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Sufis raided, initial fine, Protestants raided

Sufi Muslim Rashad Abidov was fined in Sheki for hosting a religious meeting raided by police, but managed to overturn the fine on appeal. Police raided Star in the East Pentecostal Church in Gyanja during Sunday worship. Police phoned the schools of children present. Fines might follow.

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (06.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2H9I8h1> - In December 2017, Sufi Muslim Rashad Abidov, whose home in the northern town of Sheki was raided by police during a religious meeting, managed to overturn the large fine handed down for holding a meeting without state permission. Police had brought the case rather than officials of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations.

On 28 January 2018, police raided a Sunday worship service of a Protestant church in Azerbaijan's second city Gyanja. Police phoned the schools of children present at the service. Fines might follow (see below).

On 31 January, Azerbaijan's Constitutional Court in the capital Baku wrote to Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov in Aliabad in the northern Zakatala [Zaqatala] District to tell him it would not be considering his further appeal against a large fine for meeting for worship without state permission handed down in December 2016. Pastor Shabanov – a former prisoner of conscience - must now pay the fine of more than three months' average wages for those in formal work. Another Baptist from the same church, Mehman Agamammadov, has now paid all three instalments of his fine.

Their Baptist church in Aliabad has been seeking registration – in vain – since 1994. Police and state officials have warned church members not to meet. "If we meet again for worship, we'll get double the fine," Pastor Shabanov told Forum 18 officials had warned them (see below).

Strict controls

The government imposes severe controls on who is allowed to meet for worship and where. All religious communities must have state registration before they can legally function. However, many communities (like the Baptist church in Aliabad) are arbitrarily denied such registration. Muslim communities outside the framework of the state-backed Muslim Board are banned, although this is not enshrined in any law (see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey).

Fines are typically 1,500 Manats (6,900 Norwegian Kroner, 715 Euros or 890 US Dollars). This represents nearly three months' average wages for those with a formal job. However, for those in rural areas, those without a formal job, or pensioners, such fines represent a far heavier financial burden.

Officials from the police, State Security Service (SSS) secret police, State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, and Religious Affairs Commissions attached to city or district administrations frequently raid meetings for worship and help punish those exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Criminal prosecutions

These raids come as prisoner of conscience Imam Serdar Babayev is challenging his three-year prison term handed down in July 2017 to punish him for leading services in a Shia Muslim mosque after gaining his religious education abroad. His first appeal failed in September 2017. The Supreme Court in the capital Baku is due to begin hearing his latest appeal on the morning of 13 February.

Another prisoner of conscience, Shia Muslim Taleh Bagirov, is facing a further criminal case. His trial at Baku's Qaradag District Court began on 6 February on charges of illegally having memory cards with the Koran and Koranic-related material while in prison. The trial is due to resume on the morning of 13 February, his lawyer Javad Javadov told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 February (see forthcoming F18News article).

Bagirov, seized during an armed police assault on the village of Nardaran near Baku in November 2015, is already serving a 20-year jail term for leading the Muslim Unity Movement.

Sheki: Police raid Sufi meeting, fine eventually overturned

On 18 August 2017, Police in the northern town of Sheki raided the home of 44-year-old Rashad Abidov at the behest of Chief Criminal Investigator Major Ilham Mammadov. Investigator Lieutenant Ayaz Bayramov led the raid, where officers found Sufi Muslims meeting without state permission. Officers seized 13 books by the Turkish Sufi leaders Imam Iskender Ali Mihr and Abdulcabbar Boran, as well as discs and three computers.

On 10 October 2017, Investigator Bayramov intended to open a criminal case against Abidov but this was rejected. On 23 October 2017, Captain Shamil Bazarov instead opened a case against him under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2. This punishes "Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies". The fine for individuals for this "offence" is between 1,500 and 2,000 Manats.

The case against Abidov was handed to Sheki District Court. On 14 November 2017, Judge Jahid Imanov found him guilty and fined him 1,500 Manats (6,900 Norwegian Kroner, 715 Euros or 890 US Dollars).

Abidov appealed against the fine to Sheki Appeal Court. On 15 December 2017 Judge Rafail Aliyev upheld Abidov's appeal, as the wrong officials had prepared the administrative case, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. A 3 May 2017 presidential decree said only State Committee officials could prepare cases for court under Administrative Code Article 515 (all parts) and Article 516.0.1. Police had prepared the case against Abidov.

Lieutenant Bayramov of Sheki Police refused to explain why officers had raided Abidov's home, seized religious literature and other items, tried to bring a criminal case and then brought an administrative case because he was hosting a meeting with others in his home about his faith. "No criminal case is underway," he told Forum 18 on 6 February 2018 via a colleague. The colleague then said he refused to answer any other questions and left the office.

Officers told Forum 18 the same day that Major Mammadov and Captain Bazarov were out of the office. The duty officer told Forum 18 that the raid on Abidov's home and the case against him "did not happen".

Taleh Abdullayev, the representative in Sheki of the State Committee, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about the August 2017 raid – including whether or not he or his colleagues had been present – about what had happened to the religious literature seized from Abidov and why he was originally fined. "Don't call here again," he told Forum 18 on 6 February before putting the phone down.

Gyanja: Police raid worship meeting

On 28 January, Police in Gyanja's Nizami District raided the Sunday meeting for worship of Star in the East Pentecostal Church, held in the home of 45-year-old church member Adalat Sariyev. About 100 people – 40 of them children – were present at the meeting when the police arrived, Report.az news website noted on 30 January.

"The invasion came during the service, and officers filmed everyone present with video-cameras and took their personal details, including of children," one church member told Forum 18 from Gyanja.

Police detained Sariyev and sent information about him to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, Report.az noted.

Following the raid, schools attended by the children received calls from the police, church members told Forum 18.

The man who answered the phone of Nizami District Police chief – who would not give his name – refused to explain why officers raided a meeting for worship in a home. "Ask the Interior Ministry," he told Forum 18 on 5 February. The officer then admitted that local police, not officers from the Ministry in Baku, had conducted the raid, but still refused to explain why it had been launched. "We work according to the laws of Azerbaijan," he insisted and then put the phone down.

An official of the Gyanja branch of the State Committee, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 on 5 February that the head of the branch Asif Aliyev was away for the whole of the week. The official insisted the police had raided the church "to take a look only" and to "ask questions" of Sariyev.

Asked what church members had done wrong to merit a police raid during a religious meeting, the official responded: "They didn't do anything wrong. They simply have no registration." The official refused to explain why a religious community should be raided for meeting for worship without state registration. He claimed Sariyev would face no court case.

Like many Protestant churches (as well as non-Muslim Board mosques, and communities of other faiths), Star in the East Church in Gyanja does not have state registration.

Church members do not know whether Sariyev or others will face any court case. "Nothing is certain at the moment," church members told Forum 18. "From what officials say it is possible some further action will follow."

Aliabad: Constitutional Court refuses to consider appeal

On 31 January, Azerbaijan's Constitutional Court Baku wrote to 61-year-old Baptist pastor Hamid Shabanov in Aliabad to tell him it would not be considering his further

appeal against a fine of 1,500 Manats for meeting for worship without state permission handed down in December 2016.

"The Constitutional Court wrote to say that I lodged the appeal too late," Pastor Shabanov told Forum 18 from Aliabad on 6 February. "I must now pay the fine. The law demands that I pay – they warned me that if I don't, they'll be further action."

Another Baptist from the same church, Mehman Agamammadov, has now paid all three instalments of his 1,500 Manat-fine at the insistence of the court bailiff. Despite being repeatedly refused the written decision and despite objecting to being fined for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief he paid the first instalment of 500 Manats in early December 2017. "Mehman has now paid the other two instalments," Pastor Shabanov told Forum 18.

The fines followed a November 2016 raid by police and the local State Committee official on an "illegal" meeting for prayer in Pastor Shabanov's home. Police detained more than 30 adults and children present, after which 16 women and 10 men were questioned at the local police station until 10 pm at night. Police sent confiscated religious literature to the State Committee in Baku for alleged "expert analysis". The literature was all returned the following month.

In a 15-minute hearing on 12 December 2016, Zakatala District Court found both Pastor Shabanov and Agamammadov guilty and fined them each the minimum fine, 1,500 Manats. Both Baptists were punished under Administrative Code Article 515.0.2 ("Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies").

Pastor Shabanov managed to get the written decision only in January 2017. Agamammadov never received the written decision, despite repeated attempts to get it from the court. Pastor Shabanov lodged his appeal to the Constitutional Court in October 2017 after Sheki Appeal Court refused in June 2017 to extend the period for him to lodge his appeal against the December 2016 fine.

The Aliabad Baptist Church has been seeking registration – in vain – since 1994. Former prisoner of conscience Pastor Shabanov was held in pre-trial detention from June to November 2008. In February 2009 he was given a two-year suspended sentence on charges he and his fellow-Baptists insisted were fabricated. He was arrested a month after another Aliabad Pastor, Zaur Balaev, was freed after nearly a year in prison on false charges (see F18News 12 February 2009).

The Aliabad Church has been unable to meet together for worship since the November 2016 raid. In November 2017, the head of the State Committee Legal Department Sabina Allahverdiyeva wrote to the Church warning that it cannot meet for worship without state registration.

"If we meet again for worship, we'll get double the fine," Pastor Shabanov quoted officials as having told church members, he told Forum 18.

Azerbaijan wrestles with rising Iranian influence

By *Zaur Shiriyev*

EURASIANET (27.12.2017) - <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/86596> - Azerbaijan's government is growing increasingly concerned about what it sees as growing Iranian manipulation of the country's Shia Muslim believers.

Azerbaijan's security services recently presented senior government officials with a report describing how Iran has "increased its capabilities in Azerbaijan's regions," one analyst close to the government told Eurasianet.org. "Many more people are now under Iran's influence, and this has sounded alarm bells inside the government," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

In 2013, Azerbaijan relaxed restrictions, in effect an informal ban, on religious figures linked to Iran on preaching in public. This tactical embrace of Shiism was aimed at stemming the flow of Azerbaijanis joining ISIS and fighting in Syria and Iraq, a trend that Baku believed was inspired by a rise in hardline Sunni tendencies.

But now it appears the policy is having unintended consequences, resulting in what authorities believe is increased control by Iran over Shia practice in Azerbaijan. According to official data, 22 of the 150 Shia madrassas in the country are "under the control of Iran," wrote Kenan Rovshanoglu in a recent report for the Azerbaijani news agency Turan.

Many secular Azerbaijanis have been alarmed by the increasing visibility of Shia practices in the country. During the Ashura celebrations in September in Baku, some children participated in the ritual, which involves self-flagellation. "When I saw children, who do not have a real understanding of religion, wearing hijab and attending Ashura ceremonies, I thought they are going to become kamikazes to be sent in the future to Syria," [said](#) MP Zahid Oruc.

In response, in early October, the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs of Azerbaijan proposed legislation that would prohibit children from taking part in Ashura commemorations and similar religious rituals. The legislation has not yet been voted on.

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, appeared to publicly criticize the proposed law during a November meeting with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev in Tehran. "We should appreciate this great opportunity and the glorious mourning ceremonies of the Shiites in Azerbaijan, because they will strengthen the identity of Azerbaijan's nation and country," Khamenei [said](#).

Azerbaijan, however, has been wary of publicly calling out Tehran. The two countries have had uneasy relations since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991, as Baku fears Iran's religious influence and Tehran is concerned about Azerbaijan's potential influence over the large ethnic Azeri population in northern Iran. Each also has close ties to the other's biggest enemy: Azerbaijan with Israel, and Iran with Armenia.

Since President Hassan Rouhani's coming to power in 2013, Iran has been forced to recalibrate its relations with Azerbaijan. Official bilateral contact has increased dramatically since then, with the two sides signing more than 20 cooperation agreements in the economic sphere.

In one project that would have been unimaginable before 2013, Azerbaijan has provided a loan to build a 100-mile stretch of a railroad in Iran, from the Azerbaijani border to the city of Rasht, part of the North-South Transport Corridor. Baku hopes that the initiative can derail plans to develop rail links between Iran and Armenia.

The government has not publicly claimed that Iran influenced the Ashura commemorations, but one official, Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations Gunduz Ismayilov, pointedly [said](#) that "there are some

forces in Azerbaijan who seek to bring political elements into Ashura commemorations in the country.”

In early December, the government-connected website [Haqqin.Az](#) published an [article](#) accusing Iran of trying to recruit Shia pilgrims visiting the holy city of Karbala in Iraq. The article claimed that 30,000 Azerbaijanis visited Karbala for Ashura this year, an increase of 33 percent over the previous year.

The article also alleged that the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard and its associated Shiite militia, “Hasdi Shabi,” have recruited Azerbaijanis to gather intelligence and conduct anti-government propaganda against Baku. Some of the propaganda, the article claimed, was focused on Nardaran, a center of Shia conservatism in Azerbaijan.

In 2015, security services carried out a series of [raids in Nardaran](#), arresting religious activists they accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Azerbaijan’s authorities also believed that Nardaran’s religious leaders were under Iranian influence, and that after the operation, that influence has been curbed. The Iranian propaganda, the Haqqin article said, criticized the Nardaran events as an “infringement of rights and persecution of Shias.”

Some in Baku question the government’s focus on Iran’s influence over it Shia. “It would be too easy to claim that all the people who went to Iraq for holy visits end up under Iran’s influence,” one mid-level government official told [EurasiaNet.org](#) on condition of anonymity. The official added, though, that “falling under the influences of foreign intelligence is much easier there than anywhere else.”

The official suggested that more Azerbaijanis visiting Iraq and Syria are recruited by ISIS: The number of Azerbaijanis joining ISIS has been on the rise in the last two years, and last year 151 people were stripped of their Azerbaijani citizenship for fighting in the ranks of terrorist organizations. “This is the main threat,” the official said.

Another [article](#), by a government think tank, the Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), also appeared to speak to Baku’s concerns about Iran, this time about its relations with Armenia.

The unsigned article raised eyebrows among Baku’s foreign policy community, both for its tone – reading more like an official statement than a piece of analysis – and its language. It was published in Azerbaijani, instead of Russian and English, suggesting the topic wasn’t SAM’s usual international audience, but a message to the Iranian government via its embassy in Baku.

The piece criticized increasing contacts between Tehran and the de facto authorities of Nagorno Karabakh, whom Baku regards as a separatist regime on Azerbaijani territory. It described recent appearances of Karabakh officials in the Iranian media and the publication of two books on Karabakh. And it highlighted a November 15 conference in Iran devoted to Karabakh. “The Iranian International Studies Association, one of the founders of which is the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarifi, has created a kind of platform for the conduct of anti-Azerbaijani propaganda by Armenian scientists,” the author wrote.

While Azerbaijani criticism of Iran-Armenia relations is not new, it appears to have reached a new level, one analyst with close links to the Azerbaijani government told [EurasiaNet.org](#), speaking on condition of anonymity. Baku is unsure why Tehran is emphasizing ties with the de facto Karabakh authorities, and fears that it will serve to legitimize them in Iran and create sympathy for them, which Baku regards as a threat to its interests, the analyst said.

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