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CENTRAL ASIA: State policy towards Muslims in Central Asia

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In all Central Asian states easily the largest percentage of the population belongs to nationalities that are historically Muslim, but it is very difficult to state the percentage of devout Muslim believers. Governments are intensely pre-occupied by "political Islam", especially the banned strongly anti-western and antisemitic international Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir. However, there is absolutely no certainty that all Muslims subject to severe governmental repression are Hizb-ut-Tahir members. In Uzbekistan, where there are estimated to be 5,000 political prisoners alleged to be Hizb-ut-Tahir members, mere possession of Hizb-ut-Tahrir literature is punished by at least 10 years' in jail. Also, Muslims' rights have been violated under the pretext of combating Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In southern Kyrgyzstan, for example, teachers have told children not to say daily Muslim prayers - even at home - and banned schoolchildren from coming to lessons wearing the hijab, the headscarf traditionally worn by Muslim women.

At least on paper, Muslims constitute the overwhelming majority in all the Central Asian states: in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan they are said to make up more than 80 per cent of the population. The only exception in the region is Kazakhstan, where Muslims constitute around 70 per cent of the population.

However, these statistics have to be treated cautiously, as they reflect only the percentage of the population that belongs to nationalities that are historically Muslim. It is extremely difficult to calculate the percentage of people who are devout believers. For example, many in Central Asia who call themselves Muslims drink alcohol, do not fast in the month of Ramadan and hardly ever attend mosque. Moreover, the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmens were nomads until fairly recently and are generally held not to be devout Muslims. Among these nationalities, Islam is observed at a superficial, everyday level and is closely interwoven with pagan rituals. Most devout Muslims in Central Asia are ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks.

Nevertheless, despite the attention the governments give to religious minorities (see F18News 21 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=233), Islam is the religion that arouses the most concern among the Central Asian authorities. The preoccupation is primarily with "political Islam", where Muslims not only observe religious rituals, but also try to influence the political situation on the basis of their religious beliefs.

In fairness, there are reasons for the authorities of these countries to feel such concern. During Tajikistan's civil war, which raged from 1992 to 1996, one of the opposition forces wanted society reorganised in line with shariah law (see F18News 20 Nov 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190). More recently, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) - which has been recognised by the US State Department as a terrorist organisation - tried between 1999 and 2000 to overturn Uzbekistan's secular regime by military means (see F18News 16 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105). Kyrgyzstan too was dragged into this conflict, as IMU fighters broke into Uzbekistan through Kyrgyz territory. The situation is made even more complex by the fact that around 30 per cent of the population of southern Kyrgyzstan - the region where battles with insurgent IMU fighters took place - are ethnic Uzbeks (see F18News 7 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222).

Since the beginning of the 1990s the term "Wahhabis" has become exceptionally widespread in Central Asia. Yet those dubbed "Wahhabis" have little in common with supporters of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam which is widespread in Saudi Arabia (although some of Central Asia's so-called "Wahhabis" did indeed campaign for religion to be cleansed of what they regard as "modern accretions" and for a return to the "original Islam" of the times of the prophet Mohammed). During Tajikistan's civil war, those fighting the opposition claimed they were fighting Wahhabism. People even gave opposition supporters the nickname "vovchiks" (derived from the term "Wahhabi"), while their opponents were called "yurchiks".

"The term 'Wahhabi' was spread by the KGB secret police specially to cause division between believers," the then leader of Tajikistan's Muslims, today his country's first deputy prime minister, Akbar Turajonzoda, claimed to this correspondent back in July 1992. In Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, all Muslims who voiced criticism of the clerical establishment - which had survived intact from Soviet times and was virtually indistinguishable from the official authorities - were dubbed "Wahhabis".

Additionally, in Uzbekistan the authorities actively persecuted "Wahhabis". Right up to 2000, the majority of political prisoners in Uzbekistan were so-called "Wahhabis". This year, in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan the authorities have not gone so far as to openly oppress the "Wahhabis", but a veritable campaign has been waged against them in the local media. As late as June 1999,

Kyrgyzstan's president Askar Akaev told this correspondent that the word "Wahhabism" did not have negative overtones and that it signified a striving for pureness of faith. However, after the IMU fighters' incursion into Kyrgyzstan, the government joined in the verbal attacks on so-called Wahhabis.

Since around 2000, the popularity of the term "Wahhabi" has ebbed away - although, in revealing indications of officials' ignorance of Islam, Uzbek police do still occasionally use the term to describe Jehovah's Witnesses - and the Central Asian authorities' main enemy has become the international Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which aims to unite Muslims worldwide under a single caliphate. The party's ideology indeed consists both of strongly expressed anti-western ideology (states such as the US, Britain and Israel are declared to be the work of Satan) and of blatant antisemitism (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

The problem is that there is no firm assurance that all Muslims who are subject to repression by the authorities are indeed members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The Uzbek authorities have adopted the harshest policy against the party: a person found in possession of a Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaflet or literature that closely reflects its views will be sentenced to at least 10 years' imprisonment. International human rights organisations estimate that there are around 7,000 political prisoners in Uzbekistan's prisons, of whom about 5,000 are members or alleged members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The Tajik government also pursues a relatively harsh policy against the party. Around 150 members are currently being held in Tajikistan's prisons, many of whose "crime" was to have been found in possession of a Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaflet.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have the most liberal attitude to Hizb-ut-Tahrir (of all the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is the only one not to have imposed an official ban on the party), yet even in Kazakhstan two alleged members have been sentenced this year on charges of inciting racial hatred (see F18News 10 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249). In Kyrgyzstan there have been a few dozen cases where Hizb-ut-Tahrir members have been found guilty of similar charges. Also in Kyrgyzstan Muslims' rights have been violated under the pretext of combating Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In April 2003 teachers at school in several villages in southern Kyrgyzstan, where Hizb-ut-Tahrir's influence is particularly strong, told children not to say their daily prayers (even at home) and banned schoolchildren from coming to lessons wearing the hijab, a headscarf traditionally worn by Muslim women (see F18News 12 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=52). However, after a few weeks the pressure on the Muslim schoolchildren ceased.

In 2001, according to local press reports, officers of the National Security Committee (KNB, the ex-KGB secret police) in South Kazakhstan region beat 21-year-old Kanat Biyembitov to death after having detained him for allegedly belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir. The government concluded that the two officers bore some responsibility for the death and stated it had sacked them; however, no criminal action was taken against them. The KNB has officially declared the campaign against religious extremism to be one of its top priorities.

It is scarcely surprising that in adopting such policies the Central Asian authorities are trying to exert strict control on all mosques. In Uzbekistan the Spiritual Administration of Muslims has virtually become a state agency which strictly controls all mosques functioning in the country and even approves the text of Friday addresses (see F18News 20 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=58). After opposition fighters were forced out of Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe in 1992, the new authorities abolished the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Tajikistan, which had supported the opposition, and formed a new organisation in its place - the Council of Ulems (scholarly theologians).

The authorities were initially trying in this way to weaken the Muslim clergy, who were potential political rivals to the secular authorities. However, once they had become convinced that the Council of Ulems would subserviently do as they wished, the authorities gave it the de facto authority once wielded by the Spiritual Administration. Formally, the Muslim clergy are chosen by their congregations, and the candidate they choose is confirmed by the Council of Ulems. However, in practice the Council of Ulems is governed by the authorities and an unsuitable imam will swiftly be replaced. The head of the Haji Yakub central mosque in Dushanbe and a member of the Council of Ulems, Faisullo Zabuido, even admitted to Forum 18 last November that a person the authorities regard as unsuitable cannot be an imam.

The Kazakh government has also made attempts to govern Muslims with the aid of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan. However, both the government and the Spiritual Administration deny that there is any official connection between them. Nevertheless, the government has several times proposed amendments to the law on religion, under which the Spiritual Administration would assume a quasi-official role by determining which Muslims groups should be allowed to register with the authorities and by approving the construction of new mosques. In April 2002, the Constitutional Council ruled that these proposed amendments were unconstitutional.

For more background information, see Forum 18's survey of state policies towards religious minorities in Central Asia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=233

A printer-friendly map of Central Asia and the Middle East is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast>

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