

Crackdown Continues on Tajik Mosques

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Hundreds of unofficial centres of worship have been forced to shut in recent years.

The Tajik authorities are continuing their policy of closing unregistered mosques in a move they argue will counter the growth of extremism, but which critics say is an attack on religious freedom.

In the southwestern Khatlon region, for instance, hundreds of mosques built by local residents have been shut, and worshippers say that they now have nowhere to hold services. They must choose between either holding prayers at home, or travelling long distances to larger mosques in bigger towns.

Saidhasan, an elderly man who lives in Khatlon's Yovon district, said no one had consulted the locals who had built the mosques built with their own money.

"The doors of mosques were sealed," he said. "God forbid someone will die, we don't know what to do and where to pray for the deceased."

The policy was rolled out in 2014, at a time when young Tajiks were travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight for Islamic State (IS).

Out of Tajikistan's population of nine million, 98 per cent are Muslims and interest in religion has been growing, especially in rural areas. The authorities have responded by putting ever tighter controls into place in the religious sphere.

President Emomali Rakhmon has spoken out against the wearing of religious clothing, men growing long beards and other trends he deemed to be non-traditional religious behaviour.

But this also means that the Tajik authorities have been frequently criticised for violating citizens' religious freedoms, for instance banning women and children from mosques.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom denounced Tajikistan in an April 2018 report for "systematic, ongoing, blatant violation of freedom of religion" and categorised it as a country "of particular concern".

Khatlon region prosecutor Nasrullo Mahmudzoda said that the authorities were concerned by illegal religious organisations that might spur residents to join extremist movements.

According to official data, 1,744 mosques currently operate in Khatlon region, and the prosecutor said that 561 had been closed since 2014 by the local administration.

The authorities maintain that there are enough mosques across the country to ensure the right to freedom. According to the government's Committee on Religion and Regulation of National Traditions and Rituals, Tajikistan has more than 4,000 mosques.

"According to the law, small [used mainly for Friday prayers] mosques can be opened if there are more than 100 households in the settlement, while large mosques can be opened in settlements with 1,000 households," a committee spokesperson said. "We believe this is quite enough."

The authorities have repurposed many of these closed mosques. Some were used to house homeless people while others were converted to become cultural centres, clinics, kindergartens or sewing workshops.

Mahmadyusuf Nazarov, a 64 year-old from Sarband village in Khuroson district, found himself homeless after his daughters-in-law from his second marriage kicked him out. The authorities rehomed him in a former mosque, a decision he is unhappy about but has had to comply with.

"I know that people who built this mosque are not happy, but I have no choice, as I live here now with my wife and two small children," Nazarov said.

In their defence, officials say the number of mosques had outstripped the number of schools in some districts due to a lack of state control.

For example, the 37,500 residents of the town of Tojikobod in Vakhsh district have only eight schools but 35 mosques.

Saidjafar Safarzoda, an expert on social issues, said that the mosque closures were an attempt by central

government to strengthen their control, noting that religious centres had been accused of disseminating propaganda ahead of the 1992-1997 civil war.

“In 1992, the civil war began with division and disputes among people attending mosques,” he continued. “Now... the authorities want to control the situation and prevent mosques from becoming sources of discord.”

Political analyst Maruf Abdujaborov said that he welcomed government control over places of worship, citing an incident in the spring of 2018 when several imams in the northern Sughd region of Khujand were convicted on charges of belonging to banned movements and disseminating Salafist propaganda.

“The recent arrests of imam promoting the Salafi madhab [school of thought] in the country serve as evidence that regardless of where they are, religious fanatics can use mosques for purposes alien to religion. And if such a threat existed in the past, it does not exist now thanks to the strict state control,” he concluded.

However, others argue that shutting mosques down will not resolve the problem of radicalism.

Journalist Sairahmon Nazriev, who has covered the subject closely, said that the spread of extremist ideas was not limited to mosques.

“According to our observations, most of the extremists join parties and movements outside Tajikistan mainly through social networks,” he said.

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