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## **AZERBAIJAN: Regime employing and firing imams, a controversial policy**

**Direct regime employing and firing imams is “role of a religious organisation”**

By Felix Corley

*Forum 18 (10.06.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3HlPLR5> – In the first known use of new powers for appointing, re-appointing every*

*five years, and firing all Islamic clergy, in early May, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations fired Imam Mirseymur Aliyev in Neftchala. He had held end of Ramadan prayers on 3 May, not the regime-enforced date of 2 May. Lawyer Asabali Mustafayev noted that the regime taking direct control of Islamic clergy means that “the state is now playing the role of a religious organisation.”*

On 22 April, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations approved Rules for its new roles of appointing, re-appointing every five years, and firing all Islamic clergy in Azerbaijan. Religion Law amendments which came into force in March transferred these roles from the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board to the State Committee.

The State Committee now interviews and recruits all Islamic clergy, appointing them to a maximum five-year term of office. Every five years the State Committee then reviews all clergy and decides whether or not to reappoint them for another five years. The State Committee also decides whether to fire clergy, including for violating the restrictive Religion Law (see below).

The reasons given for appointing and firing clergy are vague and unspecific, leaving much room for arbitrary official decisions. These reasons include: violating unspecified “standards of morality and ethics”; receiving unspecified support from foreign states, organisations or individuals; having a criminal conviction; or for a number of other vague and unspecific reasons (see below).

Asabali Mustafayev, a Baku-based lawyer who has taken up freedom of religion or belief cases, says the direct state

takeover of appointing, re-appointing and firing Islamic clergy violates the Constitution. "The Constitution declares that religion and the state are separate," he told Forum 18. "However, the state is now playing the role of a religious organisation" (see below).

Kanan Rovshanoglu, a commentator on religious issues, stressed that "no-one among the [Muslim] believers" had been demanding that the regime take direct control of appointing and firing Islamic clergy, or deciding every five years whether they stay in office (see below).

The State Committee enforces the dates chosen by the state-controlled Caucasian Muslim Board in advance for all mosques to celebrate major festivals, and can immediately fire imams who choose to observe festivals on different days they consider to be appropriate. The Board does not wait until devout Muslims can be certain of the date a festival should be marked before naming these dates (see below).

In an early sign of the impact of the new State Committee Rules, in early May the State Committee fired Imam Mirseymur Aliyev in Neftchala for holding the end of Ramadan prayers on 3 May, not the regime-enforced date of 2 May (see below).

"No one forced him [Imam Aliyev] to leave," Sanan Khalilov, the State Committee representative for Shirvan, which includes Neftchala, claimed to Forum 18. "I spoke to him and he said he couldn't fulfil his obligations. I simply accepted the resignation letters that he himself submitted. The State Committee then removed him" (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the regime transferred responsibility for appointing, re-appointing every five years, and firing all Islamic clergy to the State Committee. Aides to the Deputy Chair Gunduz Ismayilov and the head of its Department for Work with Religious Organisations Jahandar Alifzada refused to put Forum 18 through to them or anyone else on 10 June. Telephones at the Foundation for the Propagation of Moral Values (which is controlled by the State Committee) went unanswered each time Forum 18 called the same day.

Read full article [HERE](#)

*Photo : State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, Baku -Cekli829/Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0]*

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