warned not to meet for unregistered religious worship in halls designated as being for "cultural purposes".

Muslim communities from these mahallas have previously applied for legal status, but state Religious Affairs Committee officials claimed to Forum 18 that local residents "never asked for registration". However, the Mayor of Dushanbe's office told Forum 18 that these places cannot be used for religious worship "because they are not meant for use for religious purposes". Some reports indicate that the Imams and their communities were warned that criminal cases would be opened against them, if they continued leading prayers in these places. The authorities were unwilling to comment on this to Forum 18.

The closed mosques are often halls used for unregistered religious worship known as 'public places', which have often been used since Soviet times for weddings and funerals.

How many mosques have been closed in 2011?

An imam of a cathedral mosque in Dushanbe, the only kind of mosque where the state allows sermons, told Forum 18 on 24 January that he is not aware of any officially registered mosques being closed down recently. But the number of 'public places' used for Muslim prayers closed down in January is "more than sixty". The imam asked not to be named for fear of the authorities.

Hajji Muhammadali Faiz-Muhammad of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Central Asia's only legal religious-based party, told Forum 18 on 18 January that the number of recently closed-down mosques "is definitely more than fifty". He said that he knows some of the Imams, but they are afraid of the authorities and so do not wish to discuss the issue publicly.

Saymurod Kadyrov, Dushanbe City Prosecutor, declined to comment on the closure of mosques and referred Forum 18 on 18 January to Tajikistan's Prosecutor-General's office. "I do not have competence to comment on this," he claimed.

Asked how many mosques were closed down, Abdusami Dadabayev, Press Secretary of the Prosecutor-General, claimed to Forum 18 the same day that he did not have such information. "Why should mosques be closed in Tajikistan?" he asked. He claimed that he did not think it was happening. Asked if he was sure that no mosque was closed down recently, he replied that "I need to check out this information."

In contrast to Dadabayev, Kurbonali Muhabbatov, Public Prosecutor of Vahdat near Dushanbe, was quoted on 14 January by the Moscow-based Regnum news agency as saying that "mosques in Avul, Hayoti, Vokzal, Ispechak and Kalinin mahallas, which held unauthorised activity, were closed down." The agency reported that 57 mosques were closed down in Dushanbe's Sino District.

Muhabbatov said that all mosques in other districts of Dushanbe are being checked, and "all the illegally built mosques will be closed down".

Closures, bans, demolitions, repression

Tajikistan has in the past demolished mosques in Dushanbe (see F18News 10 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032), as well as a Protestant church and the country's only synagogue (see F18News 20 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1242). In 2007 Tajikistan "temporarily" banned the Abundant Life Christian Centre, which later closed due to pressure from the authorities (see F18News 8 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1200), and banned the Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 18 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036).

The government has also refused to register mosques outside Dushanbe, claiming that 22 mosques in the south-eastern Badakhshan Region are "old stores or car repair shops, which do not look good, and are not clean places" (see F18News 3 December 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1517).

Tajikistan has also recently introduced a highly restrictive religious censorship regime, and is forcing religious communities to pay for censorship of their literature and other material (see F18News 12 January 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1529).

What lies behind the 2011 mosque closures?

Hajji Faiz-Muhammad of the IRP told Forum 18 that he thinks the reason for the mosque closures is that the authorities are "trying to weaken the propagation of Islam among the citizens".

Tajikistan has also: created a "thought crime" by banning the Salafi Islamic school of thought (see F18News 23 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1243); passed a highly repressive Religion Law (see F18News 26 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1274); and imprisoned and fined many members of the banned Jamaat Tabligh Islamic movement (see F18News 19 May 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1446).

Officials from the Dushanbe Mayor's office and the state Religious Affairs Committee have claimed to Forum 18 was that the closed mosques "are not mosques," and "cannot be used as mosques." The officials also claimed that local people using these places "never asked for registration". It is unclear why the authorities claim that the mosques should apply to be registered as mosques, when the authorities have decided in advance that they cannot be used for worship.

Explaining to Forum 18 why the authorities are closing down the places of worship, Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, a Dushanbe mayoral religious affairs official, said that in Soviet times there were halls in most mahallas of Dushanbe where people would conduct events such as weddings and funerals, which were accepted as public places. "Some people have been using them as mosques, but they have warned by the authorities to stop praying in these places," he told Forum 18 on 19 January. Asked why people cannot gather for prayers in the places of their choice, Nuriddinov replied that this was "because those places are not meant for use for religious purposes".

Echoing Nuriddinov, Husseyn Shokirov of the Religious Affairs Committee said that "no mosques were closed down". He told Forum 18 on 18 January that "the places which were closed down cannot be called mosques", claiming that all mosques have been registered by the Religious Affairs Committee. "These places did not register officially, and were built without state authorisation," he claimed.

Zafar Safarov, Head of Dushanbe's Sino District Hukumat (Administration), was unwilling to explain why Muslims cannot meet in the so-called public places for prayers. "If you have a representative in Dushanbe, send them to my office," he told Forum 18 on 25 January. "Please, pay attention to your words," he retorted when Forum 18 repeated the question. "These are not so-called public places, they are public places." He then hung up the phone.

Attempts to register fail

Shokirov of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed that they mosque leaders "never asked us for registration". However, Hajji Faiz-Muhammad of the IRP told Forum 18 that "many of those Imams in the past asked the authorities to legalise these places as mosques, but the authorities refused."

Davlat Mirzoyev, the Imam of one closed-down mosque – with around 200 members - in the Ispchak Mahalla of Dushanbe's Sino District was reported by the Ferganews.com agency on 10 January as saying that his mosque was built with the free contributions of the local residents. "We asked the appropriate authorities to register it dozens of times." However, the authorities "without giving any reasons regularly refused" to register the mosque.

Shokirov of the Religious Affairs Committee said he did not know the mosque or the Imam. "I just do not remember them asking us for registration," he claimed. "If we had their application in our registry I would know of them," he said. Dushanbe mayoral religious

affairs official Nuriddinov said that "Mirzoyev pretends to be an Imam but he is not," he said. "People in that mahalla just tried to use the place as a mosque".

What will happen to the mosques and worshippers?

The Imam of the Dushanbe cathedral mosque said that he thinks some people from closed mosques are now praying in their homes, while others are attending other mosques.

Another Dushanbe imam, who also wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 on 24 January that members of a closed mosque attend his mosque, but are "still hoping to register their mosque with the Religious Affairs Committee". The Imam said that he welcomes members of the closed mosque to his mosque, but "they want to have their own mosque".

Asked whether, as with other mosques in the past, the authorities will tear down these public places, Nuriddinov of the Mayor's Office claimed: "None of the places will be torn down, but the people were warned not to use them for religious worship."

Shokirov of the Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 that people from those areas are "free to attend" other officially registered mosques. He declined to comment on why the local Muslims cannot have their own mosque. He referred Forum 18 to the Dushanbe City Administration when asked whether it was still possible to register these places of worship.

Both officials, as well as those from the Prosecutor-General's Office, would not tell Forum 18 what further measures will be taken against the Imams or local Muslims, if they continued worshipping in closed mosques. (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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>.

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