

# ***Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l***

Avenue d'Auderghem 61/16, 1040 Brussels

Phone/Fax: 32 2 3456145

Email: [international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net](mailto:international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net) – Website : <http://www.hrwf.eu>



## **Said Nursi and his Followers**

By Willy Fautré

Brussels, April 2016

## Said Nursi and his Followers

Said Nursi was a religious scholar, an opinion leader and an activist concerned with the acute problems the society of his time. Throughout all his life, he desperately attempted to conciliate religion, modernity and politics. His books inspired a faith movement that played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey and now numbers several millions of followers worldwide, including in Russia and other post-Soviet countries with a Muslim majority.

Nursi divides his life into three periods. The *Old Said* Period refers to the authoritarian Hamidian rule (1876-1909) overthrown by the (second) Constitutional period of the Ottoman monarchy (1909-1922). The *New Said* Period refers to the early decades of the new Turkish Republic where Kemalist reforms aimed to transform the country into a secular(ist) nation-state (1923-1950). The *Third Said* which approximately covers the last ten years of his life refers to the transition period towards liberal democratic rule commenced in 1950.

### *His intellectual path*

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia, in the 1870s<sup>1</sup>. His parents were pious peasants who had been in close contact with local Sufi leaders. He received an unconventional educational training. There was no school in his village and he started his studies with learning Arabic with his brother Abdullah. Afterwards, he attended several *medrese* but due to his independent character, he resisted their burdensome and non-critical educational programs, and left these institutions. He found a better environment in Dogubayezid where he could prove his unusual intellectual faculties and extraordinary memorizing capabilities. The then young boy was awarded an official diploma attesting that he had successfully completed his *medrese* education. Afterwards, he started to being called as Mullah Said the Famous. After Dogubayezid, he began to travel in various parts of eastern Anatolia, engaging in scholarly debates and discussions with *medrese* teachers and sheiks.

In the 1890s, the governor of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, gave him the opportunity to continue his studies and to meet regional governors, bureaucrats and politicians who were eager to modernize the Ottoman Empire. Through these contacts, Nursi developed an interest in social, economic and political problems of the empire but also became familiar with modern ideologies that were critical of religious worldview. He studied modern sciences and philosophy, through which he became more cognizant of positivism and materialism. He realized that modern skepticism ensuing from Western scientific discoveries and technical developments was rapidly prevailing with the Ottoman intelligentsia and was alienating people from religion. He disapproved such dichotomies as ‘reason v. Revelation’ and ‘science v. spirituality’.

### *His educational and political commitments*

---

<sup>1</sup> His biographers disagree on the exact date of his birth: 1873, 1876, 1877 or 1878.

A fierce critic of both the outdated religious *medrese* ignoring scientific achievements and the modernist educational system excluding religion, he conceptualized a new and holistic educational model attempting to reconcile the various opposing views by jointly teaching both religious and modern sciences under the same roof. He started implementing his educational philosophy in his native Kurdistan where ignorance, poverty, bigotry, scholastic and political despotism were prevailing. However, he realized the geographical limitations of his project and wishing to expand it he asked for official support in the imperial capital. This led him to Istanbul in 1907. Despite the suspicions of Sultan Abdülhamid II, he managed in a short time to get the interest of the intellectual elite. Though, his writings about his reform projects and the authoritarian regime earned him a strong reaction of the imperial regime. He was arrested, briefly imprisoned and then sent to a mental institution. Although he was released by a medical report clearing him from any mental problem, he was kept under strict surveillance.

When the Second Constitutional Rule was declared in July 1908, Nursi delivered ardent public speeches and published articles supporting the new constitutional regime. This was perhaps the most active political period of his life. He had still his educational reforms in mind but he thought it could be best implemented through political involvement. Hence his interest in propagating the philosophy of constitutionalism. In his view, such new institutions as the parliament, democratic elections and consultative bodies brought by the new rule could all be justified on Islamic grounds. In his opinion, real freedom could only flourish as it abode by the divine ordinances and pursued good morals and conduct outlined by revelation but if freedom was misinterpreted, it would be lost and end up in despotism. Unfortunately, the authoritative and nationalistic policies of the new regime disillusioned the population and the intellectuals. Nursi's appeal and support to the ruling Committee of Union and Progress did not last long. In April, there was a public revolt against the new regime. Nursi did not take part in it but due to his relations with the leaders of the revolt, he was arrested and sent to the Court Martial where he was first sentenced to life. After a defense reiterating his original views on the necessity of constitutionalism for the empire and its full compatibility with Islam, he was acquitted and released. His defense was later published under the title "The Testimony of Two Schools of Misfortune or the Court Martial and Said Nursi".

Frustrated by his political experience in Istanbul, Nursi decided in 1910 to go back to his native Anatolia. While there, he published a book about the introductory principles for a contemporary Quranic exegesis and in his public discussions, he addressed the regional problems such as ignorance, fanaticism and necessity to have good relations with Armenians.

In spring 1911, he went to Damascus and pronounced a sermon in Arabic about the pressing social, political and economic problems of the Muslim *umma* that was greatly admired. The original message was expanded with addenda by Nursi, published in Turkish and re-edited in 1957 as the final version.

In June 1911, he accompanied the new Sultan Mehmed Resad in his Balkan tour meant to keep the populations in the Ottoman Empire. One of the objectives was also to create a

university in Skopje but the project failed because of the Balkan Wars in 1911-1912. In August 1913, Nursi convinced the sultan to transfer the funds originally allocated for the Skopje university to the one he intended to create in eastern Anatolia but he could not finish the whole construction because of the First World War.

### ***First World War***

Nursi became the leader of a militia force with the approval of the central government. It was mainly formed by his students from his former *medrese* in Van. From 1914 to 1916, he fought in the Special Organization of the Ottoman Empire<sup>2</sup> against the Russian army along the front

lines between Van and Bitlis. He was finally captured by the Russians on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1916 with the fall of Bitlis, and sent to a camp in Kostroma, a city located at the confluence of the Volga and Kostroma rivers. He remained in captivity in Tsarist Russia during two years and took the advantage of the political chaos resulting from the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 to escape from the war camp. He went back to Istanbul on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1918 via St Petersburg, Warsaw, Vienna and Sofia.

### ***Said Nursi and Kemalism***

Said Nursi was welcomed as a hero in Istanbul. He was soon nominated to be a member of the Academy for Islamic Wisdom. Disappointed by the lack of success in his political and social involvement, he was also depressed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the decline of the Muslim communities and the occupation of Istanbul by the British forces in March 1920. He issued defying statements against this occupation and supported the Ankara-based independence movement. When the Turks recovered their sovereignty in 1922, they abolished the Sultanate.

Nursi's political vision was that the new political entity should be based on the Koranic message and promote religious understanding. However, the new governing body led by Mustafa Kemal had a totally different agenda: nationalism and anti-religious secularism. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924; all *medrese* establishments and Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed; *shariah* courts were replaced by civil courts; the tombs of the saints were closed up; the Arabic was disallowed and replaced by the Latin one in 1928; the Arabic call to prayer was banned in 1932.

Mustafa Kemal considered Said Nursi a serious obstacle to his political project and deemed it necessary to seek to control him by offering him the position of 'Minister of Religious

---

<sup>2</sup> Enver Pasha assumed the primary role in the direction of the Special Organization. Kemal Ataturk was one of its notable members. Most of its 30,000 members were drawn from trained specialists such as doctors, engineers, and journalists but the organization also employed criminals released from prison in 1913 by amnesty. Many members of this organization who had played particular roles in the Armenian Genocide also participated in the [Turkish national movement](#). The Special Organization, assisted by government and army officials, deported all Greek men of military age to labor brigades beginning in summer 1914 and lasting through 1916.

Affairs' for the eastern provinces of Turkey, a post that Nursi famously refused. This was the beginning of his split from the Kemalist ideology. Although he was also offered funding to realize his *medrese* project in Van, he refused the proposal and decided to abandon any political involvement and to focus on the promotion of faith. He retreated in Van and led a solitary life teaching to a small group of students. Though, alarmed by the growing popularity of Nursi's teachings, which had spread even among the intellectuals and the military officers, the government repeatedly arrested him for allegedly exploiting religion for political ends, forming a clandestine political organization, giving instruction in Sufism and opposing secular republican reforms. For three decades, including during and after WW II, he was harassed, put under strict surveillance, sentenced to prison terms and internal exile. In 1956, he was cleared of all these charges.

Though, for several decades, the authorities reserved him a special treatment: harassment, strict surveillance, arrests, court cases, internal exile and imprisonment.

### ***From the Democrat Party rule to the junta regime***

In May 1950, the Democrat Party won the first free multi-party elections with an absolute majority in the Parliament. The party supported more liberal and democratic governance. The new government abolished the ban on Arabic call and declared a general amnesty from which Said Nursi benefitted. He fully supported the domestic and foreign policies of the new regime. The government was supporting a religion-friendly secularism and aimed to firmly fight against Communism. This perfectly corresponded to the ideas of Said Nursi who was a staunch anti-Communist in favor of an alliance between Muslims and Christians to combat Communism.

Said Nursi died in his eighties in Urfa, the legendary city of Abraham, on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1960. He was buried on the next day with a great funeral ceremony but was however not left in peace in his grave. Two months later, a coup d'état took place in Turkey and the junta regime overthrew the Democratic Party from power. On 12<sup>th</sup> July 1960, Nursi's corpse was exhumed and buried in an unknown place in order to prevent popular veneration.

### ***His works***

Said Nursi was a prolific preacher and writer. His major work is a collection of texts named *Risale-i Nur* ("Letters of Divine Light"), a body of Koranic commentary exceeding six thousand pages.

Despite the constant surveillance by the authorities, he continued to keep in contact with people while in exile in Barla. Out of them emerged a small group of loyal fellows who were asking questions, listening to his predications, noting down and duplicating what Nursi dictated. This group became the forerunners of the *Nur* movement which would later become the most dynamic and influential community in modern Turkey. The group in Barla lacked any printing facility but Nursi encouraged them to duplicate the pieces of *Risale-i Nur* by

hand-copying. After corrections by the author, they were sent to other villages and towns around. This is how *Risale-i Nur* was produced and distributed in the country until the late 1950s. The hand copies would, in the next decades, be reported to reach more than 600,000 copies all around Anatolia.

In 1956, he gave permission to print his works in Latin script and from then on they started to be officially printed by publishing houses. Till this time, his works had mostly been either handwritten or duplicated by hand copies in banned Arabic script.

There are now followers of Said Nursi worldwide but in a number of Muslim majority countries, they continue to be persecuted although they do not engage in or call for any violent activity and are completely unconnected to terrorism. In **Russia**<sup>3</sup>, **Uzbekistan** and **Azerbaijan**, which have banned Nursi's works for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers and those who do not share religious ideas<sup>4</sup>, they are victims of police raids and confiscation of his writings. They are taken to court and sentenced to fines or prison terms.

## Some documented cases

### Azerbaijan

The 14-volume *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light) collection of writings by the Islamic theologian Said Nursi are on the list of banned religious literature in Azerbaijan. Possessing, using or distributing such books is illegal in Azerbaijan.

#### *Mass arrests in Nakhichevan*

In mid-November 2014, Nakhichevan's police and NSM secret police raided many homes, detaining about 200 Muslims. Within up to 48 hours, up to about half of those detained were reportedly freed. About 60 were freed when the authorities established that they were Sunni Muslims who were studying the works of Said Nursi. An unknown number appeared to be still in detention and under investigation on treason charges in 2015.

On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015, three Muslims who read Nursi's works were freed from prison. Two were seized in Nakhichevan in January and the third in Baku and transferred to the exclave. All three were held without any court approval. They were beaten to force them to "confess" to a "crime" (distributing anti-government leaflets). Police confiscated passports from all three to prevent them leaving the exclave. A fourth fled to Turkey to evade possible arrest.

#### *Raid in Baku*

---

<sup>3</sup> Russia's Supreme Court banned "the international religious organisation Nurdzhular" as "extremist" in April 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The Moscow-based SOVA-Center and Human Rights Without Frontiers consider that there is no valid reason to ban Nursi's writings.

In December 2014, Eldeniz Hajiyev, Ismayil Mammadov, Zakariyya Mammadov, Revan Sabzaliyev and Shahin Hasanov were on criminal trial for attending a religious meeting in Hajiyev's Baku home raided in April 2014. The "crime" of the five Muslim men was to meet to discuss the theologian Said Nursi's books and their faith without state permission. Sabzaliyev was among nine other attendees who were each fined 1,500 Manats (then about 1,400 Euros or 1,900 US Dollars) in April 2014. In a bid to extract "evidence" against the men, on 1<sup>st</sup> May Dashqin Vahabli was summoned to the NSM secret police where he was beaten. Officers tried to force him to incriminate Eldeniz Hajiyev and Ismayil Mammadov for teaching religion "illegally".

Three of the five – Hajiyev, Mammadov and Sabzaliyev - spent up to five months in the NSM secret police's Baku investigation prison. A Baku court ordered the three men's release on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2014 and transfer to house arrest. Following their release, the three lodged cases against Azerbaijan to the ECtHR claiming illegal detention. (Applications No. 74567/14, 71584/14, and 73334/14.). A criminal trial against the five still continues in July 2015.

### ***Raid in Gadabay Region of western Azerbaijan***

In early June, in Sabuhi Mammadov, the host of a group of Sunni Muslims was given a massive fine in and 13 others were fined for alleged "hooliganism" after police broke up a meeting to study the works of Islamic theologian Said Nursi.

In early June 2015, between 10 and 15 police officers raided Sabuhi Mammadov's home in Gadabay in western Azerbaijan, where about 25 Muslims were meeting to study Nursi's works. Mammadov was fined the maximum of 1,500 Manats (then about 1,290 Euros or 1,430 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 299.0.2 ("Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies") and 13 other Muslims were fined 50 Manats (about 40 Euros or 50 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 296 ("Hooliganism").

## **Russia**

Since September 2013<sup>5</sup>, no Muslim had been arrested and imprisoned for reading the works of Said Nursi. Repression started again in 2015.

### ***Court cases in Ulyanovsk***

A court in the Volga city of Ulyanovsk has imposed a jail sentence for involvement in "Nurdzhular", a banned organisation whose alleged existence is strongly denied by Muslims who study the works of late Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Two other defendants received suspended sentences.

---

<sup>5</sup> In September 2013 Shirazi Bekirov was sentenced in St Petersburg to six months in an open-regime prison. He was the 14<sup>th</sup> Muslim in Russia known to have received a criminal sentence for reading Nursi's works, many of which have been banned in Russia as "extremist". Bekirov and other Muslims who met others to read Nursi's works – whether or not they were convicted of any "crime" – appear on a Russian government "list of terrorists and extremists."

On 25<sup>th</sup> February 2015, the 31-year-old Bagir Kazikhanov was found guilty under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"), at Lenin District Court in Ulyanovsk. Judge Natalya Damayeva sentenced him to three and half years' imprisonment.

Kazikhanov's fellow defendants, 26-year-old Stepan Kudryashov and 25-year-old Aleksandr Melentyev, were convicted of the lesser offence under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 of ("Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"). They received suspended sentences of two years and one year and eight months respectively.

All three sentences will be reduced by the amount of time the defendants have already spent in custody and under house arrest. The men were all preparing to appeal.

The whereabouts of 26-year-old Farkhad Allakhverdiyev, the fourth man charged under Article 282.2, Part 2, are still unknown. His name is on the Interior Ministry "Wanted Database". As a result, prosecutors have been obliged to open a separate case against him.

#### ***Court case against two Nursi readers in Krasnoyarsk***

On 8<sup>th</sup> August 2013, police "anti-extremism" officers and the FSB security service raided Gerasimova's and Guzenko's flats, during the major end-of-Ramadan festival Eid-ul-Fitr. At Gerasimova's home, police conducted a five-hour search. During this the family's Eid guests were not permitted to leave and Gerasimova (who is a lawyer) noted a number of procedural violations.

Krasnoyarsk Regional Prosecutor's Office alleged in a press release on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014 that the accused ran an alleged "cell" of more than 10 women, and fostered contacts with "Nurdzhular" members in Naberezhnyye Chelny. Muslims in that city have denied this allegation.

The case under Article 282.2, Part 1, finally got underway with a preliminary hearing at Soviet District Court on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2014, having been passed around the Krasnoyarsk court system for the previous six months. All 14 hearings since then, the latest on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2015, have been adjourned.

#### ***A court case against three Nursi readers in Krasnoyarsk***

Since January 2014, the Siberian Federal District Investigative Committee's investigation of 35-year-old Andrei Dedkov<sup>6</sup> under Article 282.2, Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity") and 32-year-old Aleksei Kuzmenko and 18-year-old Ismat Agdzhayev under Article 282.2, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity") has been underway.

The FSB security service detained the three men and several other Muslims at Krasnoyarsk's Cathedral Mosque and in a hypermarket car park. Officers confiscated copies of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light) collection, computer equipment, and mobile phones during searches of their homes.

### **Uzbekistan**

In February 2015, the authorities released several Said Nursi readers who had served most of their long jail term for meeting to study the works of theologian Said Nursi: Rashid Sharipov, Akmal Abdullayev, Ahmad Rakhmonov, Ahmadjon Primkulov and Kudratullo (last name unknown). All of them were freed under a Presidential prisoner amnesty declared in December 2014 after they had repented and asked the President [Islam Karimov] for forgiveness.

### **Conclusions**

Said Nursi followers are prosecuted for religious activities that do not pose any public danger. Nursi himself never advocated or incited violence, called for the overthrow of the regime or favoured the establishment of a caliphate. Nursi's teachings were moderate in character and appeal to Muslims wishing to reconcile Islamic teaching and modernity. Followers meet to discuss his works in private homes and do not pose any threat.

The reasons and the operations behind the campaign against Nursi followers in Russia are unclear. Official statements point to government paranoia that Nursi readers form a pan-Turkic 'fifth column' that seeks to realign Turkish Muslims among Russia's Turkic-speaking minorities, such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and Kumyks. Some state officials also insist paradoxically that Nursi's works are banned in Turkey. Interestingly, his works are prohibited in Russia – but not in Turkey – and Russia has banned the Nurdzhular movement – even though its very existence is highly questionable.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dedkov, alongside three other Krasnoyarsk Muslims, was charged with involvement in "Nurdzhular" on a previous occasion – this case was dropped when the two-year deadline expired in March 2012.

In Azerbaijan, a regional ally of Turkey, the repression of Said Nursi followers has markedly expanded since President Erdoğan issued a warrant for the arrest of Fetullah Gülen. Gülen is a disciple of Said Nursi who has millions of followers worldwide. He is perceived by Erdogan to be a potential political rival.

Gülen presently lives in self-imposed exile in the United States. Like Nursi, he is concerned with the education of Muslims and their integration into the modern world. Starting in January 1980, Turkey transitioned to a market economy, allowing all religious movements, including the Fethullahci, to freely pursue their religious, economic and educational interests. The Gülen movement has grown all over Turkey.

Uzbekistan is the country which has arrested and imprisoned the highest number of Said Nursi followers for allegedly participating in an extremist organisation. Even still, Nursi readers are not the only movement to be repressed. The government's religious legislation is particularly restrictive and affects several other Muslim movements, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.