

Said Nursi Followers

Said Nursi was a religious scholar, opinion leader and activist concerned with the acute problems the society of his time. Throughout his life, he desperately attempted to conciliate religion, modernity and politics. His books inspired a faith movement that played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey throughout much of the 20th century and now has several millions of followers worldwide, including in Russia and other post-Soviet countries with a Muslim majority.

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey, in the 1870s. His parents were pious peasants who had been in close contact with local Sufi leaders. He received an unconventional educational training.

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

Teachings & Controversies

Said Nursi’s educational and political commitments

A fierce critic of both the outdated religious *medrese*, which ignores scientific achievements and the modernist educational system excluding religion, he conceptualized a new and holistic educational model attempting to reconcile the various opposing views by jointly teaching both religious and modern sciences under the same roof.

Despite the suspicions of Sultan Abdülhamid II about his teachings, he managed in a short time to get the attention of the intellectual elite. Because of his writings urging reform and his critique of the imperial regime, he was arrested, briefly imprisoned and then sent to a mental institution. He was later released by a medical report clearing him from any mental problem, although he remained under strict surveillance.

When the Second Constitutional Rule was declared in July 1908, Nursi delivered fervent public speeches and published articles supporting the new constitutional regime. In his opinion, real freedom could only flourish if the regime followed the ordinances and moral and

conduct outlined by divine revelation. If freedom is abused, he maintained, it would be lost and end up in despotism.

Frustrated by his political experience in Istanbul, Nursi decided to go back to his native Anatolia in 1910. There he published a book on the principles of contemporary Quranic exegesis. In his public discussions he addressed more regional problems such as ignorance, fanaticism and the need for good relations with Armenians.

First World War

With approval from the central government, Nursi became the leader of a militia force during the First World War. The group was mainly comprised of his students from his former *medrese* in Van. From 1914 to 1916, he fought in the Special Organisation of the Ottoman Empire¹ against the Russian army. He was captured by the Russians on 3rd March 1916 and sent to a camp in Kostroma, a city located at the confluence of the Volga and Kostroma rivers. He remained in captivity in Tsarist Russia during two years and took the advantage of the political chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 to escape from the war camp.

Said Nursi and Kemalism

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

Nursi's political vision was of a new political entity based on the Quran and promoting religious understanding. However, the new governing body led by Mustafa Kemal had a totally different agenda: nationalism and anti-religious secularism. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924, and over the next decade traces of religious influence in the public sphere were dismantled. All *medrese* establishments and Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed, *shariah* courts were replaced by civil courts, the tombs of the saints were closed, Arabic was banned and replaced by Latin, and the Arabic call to prayer was forbidden. This was the beginning of Nursi's split from Kemalist ideology.

¹ Enver Pasha assumed the primary role in the direction of the Special Organization. Kemal Ataturk was one of its notable members. Most of its 30,000 members were drawn from trained specialists such as doctors, engineers, and journalists but the organisation also employed criminals released from prison in 1913 through an amnesty. Many members of this organisation who had played particular roles in the Armenian Genocide also participated in the Turkish national movement. The Special Organisation, assisted by government and army officials, deported all Greek men of military age to labour brigades beginning in summer 1914 and lasting through 1916.

Alarmed by the growing popularity of his teachings, which had spread even among the intellectuals and the military officers, the government repeatedly arrested Nursi for allegedly exploiting religion for political ends, forming a clandestine political organisation, giving instruction in Sufism and opposing secular republican reforms. He was repeatedly harassed, placed under strict surveillance and sentenced to prison terms and internal exile. In 1956 he was cleared of all charges, although the authorities continued their campaign against him for many years afterwards.

From the Democrat Party rule to the junta regime

In May 1950, the Democrat Party won the first free multi-party elections with an absolute majority in the Parliament. The new party supported more liberal and democratic governance, abolished the ban on Arabic and declared a general amnesty from which Said Nursi benefitted. The government supported a religion-friendly secularism and aimed to firmly fight against Communism; policies which aligned with Nursi's ideas of an alliance between Muslims and Christians to combat Communism. Nursi was in full support of the domestic and foreign policies of the new regime.

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

His works

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

Despite constant surveillance by the authorities, he continued to contact people whilst in exile. Out of them emerged a small group of loyal followers who became the forerunners of the *Nur* movement, which would eventually become the most dynamic and influential community in modern Turkey. The first portions of *Risale-i Nur* were produced in the 1950s and were copied by hand. These first hand-copied editions were reported to have reached more than 600,000 copies throughout Anatolia. Nursi's works have been published in Latin script by publishing houses from 1956 on.

There are now followers of Said Nursi worldwide. They continue to be persecuted in a number of Muslim majority countries, even though they do not commit or advocate violence or terrorism. Nursi's works are banned in **Russia**, **Uzbekistan** and **Azerbaijan** for allegedly inciting hatred and enmity against non-believers. Nursi readers have been subjected in these countries to police raids, confiscation of literature and court sentences of fines and prison terms.

Said Nursi Followers in Prison

Azerbaijan

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

Mass arrests in Nakhichevan

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

On 11th February 2015, three Nursi readers were released from prison, who had been detained following raids in Nakhichevan raids and Baku the previous month. All three had been held without any court approval. They were beaten in an effort to force them to confess to the 'crime' of distributing anti-government leaflets. Police had confiscated passports from all three to prevent them leaving the exclave. A fourth Nursi reader had fled to Turkey to evade possible arrest.

Raid in Baku

In December 2014, **Eldeniz Hajiyev, Ismayil Mammadov, Zakariyya Mammadov, Revan Sabzaliyev** and **Shahin Hasanov** were on criminal trial for attending a religious meeting in Hajiyev's Baku home when it was raided in April 2014. The men had been meeting to discuss their faith and Said Nursi's books without state permission. **Sabzaliyev** was among nine others who had been fined 1,500 Manats (about 1,400 Euros or 1,900 US Dollars) that same month for teaching religion illegally.

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

Raid in Gadabay Region of western Azerbaijan

In early June 2015, between ten and fifteen police officers raided **Sabuhi Mammadov's** home in Gadabay, western Azerbaijan, where approximately twenty-five Muslims were meeting to study Nursi's works. Mammadov was fined the maximum amount of 1,500 Manats (then about 1,290 Euros or 1,430 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 299.0.2

(‘Violating legislation on holding religious meetings, marches, and other religious ceremonies’), and 13 other Muslims were fined fifty Manats (about 40 Euros or 50 US Dollars) under Administrative Code Article 296 (‘Hooliganism’).

Russia

The followers of Said Nursi are especially repressed in Russia. The first significant ruling against Nursi readers came in May 2007 when a Moscow court declared Russian translations of portions of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* to be extremist. This decision was based solely on linguistic textual analysis and ignored the counsel of Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and even Russia's most pro-Kremlin Muslim leader, Talgat Tadzhuddin. In 2001, Tadzhuddin had declared that *Risale-i Nur* was ‘far from religious extremism and fanaticism.’

In April 2008, Russia's Supreme Court went on to ban Nurdzhular – a russification of the Turkish for ‘Nursi followers’ - as an extremist organisation, although Russian Nursi readers have repeatedly insisted that no such organisation exists.

In 2014, the Mufti of a Mosque in Saransk was fined 5,000 Roubles for possession of a copy of Said Nursi's ‘Guidebook for Women,’ during an inspection that was conducted without warrant.

On 9th April 2014, a court decision was issued to ban the Russian-language website for the study of Nursi's works, www.nurru.com.

Court cases in Ulyanovsk

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

Kazikhanov's fellow defendants, 26-year-old **Stepan Kudryashov** and 25-year-old **Aleksandr Melentyev**, were convicted of the lesser offence under Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2 of participation in an association that has been banned due to extremist activity. They received suspended sentences of two years and one year and eight months respectively. A fourth man, **Farkhad Allakhverdiyev**, has been similarly charged but remains at large.

Uzbekistan

Some forty Said Nursi readers were still awaiting trial in 2015 five years after their arrest in Bukhoro five years earlier. Twenty-five alleged Nursi followers were also arrested in the capital city, all serving in the army. Twelve will face a military tribunal.

Under a presidential amnesty, the authorities released in February 2015 **Rashid Sharipov**, **Akmal Abdullayev**, **Ahmad Rakhmonov**, **Ahmadjon Primkulov** and **Kudratullo** (last name unknown) after having served most of their prison term for holding meetings to study the works of Said Nursi. All of them were freed after they had repented and asked the President for forgiveness.

Other Nursi followers, **Ikrom Merajov** and **Botir Tukhtamurodov**, who were jailed in April 2009, for nine years and six years respectively, remain in prison. **Nutfullo Aminov** and **Ilkhom Rajabov**, who were jailed for six years each, and **Abdullo Rasulov**, who was jailed in 2010, also remain behind bars.

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

Uzbekistan is the country which has arrested and imprisoned the highest number of Said Nursi followers for allegedly participating in an extremist organisation. Even still, Nursi readers are not the only movement to be repressed. The government's religious legislation is

particularly restrictive and affects several other Muslim movements, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.