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Conscientious objector's military trial imminent

18-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Daniil Islamov faces up to two years' imprisonment if convicted at Qurghonteppe Military Court. Forcibly conscripted in April, he has been detained in a military unit. Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov lost his appeal against his three-year prison term.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (31.08.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2vPNHeg> - The trial appears imminent at Qurghonteppe Military Court in Khatlon Region of 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Daniil Islamov. He was forcibly conscripted into the military against his will in April and has been held since then in military custody. He faces up to two years' imprisonment if convicted. Islamov requested to perform alternative service, despite his health impediments since childhood, but was refused.

Judge Alisher Rafikzoda of Qurghonteppe Military Court, who is due to hear the case, told Forum 18 on 31 August through his Assistant that the date of the trial is "not yet decided".

The Armed Forces General Staff told Oksana Islamova, Islamov's mother, that her son cannot be offered alternative service since there is no legal act regulating it (see below).

Elsewhere, Sogd Regional Court on 18 August upheld the three-year prison sentence given to Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'" (see below).

Meanwhile, President Emomali Rahmon on 28 August signed amendments to the Law on Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals. These oblige individuals, including officials, to wear "national dress", seen by many as a de facto ban on wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) or other "non-traditional" religious apparel. The new amendments also ban offering of food on the third, seventh or fortieth day after a funeral as is usually practiced in Central Asia. And they assign to the state responsibility for organising participation from Tajikistan in haj or umra pilgrimages to Mecca (see forthcoming F18News article).

Education and Science Minister Nuriddin Sayid ordered school children and students to attend classes on 1 September, the date announced by the state as the Muslim festival of Id al-Fitr (Sacrifice). Also on 25 August Imam-hatyps of mosques in the capital Dushanbe told

fathers attending Friday prayers to send their children to school on 1 September (see forthcoming F18News article).

No alternative to compulsory service

Military service of two years is compulsory for almost all able-bodied young men between the ages of 16 and 27. Article 1 of the November 2000 Law on Universal Military Obligation and Military Service mentions alternative service, adding: "The procedure for undergoing alternative service is determined by Law." However, no such Law enacting alternative service has ever been adopted.

Tajikistan has ignored repeated insistence by United Nations (UN) human rights bodies and local human rights groups that the country must make provision for individuals to opt out of military service on grounds of conscience.

In its Concluding Observations of 22 July 2004 on Tajikistan's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR/CO/84/TJK), the UN Human Rights Committee declared: "The State party should take all necessary measures to recognize the right of conscientious objectors to be exempted from military service."

In its Concluding Observations of 23 April 2013 (CCPR/C/TJK/CO/2), the UN Committee "reiterates its previous concern" about "the State party's lack of recognition of the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service, and at the absence of alternatives to military service".

The UN Committee added: "The State party should take necessary measures to ensure that the law recognizes the right of individuals to exercise conscientious objection to compulsory military service, and establish, if it so wishes, non-punitive alternatives to military service."

Islamov refused Alternative Service

Jehovah's Witness Daniil Islamov, a resident of Dushanbe, turned 18 on 31 January. He received army call-up papers on 21 April. "Despite his health problems since childhood because of injuries to his spine and concussion," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 23 August, "he went to the Military Conscription Office in Firdavsi District of Dushanbe the day after receiving the notice, with a request to be enlisted in alternative service."

However, the Conscription Office's medical department examined Islamov and pronounced him fit for active military service. That same day, he was "forcibly taken" to the military unit in Qurghonteppa in Khatlon Region, some 100 kms (60 miles) south of Dushanbe.

Jehovah's Witnesses lamented that Islamov, who refuses to serve in the military for Jehovah's Witnesses' religious principle of refusing the military oath and bearing arms, was refused alternative service.

Arrested for refusing to serve in military

Lieutenant Colonel M. Kulmakhmadov, Commander of the military unit, opened a criminal case against Islamov on 7 June and he was placed under arrest. The case was investigated by Rakhmonali Saidaliyev, Qurghonteppa's Military Prosecutor. He handed it to Qurghonteppa Military Court on 10 August, Saidaliyev told Forum 18 on 23 August. He added that Islamov "is currently in custody in the military unit."

Islamov was arrested for "refusing to wear the military uniform and taking the military oath", Prosecutor Saidaliyev said. He is facing trial under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 1.

Article 376, Part 1 punishes "Evasion by an enlisted serviceman of fulfilment of military

service obligations by way of inflicting on oneself injury (self-mutilation) or evasion by simulation of sickness or by other deception" with constraint during military service of up to two years, or arrest of between three and six months, or custody in disciplinary military unit of up to two years, or imprisonment of up to two years.

Asked what Islamov had done that could be qualified as a violation under the Criminal Code provision, Saidaliyev avoided the question. "We referred the case to Court. If you really want to know you can attend the hearing." Told that Islamov is a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, who uphold the principle of not serving in the military or taking arms, and asked why Islamov cannot be provided alternative service which he is willing to do, Saidaliyev replied: "Tajikistan does not have alternative service."

An official of the chancellery of Qurghonteppa Military Court (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 24 August that the Court has 28 days to study the case and investigate the circumstances.

Asked on 24 August what Islamov had done that could be qualified as a violation under the said charges, Judge Alisher Rafikzoda, Chair of the Military Court, who will hear the case, replied, "Please be patient, we have not given our verdict yet." Asked why Tajikistan does not provide alternative service for those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience, he did not answer.

Why the trial as a serviceman?

Neither Prosecutor Saidaliyev nor Judge Rafikzoda would explain why Islamov is being tried as a serviceman when he never chose to be conscripted into the military.

Zaydullo Tavazoda, Deputy Chief of the International Department of the General Staff, insisted to Forum 18 on 30 August that Islamov "became a serviceman as soon as he was conscripted and appeared before the Conscription Office, and therefore his case is being investigated by the military."

The Dushanbe-based human rights organisation the Office of Civil Freedoms, which defends the rights of those conscripted into the military, has long complained that civilians have been treated as conscripts and can thus be brought to trial in military courts.

General Staff rejects mother's enquiry

Oksana Islamova, Islamov's mother, wrote to the Armed Forces General Staff asking why her son cannot be enlisted in alternative service.

Colonel Musa Odinzoda, Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Head of the Organisation and Mobilisation Department, responded to her on 26 June, insisting that Islamov must serve in the active military. He noted that Article 1 of the Law on Universal Military Obligation and Military Service specifies that the procedure for alternative service is defined by Law. "However, up till now, an appropriate legal act regulating this issue has not been enacted," he told Islamova.

The General Staff's reception official (who did not give her name) put Forum 18 through on 30 August to Colonel Odinzoda's phone. However, this went unanswered.

Why no Law to enact alternative service?

Asked why despite repeated UN recommendations, Tajikistan has not adopted a Law or regulations enacting alternative service, Tavazoda of the General Staff did not answer. "Please, send your questions in writing," he said, and declined to talk further to Forum 18.

"The issue [of alternative service] is not on the agenda of Parliament," Kobijon Abdukodirov of Parliament's Legal Department told Forum on 30 August. Asked why Tajikistan has ignored repeated UN recommendations, made over more than a decade, and is violating international conventions it is party to, he responded that the initiative for such a Law must come from the Defence Ministry and other law-enforcement agencies.

Dilrabo Samadova, Head of the human rights organisation the Office of Civil Freedoms, in defence of Islamov, lamented to Forum 18 on 30 August that "though Tajikistan's Law mentions alternative service, no regulations exist to make this right a reality". She added that "Tajikistan's human rights organisations several times made efforts for the adoption of such a Law and prepared recommendations which were referred to Parliament. But they were rejected."

"The right to refuse military service on the basis of religious beliefs is an inseparable part of the concept of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religious faith, guaranteed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

Samadova told Forum 18 that though Article 43 of Tajikistan's Constitution declares that the "defence of the homeland, guarding of State interests, strengthening of its independence, security and defence power is a sacred duty of the citizen," Article 26 guarantees individuals' right freely to choose and practice a religion.

"Although the Constitution does not mention the right to refuse military service and Tajikistan does not have a Law on alternative service," Samadova added, "the fact that Tajikistan is party to the said UN Declaration and Convention means it must implement the UN recommendation to recognise the right to refuse military service." She pointed out that the Constitution's Article 10 declares that international conventions Tajikistan has signed are constituent parts of the country's law.

Pastor Kholmatov's prison sentence upheld

On 18 August, Sogd Regional Court upheld the three-year prison sentence given to Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Sunmin Sunbogym Church, Malzuma Jumayeva, Chief of the Court Chancellery, told Forum 18 on 25 August. However, she refused to give details of the appeal or comment on it.

She referred Forum 18 to Mukhammad Mirzozoda, Deputy Chair of the Court. Judge Mirzozoda in his turn through his secretary referred Forum 18 on 25 August to Bakhtiyor Okilzoda, Chair of the Court. "Only he can answer your questions on the case," the Secretary told Forum 18.

Judge Okilzoda on 28 August refused to comment or give details of the case. "I do not know you and cannot give information on this case over the phone. I will talk to you in my office."

Prisoner of conscience Pastor Kholmatov was punished for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". Khujand City Court sentenced him in early July under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pastor Kholmatov on 10 April after they raided his Church in Khujand, and harassed and physically tortured with beatings its members (see F18News 28 April 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276).

The 42-year-old Pastor, who is married with three children, was first held in NSC secret police custody after his arrest. He was later transferred to the Investigation Prison in Istaravshan, 80 kms (50 miles) from Khujand. It remains unclear whether he remains there or has been transferred to a prison camp to serve his sentence.

Kholmatov's bank accounts not blocked

On 18 August Tajikistan's National Bank published a list of individuals whose bank accounts have been frozen for alleged ties with terrorist organisations. Mavjuda Khasanova, Press-Secretary of the National Bank, told Forum 18 on 28 August that Pastor Kholmatov's name is not on the list.

The list includes members of the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, which is banned in Tajikistan, and Mukhiddin Kabiri, Chair of the Islamic Renaissance Party, which has also been banned.

The authorities banned the Tabligh Jamaat movement and the Salafi school of thought even though no crimes have been connected with them (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

Protestant pastor jailed for 3 years for extremism in Tajikistan

Interfax (08.08.2017) - <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=13933> - A pastor of the Korean Christian Church *Sonmin Sunbogym* was sentenced for three years of imprisonment on charges of extremism in northern Tajikistan.

The sentence had been handed down to the pastor in late July, but it became known only now, local media said. Bakhrom Kholmatov, aged 42, was detained, following an inspection of the Protestant church with Korean origins, in Khujand on April 10, 2017, media said.

According to official report of law enforcement structures, the man was detained on suspicion of extremism.

Tajik authorities said that the *Sonmin Sunbogym Christian Center* is not registered officially, and, therefore, its activities are illegal in the country. However, the Korean church said on its website that the *Sonmin Sunbogym Center* had been officially registered in the Tajik Religious Affairs Committee in 2009.

The Christian center has been active in Tajikistan since 1993 and operated as a religious mission before the adoption on the law on religious activities.

Over 70 non-Muslim centers and organizations are currently active in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan has been recently criticized for the infringement on the rights of believers. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said it considers Tajikistan "a country causing particular concern" in ensuring the freedom of belief. Citizens continue to be subjected to religiously-motivated persecution in Tajikistan, the USCIRF said.

Fines, questioning, threats for wearing hijab

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (02.08.2017) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2301 - Officials this spring launched a massive renewed campaign against women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Victims and human rights defenders complain that women have been questioned, threatened and fined, as have some husbands. Some have lost their jobs or been forced to leave school.

Since late spring, the authorities - particularly in the capital Dushanbe and Khujand, central City of the northern Sogd Region - have been carrying out a massive renewed campaign against women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Working groups - which included Police, employees of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and officials of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) - raided bazaars and public places to reveal those who wear the hijab to punish them. Such raids were publicised in the local media and on State TV Jahonnamo in mid-July.

In mid-July President Emomali Rahmon and other officials made public statements against wearing the hijab and beards. The campaign became "more energised" after those statements, according to human rights defenders. And "it still goes on," as one human rights defender pointed out.

Women wearing the hijab were punished with fines and in some cases their husbands were questioned and held in police custody. Other women were threatened with punishments unless they stop wearing the hijab, while some were forced to take it off in public places. At least one was "humiliated" during police questioning, as the victim told human rights defenders. Still others lost their jobs.

A Muslim woman, one of the victims and several human rights defenders, who all for fear of state reprisals asked not to be named, complained to Forum 18 in July about such harassment (see below).

Officials denied to Forum 18 that anyone had been harassed or claimed the raids were merely an "awareness campaign" (see below).

"Total control of Muslim activity"

President Rahmon has been attacking women wearing the hijab as well as men wearing beards from at least March 2015 (see Forum's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

In recent years, the authorities have tightened the already strict control of Muslims who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief. The authorities have demolished or closed down hundreds of prayer rooms and mosques in Dushanbe. Young activists have been placed in mosques as volunteers to help law-enforcement agencies catch "extremists", as well as those who do not pray according to Hanafi or Ismaili traditions. The authorities have installed surveillance cameras and metal detectors in mosques. In 2015 the authorities banned state employees from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour. One human rights defender described the state's aim to Forum 18 in 2016 as to "establish total control of Muslim activity" (see F18News 6 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2175).

Six months' imprisonment for filming hijab harassment

Okil Sharipov was arrested in Isfara in Sogd Region in late February 2016 for filming police harassment of women for wearing the hijab (see F18News 26 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2172).

Judge Rustam Yunuszoda of Isfara City Court handed Sharipov a one-year prison sentence on 26 May 2016, his lawyer Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 1 August 2017. The authorities amnestied Sharipov and released him from prison in late August 2016 after six months' imprisonment.

"Allah can be perceived by intellect not by hijab, turban or beard"

On 11 July, at a meeting marking the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Law on Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals with representatives of state and public organisations, President Rahmon spoke against hijabs and other religious apparel not traditional in Tajikistan, as well as against long beards.

Radio Free Europe reported Rahmon warning in the same meeting that some women "wearing black and dark apparel (..) trample on the values of our traditional culture and darken the spiritual space of our society." He was reported saying that "Allah can be perceived by the intellect not by the hijab, turban or beard."

Rahmon warned that extremist religious movements in Tajikistan "emerged because of bowing before and imitation of foreign language and culture".

Also speaking against the hijab and non-traditional religious apparel on 15 July in a meeting of the Health Ministry was Minister Nasim Olimzoda. He spoke on the need to create permanent committees in healthcare institutions to monitor employees to ensure that they do not wear the hijab.

Fotima Ghoyibova, Press-Secretary of the Ministry, declined to comment on Minister Olimzoda's statement. "I don't know when the Minister spoke on this," she claimed on 1 August. Told that many news agencies reported on this, she asked Forum 18 to send written questions through the Foreign Ministry.

The Interior Ministry noted on its website in January 2016 that in 2015 in Khatlon Region alone the authorities "forcibly shaved beards of thirteen thousand men. Authorities also closed down 162 shops selling hijabs," according to the local media.

Shankhaibazaar raid in Dushanbe

State TV channel Jahonnamo broadcast on 19 July the authorities' anti-hijab raid in Dushanbe's open-air market Shankhaibazaar, which was also reported by local news agency Asiaplus. As reported by it and in the video material of Jahonnamo TV, seen by Forum 18, Makhbuba Azimova, Press-Secretary of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, spoke against the hijab in her television interview. She and her co-employees from the Committee were shown stopping women in the hijab and convincing them against wearing it. They also warned those who sold and bought non-traditional religious apparel in the bazaar.

Raids in Sogd

Working groups created by the Sogd Department of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs in early July raided all the Districts, shopping centres, bazaars, sewing workshops, restaurants, healthcare institutions, schools, and kindergartens to reveal those wear hijab and to give lectures against wearing it, local news agencies reported. The working

groups reportedly included Police officials, State healthcare and education institutions and state religious affairs officials.

Nodira Mirzozoda, Chair of the Sogd Department who personally participated in the raids, adamantly denied to Forum 18 that the working groups campaigned against the hijab. "We only asked women about their problems and spoke to them on family issues, but not the hijab," she claimed to Forum 18 on 19 July. "This issue is in the competence of other authorities, not us."

When Forum 18 told her it has seen the raid of the Dushanbe bazaar by her State Committee broadcast by State TV and of the media reports of the anti-hijab working groups created by her Department, Mirzozoda declined to discuss the issue further. "Please, send your further questions in writing."

Sogd Regional Police's Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, Mashraf Islomzoda, declined to comment on the raids and violations by the Police. "I am not competent on this issue, please talk to the Chief of Police," he told Forum 18 on 1 August. "Other staff are involved in this issue." Phones of the Chief of Sogd Police went unanswered on 1 August.

Police "humiliate" woman during questioning, another's husband held for three days

The husbands of two victims, "Zulola" and "Volidia" (not their real names to protect their security), were summoned to Khujand City Police Station questioned, one human rights defender complained to Forum 18.

In Zulola's case, "both she and her husband were summoned to the Police Station and questioned separately. Each was questioned for between three and four hours." Zulola told the human rights defender that she "felt humiliated" during the Police questioning. After the incident Zulola "changed her dress and head cover style."

Volidia's husband was kept in custody for three days after the questioning. Officers "demanded that his wife take off the hijab before they would release him".

Fined for granddaughter's hijab

One seventy-year-old woman was fined 2,000 Somonis (1,800 Norwegian Kroner, 190 Euros or 230 US Dollars) because her granddaughter wears the hijab, a human rights defender told Forum 18.

Gave up wearing hijab after being fined

In another case, two related women "gave up wearing the hijab" since the authorities fined each of them approximately 900 Somonis, the human rights defender told Forum 18. "It is easier not to wear the hijab than to get into trouble with the police and pay such heavy fines," the women explained to the human rights defender.

Forced on street to take off hijab

A Muslim woman from Khujand, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, complained that she was discriminated against for wearing the hijab. In May, Police officers barred her from entering the city's circus. "Officers insisted that I take off my hijab or else they will call for duty officers to take me to the Police Station," she told Forum 18 on 27 July. "I had to take it off, and only after that they allowed me in."

The woman also told Forum 18 that on a separate occasion while she was walking on the street, two women, who introduced themselves as Police officers, who were "dressed in European style dress, stopped me to ask why I wore not a traditional Tajik dress and head cover but a foreign one in ignorance of the officials' public statements." She said that "When I told them that it is my right and that the Law does not prohibit it, they told me that I violate the Law since the Chief of Sogd Police had publicly announced that women must not wear the hijab."

When the woman asked the police officers to tell her exactly what law prohibits wearing the hijab, they could not answer. "They wanted to write down my name and address but I walked away."

Police harass Madina on the street and force her to take off hijab

Police stopped 24-year-old Madina on the street demanding that she take off her hijab, one human rights defender told Forum 18. When she refused to do so, "the police officers very rudely demanded that she must take it off right on the spot. She was scared and took it off." The human rights defender lamented that while telling them this Madina cried "and said that she never felt so humiliated before."

The officers also filmed it, and warned Madina that if she continues to wear the hijab they will share the film on the internet and broadcast it on television.

Forced to leave job

Makhrifat, a 58-year-old street vendor in Khujand, was forced to hire somebody else to run her shop because of the pressure of the authorities to take off her hijab. "Last year Police checked up on her in her shop numerous times, demanding her that she take off her hijab," one human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "Finally they threatened her that the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police will deal with her now."

Makhrifat complained to various State organs, including the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, but with no success. "She was told that she must take off her hijab." She felt that she had no choice but to hire somebody else for her shop.

Lost her job, cannot find employment but official pressure continues

Khujand resident Karomat, who is over forty, also had to leave her job in 2016 because she was pressured to take off her hijab. "She could not find employment with her higher education because she wears the hijab." However, the authorities still pressure her. "In the beginning of June, police stopped her at the market and wrote down her name and details. The authorities then visited her home several times until very recently, demanding that she take off her hijab."

During the last two police raids on her flat, officers "banged on her door when she decided not to open it." The last time officials sent her a message through her neighbours that she must come to the local Police Station. Karomat "decided through consultation with a lawyer that she will not visit the Police without a written summons." She refuses to take off her hijab "because it is her elementary human right".

Schoolgirl forced to leave school

Malika is unemployed and has two daughters aged 15 and 16. All three wear the hijab. During a police raid on their home, officers asked her "how could they stoop so low as to wear the hijab", a human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "After they lectured her

on the hijab, the officers warned that her husband will have trouble with the authorities unless they stop wearing it."

After the July public statements by President Rahmon and other officials, Malika was summoned along with other parents to the school. Staff there demanded that she "take the hijabs off her daughters." Malika "had to take her oldest daughter out of the school."

Barred from entering park in hijab

Sitora, a married woman with children, was stopped in a market place in Khujand for wearing the hijab. Police and representatives of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs took her to her home. The officials "lectured her mother to convince her daughter not to wear the hijab before leaving".

After that, Police stopped her again while she was entering a park in the city. Officers told her that she "cannot enter the park unless she takes off the hijab." Sitora "had to tie the scarf in a different manner to enter the park."

"Vigorous fight against Islam"

Human rights defenders have condemned the anti-hijab and anti-beard campaign to Forum 18. "It is a flagrant violation of women's fundamental human right, their discrimination and utter disrespect to them," one human rights defender complained to Forum 18. "As a rule those who wear the hijab or beards are practicing Muslims. In reality, the worst thing is that under propaganda against the hijab and beards and by these campaigns and raids, the authorities are conducting a vigorous fight against Islam."

Idigul Kosimzoda, Chair of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, confirmed the raids to hunt for women wearing hijabs but declined to comment. "Working groups were established by the SCRA, and [Makhbuba] Azimova [the Committee Press-Secretary] was included in it. Please talk to the SCRA," she told Forum 18 on 1 August.

Told that Azimova, as well as employees of Sogd Regional Department of the Committee, who participated in the raids in Dushanbe and Khujand, are subordinate to her, Forum 18 asked why she endorsed the raids. "I am very busy with people in my office, please talk to the SCRA," she responded. She declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Khuseyn Shokirov of the SCRA claimed to Forum 18 on 1 August that his Committee was "not involved" in the raids. "I am surprised that Kosimzoda asked you to talk to us." Asked if the SCRA approves the raids, he evaded the question. "We are not against women wearing the hijab, but we encourage our women to wear our traditional costumes. Those in Africa or in Saudi Arabia do not wear Tajik head coverings or dresses, so why should we dress like them?"

Told about the violations against the Muslim women and raids since late spring, and asked why the State Committee was not concerned and raised the issue with higher authorities, Shokirov responded: "No one complained to us."

Why Police raids against hijab and harassment of women and their families?

Asked why the Interior Minister is involved in raids against women in the hijab, and Police harassed women and their husbands, the Ministry referred Forum 18 on 2 August to Zumrad Abdullozoda, Chief of the International Relations Section. Abdullozoda wrote down Forum 18's questions but then declared: "Other Ministry officials are overseeing that issue." She

promised to seek the answers from those officials and asked Forum 18 to call back. Subsequent calls on the same day went unanswered.

Colonel Raimjon Abduvaliyev, Chief of Staff of Sogd Regional Police, defended the raids on women wearing the hijab. Asked if he does not think the Police violate the women's fundamental human rights, he told Forum 18 on 2 August: "We are only talking to women on the streets to explain them that it is better to wear our own national dress and head cover instead of foreign ones." Asked why the Police should be involved in the anti-hijab campaign, Colonel Abduvaliyev claimed: "It is only an awareness campaign."

Told about the cases of abuse by the police of women wearing the hijab, Colonel Abduvaliyev denied it. "That is a lie, a provocation." Told that Forum 18 received detailed complaints on numerous cases, and asked whether he thinks all those women and the human rights defenders are lying, he responded: "Why didn't they complain to us?"

Forum 18 told Abduvaliyev that the women are afraid to complain. "Those are the people who want to destabilise Tajikistan," he responded. "They must have done something wrong that they are afraid to complain."

Colonel Emin Jalilov, Chief of Khujand City Police, denied any police involvement in the raids. Asked on 2 August why Police in Khujand harassed women wearing the hijab on the street, why Police took women and their husbands to his Police Station, why it kept in custody husbands of some, he claimed to Forum 18: "I know of no such cases." He then claimed he was "not competent" to talk further and referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry.

Tajikistan to promote clothing to counter 'alien' traditions

RFE/RL (21.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2v9q5lh> - Tajikistan has set up a commission to promote clothing the government deems appropriate for citizens of the Central Asian country, an initiative it says is aimed at combating "alien" culture.

The commission will help design clothes for men and women "taking into consideration Tajik traditions" and "modern" life, Culture Minister Shamsuddin Omurbekzoda told reporters on July 21.

Omurbekzoda's comments suggest the initiative is part of a number of moves by longtime President Emomali Rahmon's secular government to discourage Islamic practices it fears could promote extremism in the mostly Muslim country.

The culture minister said that the Islamic hijab is not compatible with Tajikistan's "hot climate" for hygiene reasons, and that women wearing the hijab could spark "fear and doubt" in public places.

"Some people standing next to them might wonder, 'What if she is hiding something under her hijab,'" Omurbekzoda said.

He said it is recommended that Tajik men wear "European clothes," adding that he can't imagine "us wearing Arab clothes."

In what it says are efforts to combat Islamic extremism, state authorities have banned the hijab in government offices and schools, and boys under 18 are barred from praying in mosques.

Tajiks say police have sometimes rounded up men with bushy beards on the streets and in markets and forced them to shave.

Protestant pastor jailed for three years

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.07.2017) - http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2298 - Protestant **Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov** has been jailed for three years for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". Tajikistan has threatened family members, friends, and church members with reprisals if they reveal any details of the case, trial, or jailing.

Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Khujand's [Khojand's] Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church has been jailed for three years, Protestants who wish to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 July. Prisoner of conscience Kholmatov was jailed in early July by Khujand City Court in Tajikistan's Sogd Region.

The 42-year-old prisoner of conscience Kholmatov, who is married with three children, was first held in NSC secret police custody after his 10 April arrest (see F18News 28 April 2017 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276). While on trial he was held in a police detention centre, and he has now been moved to an unknown prison.

The authorities have threatened family members, friends, and church members with reprisals if they reveal any details of the case, trial, or jailing to anyone. "We are afraid of more arrests or other punishments", Protestants told Forum 18.

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, together with the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) and other law-enforcement agencies, raided Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations in Sogd Region in early February. Officials closed down the congregation in the town of Konibodom in March after interrogating and torturing church members, and NSC secret police officers pressured employers into firing church members from their jobs. The NSC arrested Pastor Kholmatov on 10 April after they raided his Church also, and harassed and physically tortured with beatings its members (see F18News 28 April 2017 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276).

No arrests or trials have taken place of officials who tortured people, contrary to Tajikistan's binding international human rights law obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

Protestants in Tajikistan state that they do not know the exact details of the jailing of prisoner of conscience Kholmatov, but do know that he was jailed for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". The charges were brought after the February raid, when the NSC secret police claimed that songs based on Biblical passages, such as "Praise God, oh the godless country", "God's army is marching", and "Our fight is not against flesh and blood" are "extremist and call on people to overthrow the government". The NSC also claimed that a book, "More Than a Carpenter" by American Protestant author Josh McDowell, is also "extremist". The "experts" who concluded this are imams working for the NSC (see F18News 28 April 2017 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2276).

Prisoner of conscience Kholmatov was jailed under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Similar charges of "inciting religious hatred" were brought against Muslims whose "crime" was to film police harassment of women for wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) (see F18News 26 April 2016 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2172). Many Muslims who exercised their freedom of religion and belief have been jailed "to scare the population", human rights defenders have told Forum 18 (see F18News 19 May 2016 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2180).

President Emomali Rahmon and other officials, as well as state TV, have once again attacked women who wear the hijab and men who wear beards. On 19 July the authorities raided the capital Dushanbe's open air Shankhai-bazaar market targeting male and female Muslims who ignore the government's orders to them about their appearance (see forthcoming F18News article).

Harsh state restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief

In defiance of its international human rights obligations, Tajikistan severely restricts rights to freedom of religion or belief. The authorities impose a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

"The Court tried him in the name of the state of Tajikistan"

Khujand City Administration's chief religious affairs officials, Mukhsin Mirkamolov, claimed that: "The Court tried him in the name of the state of Tajikistan. It was not prejudiced against him as a Christian", he told Forum 18 on 18 July. "All religions are equal and free in Tajikistan. He violated the law and was therefore tried." He refused to give more specific details of the case, and referred Forum 18 to the Court.

An official who answered the phone of Judge Mavjuda Sharifzoda, Chair of Khujand Court, on 14 July immediately put the phone as soon as they heard the name Forum 18. The telephones of both the Court and its Chancellery were not answered between 14 and 20 July.

Similarly reluctant to discuss the case was Khuseyn Shokirov, who is the SCRA official in the capital Dushanbe overseeing registration of religious organisations. "We do not know the details of the case. We wrote a letter to the regional authorities, but have not received an official response yet", he claimed to Forum 18 on 19 July. He then referred Forum 18 to the NSC secret police, who did not answer their telephones.

Local Protestants told Forum 18 that the Church had appealed against the verdict, but the result is unknown.

"Everything is normal"?

When Forum 18 asked why Pastor Kholmatov was targeted, Mirkamolov of Khujand City Administration claimed that "the case has nothing to do with the Church. It continues to function. The Pastor, not the Church, violated the law."

Mirkamolov also claimed that "everything is normal with the Church. They already appointed a new Pastor". Asked whether the appointment of a new Pastor was a demand by the authorities, he claimed that: "All religions are free in Tajikistan and the state does not interfere in their activity." Protestants told Forum 18 that the Church is currently being led by Pastor Kholmatov's deputy.

Protestants strongly disputed officials' claims, stating: "Church meetings continue, but how can things be normal after all that happened? The Church is very concerned for the Pastor", they said. "A large group of believers have stopped attending the Church after the raids, interrogation and harassment. They are afraid of being arrested like the Pastor."

Dushanbe: SCRA warning to Baptists

On 11 June the NSC secret police, with other officials, raided the Sunday worship meeting of Council of Churches Baptists in Dushanbe. The NSC filmed the worshippers, confiscated religious literature, and threatened to demolish the home where the Baptists were meeting (see F18News 29 June 2017 http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2291).

Council of Churches Baptists refuse to register their churches, as they think this leads to state interference and international human rights law bans governments from insisting that state permission is necessary to exercise freedom of religion and belief.

In late June the SCRA wrote to Baptists demanding that they must register their Church. Pastor Pyotr Plett of the Baptist Church, told Forum 18 on 19 July that the authorities "left us alone after the incident". He said that no case was opened by the authorities and that the Church continues to meet for worship "without problems".

Fines and confiscations elsewhere

Forum 18 is also aware that in late April another Protestant elsewhere in Tajikistan was fined about 1,750 Somonis (about 1,610 Norwegian Kroner, 175 Euros, or 200 US Dollars) for in public giving someone a Tajik language New Testament. Police also confiscated Tajik language Bibles and New Testaments as well as his laptop computer from the Protestant. The authorities warned the Church that their members must not give out religious literature in public places.

There is strict state censorship of all religious texts, as well as of websites (see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138).

Trial imminent for arrested pastor

The secret police's criminal case against Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov reached court in Khujand on 22 June. Officials refuse to say what charges he faces. Officials threaten Baptists in Dushanbe with fines after raiding their worship. Officials again enforce the haj ban on under-40s.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (29.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sxObZ5> - Ten weeks after the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov in the northern city of Khujand, his criminal case was handed to Khujand City Court on 22 June for trial. No date appears to have been set for the trial to begin. Officials refuse to reveal what charges the Pastor is facing.

Meanwhile, NSC secret police officers and others in the capital Dushanbe raided the Sunday worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptists on 11 June. Officers seized religious literature and threatened to demolish the home where the Baptists were meeting.

For the second year running, the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) is enforcing the state's ban on anyone under the age of 40 from participating in the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which is due to begin in late August. It has turned away younger applicants for this year's pilgrimage. Officials have given contradictory reasons for the ban.

The authorities have tried to stop young people from exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief. They have closed madrassahs (Islamic colleges). The 2011 Parental Responsibility Law bans "the encouragement of children to receive education in illegal schools and education institutions as well as from individual persons who do not have permission for such activity", requires parents "not to allow the education of adolescent children abroad without the permission of appropriate state agencies" and bans the participation of children and young people below the age of 18 in religious events apart from funerals.

Khujand: Criminal trial imminent

The criminal trial of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of Khujand's Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church is expected to begin imminently. The case reached Khujand City Court on 22 June, the Chair of the Court Judge Mavjuda Sharifzoda told Forum 18 the same day.

"We have not yet decided who will lead the case or when we will hear it since it only arrived today," Judge Sharifzoda added. She declined to discuss the case or say what the charges against the Pastor are. The Court again on 28 June refused to tell Forum 18 what criminal charges Pastor Kholmatov is due to be tried under.

The NSC secret police in Khujand arrested Pastor Kholmatov on 10 April after raiding his church. Officers interrogated, beat and threatened church members. They also seized Christian literature. Officials claim songbooks and a book "More Than a Carpenter" are "extremist". The pastor was accused of "extremism".

The NSC secret police, together with the SCRA and other law-enforcement agencies, had raided Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations elsewhere in Sogd Region in early February. Officials closed down the congregation in the town of Konibodom in March after interrogating and beating church members.

Khujand: Mystery surrounds criminal charges

Khuseyn Shokirov, the SCRA's Head of the Department overseeing religious organisations and registration, on 21 June declined to discuss Pastor Kholmatov's case. "Neither the state authorities nor the Church addressed us about the case," he claimed to Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 June. "I cannot comment."

Mukhsin Mirkamolov, the official of Khujand City Administration overseeing religious organisations, in contrast to the extremism charges, claimed to Forum 18 on 20 June that it "is not an issue of violation of the Religion Law." He hinted that the charges against Pastor

Kholmatov may be related to the Church's economic activities. "Inside the Church there are not only religious issues, but business and other issues," he said.

However, Mirkamolov refused to answer Forum 18's questions whether the Pastor is being accused of economic crimes and what exact charges he faces. "Do not worry, the authorities are investigating it, and they will give a proper evaluation." He did not wish to talk further and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing to the City Administration.

On 20 June Forum 18 asked Khujand City Administration in writing why the NSC secret police arrested and has held Pastor Kholmatov in custody for more than two months, and what the charges against him are. Forum 18 received no response by the middle of the working day in Khujand on 29 June.

Members of the Sonmin Church built a modern hospital in the city of Buston (formerly Chkalovsk) in Sogd Region, operated gyms teaching taekwondo and ran a Christian secondary school. There were rumours in the past that some officials desired to expropriate enterprises linked to the Church.

The Church has also drawn attention to itself because of its missionary activity. The authorities tried to close it down in 2005 because of this.

Khujand: Secrecy surrounds investigation and custody conditions

"Pastor Kholmatov's family and Church members don't know what the NSC secret police is doing with him," Protestants from Sogd Region who are closely following the situation and who, for fear of state reprisals, asked not to give their names, complained to Forum 18 in April. They said they had had no news of Pastor Kholmatov's physical conditions or state of health since his arrest.

No Church members wished to talk to Forum 18 on Pastor Kholmatov's case between April and June. Sogd regional authorities also tried not to give Forum 18 any specific details of the case in the same period.

Dushanbe: Worship meeting raided, demolition threat

Authorities in Dushanbe raided the Sunday worship meeting of the Council of Churches Baptists on 11 June. Twelve officers of various state agencies, led by NSC secret police Lieutenant Alijon Khojayev, "disrupted our worship", Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 20 June. "Officers refused to show their identification documents, and immediately began filming all the worshippers on a video camera."

Officers did not allow anyone to leave the meeting hall. They wrote down personal details of the worshippers and confiscated their Bibles and other religious books. "Some officials literally pulled the books out of the hands of the believers," Baptists complained to Forum 18. Police also confiscated 312 books and magazines from the Church library.

Police then conducted a search without a warrant in the private flat of Church member Andrei Chumachenko. The flat is located inside the house where the worship took place. Officers confiscated nine books and 51 audio discs from his flat.

"Lieutenant Khojayev threatened me that they will demolish my house," Chumachenko complained to Forum 18 on 20 June. "Other officers also threatened our believers with criminal prosecution."

Council of Churches Baptists choose to meet for worship without seeking the compulsory state registration. They point to their rights to freedom of religion or belief guaranteed in Tajikistan's Constitution and the country's international human rights commitments.

Dushanbe: SCRA summons, warns Baptists

Later on Sunday 11 June, the SCRA summoned the Church's Pastor Pyotr Plett, Chumachenko and three other Church members from one family – the brothers Viktor and Valter Gibko, and Viktor's son Vilgelm. SCRA officials "demanded that they pay a fine for unregistered religious activity as well as to stop their religious activity".

When the Baptists told the SCRA officials that they will "not pay a fine because we do not consider that we are guilty of anything, they warned us that they will refer the case to the Prosecutor's Office," Pastor Plett told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 20 June.

SCRA officials summoned the Church members again on 20 June, Chumachenko told Forum 18. Khuseyn Shokirov, the Head of the SCRA's Department overseeing religious organisations and registration, told them that "each participant in the 11 June worship meeting will be fined".

"We told the authorities that under the Constitution, the state and religion are separated," Pastor Plett told Forum 18. "We have no demands on the state and do not want to establish a registered organisation. We have the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion. We want to freely practice our faith."

Dushanbe's Somoni District Court banned the Baptist Church in October 2009 because it met without the compulsory state registration. The ban came weeks after a raid on the Church.

Shokirov of the SCRA pointed to the court ban on the Church. "The Baptists can only continue with their worship meetings after they officially register," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 June.

Told that it is against the principles of the Council of Churches Baptists to register with the state and thus be regulated by it, Shokirov responded: "We won't allow them to continue without registration. They must register." Asked what further steps the authorities will take if the Baptists continue to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief without registering, he refused to say.

Asked whether the authorities will demolish Chumachenko's home as NSC officer Khojayev threatened, Shokirov replied: "I was not there during the check-up, and cannot speak for the officials who were there. I can only say a private house cannot be demolished."

Asked whether he does not think the authorities' pressure on the Baptists to force them to register violates their freedom of religion or belief guaranteed by Tajikistan's Constitution and international norms, Shokirov claimed: "The Religion Law corresponds to the Constitution and international norms."

Told that the state and religion are separated according to the Constitution, and the Baptists do not want state interference in their exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief, Shokirov insisted: "We do not interfere - we only want to register their activity."

Young men refused haj, elderly citizens abandoned haj

Tajikistan and Saudi Arabia agreed a quota of 6,000 pilgrims for the 2017 Muslim haj pilgrimage to Mecca, which is due to begin at the end of August. The SCRA controls all aspects of the pilgrimage.

The SCRA has already rejected individuals who wished to be added to the list of approved pilgrims. "Tens of citizens under 40 wishing to make the pilgrimage this year could not get onto the official list," an unnamed SCRA official told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 20 June.

The official added that the number of pilgrims in 2017 decreased both for economic reasons and because of the age limit the SCRA imposes. "Hundreds of elderly people, who cannot make it without the help of their sons, were forced to abandon the haj."

In 2009 the Tajik authorities imposed a lower age limit of 16 and an upper limit of 80 for applications for the haj. The lower limit was increased to 35 in April 2015, only to be increased to 40 in December 2015 with no explanation.

At the SCRA both Press Secretary Afshin Mukim and Shokirov, the Head of the Department overseeing religious organisations and registration, adamantly defended the state control and restrictions on the haj. Both insisted to Forum 18 on 21 June that they "absolutely do not violate" religious freedom. Mukim refused to discuss this and other issues with Forum 18, referring it to Shokirov for comments.

Tajik Muslim applies for Russian citizenship to be able to go on haj

A Muslim from Sogd Region in his thirties, Jahongir (last name not given), was one such individual unable to gain approval to be included in the official list for this year's haj. He told Radio Free Europe that he worked in Russia for the last two years to collect money to be able to go to Mecca with his elderly mother. He complained that the SCRA's Sogd representative rejected his application.

"Two years ago they told me that I could only go when I am 35, but now they say I must be 40," he lamented to Radio Free Europe. "I worked hard for two years in Russia, and this is what I get now."

Jahongir said that his mother had to abandon the pilgrimage since she cannot make it without a helper. He said he would now apply for Russian citizenship in order to be able to accompany her on the haj.

Told that in Jahongir's case, his mother might die before they can make the pilgrimage, and asked whether he does not think the restriction deprives them both of their religious rights, Shokirov told Forum 18: "Everything is subject to Allah's will." Asked whether he means that Tajikistan's authorities' decisions are Allah's will for its citizens, he did not answer.

2015 Decree and state control of haj

The Government Decree increasing the minimum age for applications for the haj from 35 to 40 was issued on 30 December 2015. It made any individual under 40 ineligible to make the pilgrimage.

The Decree established dual control over the haj pilgrimage for Tajikistan's citizens. The SCRA was commissioned to organise, carry out and regulate the pilgrimage, and a Board of specialists from various state agencies under the Prime Minister was commissioned to ensure control over the organisation of the haj.

Individuals wishing to make the haj must present the necessary documents, subject to the quotas fixed for various cities and regions, no less than three months before the date of the beginning of the pilgrimage, approved by the SCRA.

The SCRA was tasked to prepare a countrywide database of those wishing to make the pilgrimage and their turn on the waiting list based on their applications. Only individuals who have resided for at least one year at the location of their official residence registration can apply for the pilgrimage.

An individual who has made the pilgrimage once can go a second time only after five years, unless Tajikistan's haj quota is not filled.

Asked whether the age restriction and other state controls over the hajj do not violate the religious freedoms of Muslims, Shokirov argued to Forum 18: "People under 40, especially men, must first learn to take care of their families financially and be mentally ready to undertake such a pilgrimage."

Asked what he means by "mentally ready", Shokirov responded: "We do not want these people to be influenced by radical religious movements while abroad." He did not say if the authorities do not trust their citizens to make their own right judgments about radical movements.

Tajikistan bars citizens under 40 from performing hajj

RFE/RL (21.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rVnWXc> - Authorities in Tajikistan have barred citizens under the age of 40 from performing this year's annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

Tajikistan's Committee on Religious Affairs told RFE/RL on June 20 that the decision was made to give older Tajik Muslims more of a chance to undertake the pilgrimage, as Saudi authorities are putting in place stricter quotas.

But many in the Central Asian state believe the ban is an attempt to prevent instances of radicalization among younger generations.

In the past years, the Tajik government has routinely imposed age restrictions for devout Muslims to perform hajj. In 2015, the minimum age was 35.

President Emomali Rahmon's government has repeatedly called for the strengthening of secular principles in the mostly Muslim country of 8.5 million.

Tajikistan has banned head scarves for schoolgirls, barred minors from mosques, and forced thousands of students to return home from Islamic schools abroad in recent years amid reports that many Tajiks have joined Islamic extremists in Iraq and Syria.

"Extremism" prison term for Christian books?

The NSC secret police in Khujand arrested Protestant pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov on 10 April after raiding his church and seizing Christian literature. Officials claim songbooks and a book "More Than a Carpenter" are "extremist". The pastor is being investigated on "extremism" criminal charges.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (28.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qzueMb> - On 10 April the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police in Tajikistan's northern Sogd Region arrested Bakhrom Kholmatov, Pastor of the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in the regional capital Khujand. He remains in NSC secret police custody, apparently under investigation on criminal charges of "extremism". The charges follow the seizure of Christian books during a raid on his Church.

"Pastor Kholmatov's family and Church members don't know what the NSC secret police is doing with him," Protestants from Sogd Region who are closely following the situation and who, for fear of state reprisals, asked not to give their names, complained to Forum 18 on

20 April. They said they have had no news of Pastor Kholmatov's physical conditions or state of health since his arrest.

Reached on 28 April, the duty officer at the NSC secret police in the capital Dushanbe refused to transfer Forum 18's call to anyone. He consulted a colleague, then gave another number, which turned out to be that of a pharmacy (which said it often receives calls from people given the number by various state agencies). Called back, the NSC duty officer again said he would consult a colleague, then came back and told Forum 18 it had called a wrong number. He then put the phone down.

The Deputy Head of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Dushanbe, Khuseyn Shokirov, refused to explain why Pastor Kholmatov is under arrest accused of "extremism".

The NSC secret police, together with the State Committee for Religious Affairs and other law-enforcement agencies, began raiding Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations in Sogd Region in early February. Officials closed down the congregation in the town of Konibodom in March after interrogating and beating church members. NSC secret police officers arrested Pastor Kholmatov after they raided the Khujand Church in April.

Meanwhile, officials in Dushanbe have closed down two kindergartens. One was closed after officials found a Christian songbook, the other apparently because Protestants were employed there.

"Extremism" punishments

Officials have not revealed what criminal charges Pastor Kholmatov will or might face. The Criminal Code punishes a number of crimes related to "extremism".

Criminal Code Article 307-2 punishes "leading or organising an extremist community". Punishments are prison terms of up to 12 years (if conducted by an individual using their official position). The Article allows an individual to be freed from punishment if they voluntarily agree to stop their activity. This Article was among several related to "extremism" added to the Criminal Code in December 2015.

As elsewhere in the region, the Tajik authorities frequently use "extremism"-related charges to punish individuals for exercising freedom of religion or belief outside the framework of religious communities that the state allows to operate. Such charges are mainly levelled against Muslims.

In April 2016, a court in Sogd Region handed down an eight year prison term to Imam Khamid Karimov, the leader of the Mosque in Unji-Bobojon village. The Judge handed down seven year prison terms to each of four members of his Mosque. These – and many other Muslims, especially those accused of being Salafis – were imprisoned using Criminal Code "extremism" punishments.

Harsh state restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief

In defiance of its international human rights obligations, Tajikistan severely restricts rights to freedom of religion or belief. The authorities impose a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or

belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites.

Interrogations, beatings to close church

Sunmin Sunbogym Protestant Church in Khujand was officially registered with the State Committee for Religious Affairs in 1993 as a "missionary centre" (Forum 18 has seen the certificate). After the new Religion Law entered into force in 2009, when all registered religious communities were required to re-register to continue to be allowed to exist, the Church was re-registered on 23 October 2009. Its affiliated congregations gained local registration.

In early February 2017, the NSC secret police, together with the State Committee for Religious Affairs and other law-enforcement agencies, began raiding Sunmin Sunbogym's affiliated congregations in Sogd Region. They particularly targeted the church in the town of Konibodom.

The authorities "put all kinds of pressure on the Church leaders and members so that they would cooperate with the Police for the closure of the Church in Konibodom," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "Officers insulted the believers by shouting and swearing at them. They demanded that they renounce their faith and leave the Church." The Protestants lamented that "some believers were even beaten." Finally in March the authorities sealed the church building, they added.

The Protestants added that some members of the Konibodom Church were dismissed from their jobs under NSC secret police pressure. For fear of state reprisals, they declined to give the names or the details of the dismissals.

Asked why officials had forcibly closed down the Konibodom Church, Khuseyn Shokirov, Deputy Head of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Dushanbe, overseeing work with religious organisations, insisted to Forum 18 on 26 April: "The Church was closed down because its members wished so, and it is their internal matter." He gave no evidence for his claim.

Why is Pastor being charged with "extremism"?

In early April the authorities began raids on the central Sunmin Sunbogym Church in Khujand. They searched all the Church's premises, Protestants told Forum 18. Officers seized Christian songbooks and other literature.

As in Konibodom, the law-enforcement officers in Khujand "interrogated believers and beat them." They complained that the authorities "threatened them that they must cooperate with them." NSC officers arrested Pastor Kholmatov after these raids.

NSC secret police told Church members during interrogations that their "purpose is to close down Churches in Tajikistan and take away their property," Protestants told Forum 18.

Lieutenant Colonel Mashraf Istamzoda, Chief of Sogd Regional Criminal Police, and Amis Usmanov, Chief of the Region's Organised Crime Police, said that the Police are not involved in Pastor Kholmatov's case. Istamzoda told Forum 18 from Khujand on 26 April that the NSC secret police "usually leads such cases".

The NSC secret police "could not find anything illegal" in the activity of Sunmin Sunbogym Church, Protestants from Sogd told Forum 18. Officers then decided to use the Church's Christian hymns from a songbook and Christian books against the Pastor.

The NSC secret police asserts that the songs "Praise God, oh the godless country," "God's army is marching," "Our fight is not against flesh and blood," are "extremist". Protestants pointed out that the words of these songs are references to texts of the Bible. Officers told Church members during interrogations that these songs are "extremist and call on the people to overthrow the government".

The NSC secret police also deemed one book they had found, "More Than a Carpenter" by American Protestant author Josh McDowell, "extremist". Officers told Church members that the group of religious "experts" concluded that both this book, and the songs, are "extremist".

"All these so called experts are Imams," Protestants complained. "How can Muslim experts give an opinion of Christian literature as extremist?"

"Experts" on religious literature of the State Committee in Dushanbe, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov and Alinazar Aliyev, told Forum 18 on 25 April that "no list" of banned Christian books exists in Tajikistan. "We undertake an expert analysis of each Christian book and then make our decision whether or not it can be allowed for import or distribution," Mavlanov told Forum 18. The two officials did not discuss state censorship of religious literature of other faiths, including Islamic literature.

Asked whether McDowell's book "More Than a Carpenter" is allowed for distribution in Tajikistan, both "Experts" gave similar answers: "I am not sure." Mavlanov asked Forum 18 to call back the next day, 26 April. The telephones of Mavlanov and Aliyev went unanswered between 26 and 27 April.

Told that according to the State Committee "Experts" no Christian books are banned in Tajikistan, State Committee Deputy Head Shokirov refused to discuss this or any further questions and put the phone down.

All religious literature must undergo state censorship before it can be printed, published, distributed, sold or imported. Those who violate these censorship provisions are liable to punishment.

Dushanbe kindergartens closed for Christian songbook, employing Protestants

Meanwhile, authorities in Dushanbe closed down two kindergartens where Protestant Christians were employed, Protestants from Dushanbe, who asked not to give their names or details of the closures, for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 20 April. "In one kindergarten the authorities found a songbook of Christmas carols during a raid," they explained. "The other one was closed down just because they found that Christians worked in it."

The authorities have particularly targeted any educational activity related or perceived to be related to religion. Officials finally closed the country's last surviving state-approved madrasahs (Islamic religious schools for children) in 2016.

Husbands demand wives wear head covers, government demands removing

Ferghana News (02.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mB5AcY> - The situation around *satr*, a locally used term for *hijab*, or headscarf, is becoming ever more controversial in Tajikistan. Only a

few years ago the Tajik society was rather tolerant toward satr with the male part of it encouraging women to wear Islamic attire. But lately, mostly thanks to the Tajik authorities' efforts, the society has gradually started espousing suspicious attitudes toward this Islamic piece of clothing. In the imagination of Tajik authorities, men sporting beards or women wearing headscarves are initial steps toward radicalisation and extremism. Even though Article 26 of the country's constitution reads that "each person has the right to independently determine her/his religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others or to practice no religion, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals and ceremonies", wearing satr is not openly welcomed by the authorities; doing so triggers persecutions in certain cases. That said, even those human rights advocates who used to make bold statements about human rights violations are remaining silent.

During a meeting with students of the National University back in 2010, President Emomali Rakhmon was very critical about women wearing hijabs: "Watching young people, especially young ladies and women in the capital, I can see that some [of them] are copying the style of clothing [practiced] in other countries". He has then seemingly jokingly threatened: "If any one among you prefers the dress style of a different country, then I will send you [there]". Speaking during a meeting with female activists on March 6, 2015, the president has again brought up the topic of the hijabs, and cited a historical fact: "According to scientific and ethnographic sources, our people had beautiful clothes for women since ancient times. Our women and girls never wore black clothes. Black clothes are traditionally discouraged. You all know well that even mourning clothes of our people are not black. However, some Tajik girls and women are wearing black; they don't know and even don't want to know the history and purpose of such garments. According to some sources, girls and women clad in completely black clothes are visiting the funerals of complete strangers and trying to propagate different ideas that are alien to our ancient history and culture among women there," the president claims.

The head of state's repeated speeches critical of such behaviour did eventually have an impact. For instance, in April 2015, Dushanbe Mayor Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev decreed to seize from all stores in the city "all clothes that are alien to the Tajik nation's culture of garments" especially women's clothes. And then came the banning of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan later the same year. The official ban then led to persecutions of women wearing satr with renewed vigour: Police districts, national security agencies and prosecutors' offices joined the effort. And our officials are known for their extra zealotry when their interests are concerned: Even though the president was only talking about women and girls wearing black cloths, they started pressuring everyone who would don a headscarf "a-la Muslim" whatever its colour may be.

Nonetheless, despite all prohibitions of wearing and retailing satr, numbers of women wearing it are not diminishing. Many believing women in Tajik simply cannot fathom appearing in public with their hair and necks exposed. After all, satr is an obligatory attribute of clothing according to Islamic teachings. Several Tajik women spoke with Fergana to discuss why they prefer satr and are not prepared to remove it.

Manzura Maksudova of Kulyab maintains that many satr-clad women do so not necessarily for religious reasons but more as a nod to fashion: "It seems to me this is following fashion and [desire for] beautiful clothes. Mass donning of satr started in Tajikistan after *Clone*, a colourful and unforgettable Brazilian soap opera, was aired in Russian early 2004. The Tajik audience, just like everyone else in the post-Soviet space, loved watching Russian TV channels. The protagonist is Jadi, a dazzling Muslim woman from Morocco. She used to wear beautiful oriental clothes all the time. A lot of Tajik women liked that, so they started seeking out similar clothes in local marketplaces. Some received such clothes from their relatives visiting the Middle East. And, naturally, businessmen started importing such clothes given the public appetite. So women and girls started wearing colourful clothes and donning "Oriental" headscarves. It seems to me they, many of them anyway, would have voluntarily

stopped wearing them if not all these prohibitions. As is known, prohibitions always cause the opposite reactions”.

Muhabbat Ziyoyeva of Dushanbe would not wear satr if it weren't her husband's condition: "When I was a [college] student, I used to wear clothes like everyone else did in town. I would not even think of satr until I was engaged. My would-be husband's parents demanded nothing when they came to my parents asking for my hand. It was him who demanded at the very first meeting that I put satr on. I liked that young man right away, so I thought to myself 'why not'? And now not a single day without satr. I can wear colourful clothes at home, but I must not attract attention in public. Of course, wearing satr is annoying sometimes. Women wear various kinds of clothes in this city. But I don't want to upset my husband, so I will have to wear this all my life”.

The parents of Zaynura Obiyeva put satr on her when she was 13. Other girls in school would wear more traditional headscarves and Zaynura was in satr. "I am a good obedient daughter. How can one disobey their parents' will? That is sin. And I have myself grown used to covering up. I am more comfortable like this. Nobody bothers me when I'm out [in public]. I am treated with respect, not like those women who are open [covering up less]. They are harassed and they hear various dirty things. They are touched, groped and look at with lust. That is simply bad manners”.

Zamira Musoyeva is a girl of principles. She has conscientiously chosen to wear satr. "I was going through a very difficult period in my life. I was in depression for a very long time. I read a lot of Islamic literature at the time, including many books by Shamil Alauddin [a preacher and cleric in Russia]. He explains Islam in a very easy to understand manner—something I have not heard from our religious figures. They only scare and prohibit. I closed [presumably: my entire body with clothes] gradually. Initially I only wore the headscarf. And then I gradually moved on to satr. I feel comfortable in satr. Although no one was expecting this from me because I didn't used to wear even national clothes”.

Madina Islamova is lenient toward women in satr. She prefers "European" style of clothes. "I am a Muslim by birth. I read the commentaries of the Koran by Valeriya Porohova. But I will say it openly to you: I am not very religious. I love philosophy of Ghandi and Dalai Lama. But religion is not a dogma for me. I believe Ghandi's words: 'God has no religion.' I think living with [peaceful] conscience is actually what religion is. Obviously, external attributes are not an indicator of the true faith. Faith lives in one's soul. But I do respect the women's choice and their right to wear satr. Having the right to choose is the most important for humans. So if she wants, she'll take [satr] off; if she wants, she'll keep it on. That does not annoy me. People and their opinion must be obligatorily respected in a secular and lawful society”.

Zarina Mirzokulova argues that belief in God is a spiritual condition. "People believe the way they feel. The majority of women wear satr, most likely, because they are coerced. Others started wearing unconsciously. Many fell for the tribal instinct: 'Everybody is wearing so I will wear as well to be like everyone else.' And now those who put it on unconsciously are taking it off under the pretext of 'they are prohibiting it now.' And there are few among those who are still wearing it that came to this consciously. I am tolerant toward women wearing satr. But I don't like those women in satr who believe they are saints and brag about it; they try teaching others to wear it even though they have no spiritual themselves. Unfortunately, the majority are such [women]. There are none—I don't see them anyway—who would correctly interpret Islam. Nobody wants to go deep into it. There is very little love in this generation, more fear”.

Nazira Mulloyeva, a public activist, often deals with the problems of women and sees men's fault in the lack of women's rights. "To put it mildly, men are feudal lords in our country. Men never liked the European style of women's clothes. Men, including male officials, have always been unsatisfied with such clothes. I think they like it when women are covered up

and tacitly encourage doing so. Men usually dictate things. Women oblige; they have no rights in our country. When women started wearing satr, men encouraged that. And now we have new prohibitions with the authorities demanding women take it off. Yet another prohibition. So the male portion of our society is coercing women to put satr on, while the government is prohibiting [doing so]. The woman is between two fires now. The government should first combat the male chauvinism rather than women in satr”.

The issue of satr is very sensitive for Sayram Murodova. She believes women are forced to wear satr because wearing European-style clothes is now becoming dangerous even in the city’s centre. “The situation my acquaintance’s daughter found herself in is a testimony to that. The event happened in evening time last summer. She and her friends—attractive and beautiful—were in a cafe with their male course mates. Then they were headed home, preparing to cross a street. A black vehicle drove up close. The windows were rolled down and occupants started spitting and throwing plastic bottles at the girls. That was unexpected, so the girls were startled. One of the young men in the car has contemptuously called them unbelievers and used profanities. The girls couldn’t recover from this for a long time. That is what illiteracy and radicalism is. Nobody explains to them Islam correctly. What is also saddening is that there are many illiterate ones like them unfortunately, whose vision of Islam is expressed in such an aggressive manner. It is saddening that they believe they are on the right path. Islam is a religion of light, and the fanatics are making it dark. This leads to a radical treatment of women, whereas there is no such teaching in the Koran. And they listen to various false preachers and don’t want to enlighten themselves”.

Zebo Kabirova, a marketplace vendor, wears satr as a form of protest of the governmental prohibition. She often finds herself in the vision field of law-enforcement agents. “They tried everything to force me into taking satr off: they pleaded and threatened and took to their police station. But who are they to prohibit? I like [satr], so I’ll continue wearing it. I’ll take it off whenever I wish to do so”.

Aziza Toirova is a spouse of a religious figure. She has been wearing satr for a very long time now. She is a very talented person who graduated from a secular university with honours. “I write poems and read them to my husband. He is my only audience and critic. I work a lot on self-education—computers, languages. Nobody forces me to wear satr as I it is my personal choice. I am a homemaker and bringing my children up. But that doesn’t mean that I am deprived of joy of communicating with my friends. We often meet both as families and individually. They don’t wear satr and maintain a different lifestyle. Nonetheless, they understand me. But a complete prohibition will always cause a reaction; that’s human nature. We clearly see a crisis of education and upbringing in our society. The education system and enlightenment must be invested in with money. [Presumably: the government] needs to explain, bring up and educate, [instead of] forcibly prohibiting [satr]”.

While this article was being prepared for publication, Fergana learnt from several sources in the Tajik government that state-funded institutions are orally instructed to record personal information of women in satr when they apply for government services and report them to [presumably: law-enforcement and national security] agencies.