

Dagestan: Converts Face Harassment

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New Muslim adherents claim they're subjected to police persecution.

To be a convert to Islam in the most traditional Islamic society in Russia, Dagestan, is not easy. New Muslims face hostility both from the authorities, who frequently suspect that they are Islamic extremists, and from traditional Muslims.

"Why do they need Islam?" asked Magomedrasul Magomedov, a parishioner at the central mosque in the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala. "It looks as though it's useful for them for some reason."

Andrei Popov, a Christian and parishioner at the Russian church, concurred, "I don't believe in these lightning conversions. Most of the Russians who convert to Islam do it for money. Maybe some people do come to the Koran [for genuine reasons] but I think that's a tiny number."

Dagestan is generally regarded as the most devout Muslim republic in Russian and has Islamic roots going back more than a thousand years. It has undergone a big religious revival in the last 15 years. Since 1990, more than 2,000 mosques and several thousand prayer houses have opened. Around twelve thousand people make the pilgrimage to Mecca every year.

In Russia as a whole, there are estimated to be 10,000 converts to Islam, around three quarters of whom are women who converted after marriage. In Dagestan, there are believed to be more than 400 converts.

Sergei Pigarev, a Russian who lives in Makhachkala, took the name Serazhutdin when he converted to Islam in 2004. This immediately made him a suspect in the eyes of the local police.

Pigarev said officers from his local police station first of all asked him to collaborate with them and supply information on fellow parishioners at the mosque he attended. He refused.

Then on May 13, 2005, he was arrested. His detention was covered by the entire local media. Dagestan's interior minister publicly named Pigarev and announced that he had been detained carrying explosives.

After several months of incarceration, Pigarev was tried and acquitted by a jury on November 22 the same year.

Pigarev's lawyer, Sahil Husseinov, told IWPR, "He suffered so much during this time, starting with threats by policemen, attempts to inject him with unknown substances and beatings. The officers in the detention cells set common criminals against him and spread rumours that he wanted to commit suicide."

Pigarev himself said, "My release was not part of the plans of the police officers. Everything that happened to me is a blatant attempt to frighten anyone else who wants to convert to Islam."

He said his trials have not ended with his acquittal, as his mother lost her job when he was under investigation and the family cannot afford to leave Dagestan.

Abdurahman Buga used to be known as Andrei Buga. He converted to Islam five years ago when he was a student.

His mother Lyudmila Buga told IWPR, "I wasn't against my son converting to Islam. But immediately afterwards the problems began. A policeman began to visit us."

The family house was searched and Buga was questioned on suspicion of being an Islamic militant. According to his mother, during one of these searches, the police planted a grenade in a rubbish bag in the house.

Buga was tried for illegal possession of weapons - and like Pigarev he was acquitted. But the family's problems continued. "The Dagestani police was clearly not satisfied with the court's decision, but they did not even try to query it in a legal fashion," said Lyudmila Buga. "So they prepared Andrei-Abdurahman a new surprise."

On August 18 last year, he was invited to an interview with an officer in Dagestan's department against extremism and terrorism and then disappeared.

His mother searched for him desperately for several days before discovering that he was in detention. First he was charged with "petty hooliganism" and later accused of having hidden in the forests and being an Islamic fighter.

The authorities say Buga was released on September 2, but in fact he remained in detention. He is now being re-tried in the town of Khasavyurt on extremism charges.

IWPR contacted the Dagestani interior ministry about these cases and asked what evidence they had that converts to Islam were Islamic extremists. Press spokesperson Angela Martirosova declined to comment, saying she had no information and referred IWPR to Magomed Magomedov, head of the department against extremism and terrorism.

"We are not persecuting anyone," said Magomedov. "I won't reply to your provocative questions. Ask the press service and Martirosova." He then put the phone down.

Ahmed Tagayev, deputy head of the official body, the spiritual department of Muslims of Dagestan, said his organisation had no statistics on the number of Muslim converts in the republic and that he doubted the police did either. "And as for someone being unfairly charged, we all know how the police work," he said.

But, Idris-Haji Israpilov, imam of the central mosque in Makhachkala, said the accusations were not without foundation and that there were many extremists among the new converts.

"As opposed to ethnic Muslims, whose religion and customs are transmitted from generation to generation,

for the neophytes everything is new and unknown,” he said. “Then the extremist missionaries appear who not only explain and show everything but give financial support. That’s how the new Muslim converts come to Islamic radicalism.”

There is very little evidence, however, of actual cases of converts who became dangerous militants.

Another unusual convert to Islam is a former rabbi, who was called Moishe Krivitsky before he changed his name to Musa. No one knows where he now is, though parishioners say he may have left for Moscow.

“The police didn’t leave him in peace here,” said one of the worshippers in his mosque, Rasul Magomedov. “So he left.”

Krivitsky had also been detained by the police and accused of illegal possession of weapons, which he says were planted on him by the men arresting him. He pleaded guilty to the charges - after what he later said was physical abuse. However, he was amnestied after a short period in detention.

A source in the counter-intelligence service, the FSB, in Dagestan says that they have information about more than 100 converts who have turned to extremism in Russia as a whole.

Ali Aliev, a human rights activist with the Glasnost fund in Dagestan, warned that dangerous assumptions were being made.

“If an adherent of another faith accepts Islam we can say that that automatically makes this person an object of interest for the police and the religious authorities,” said Aliev.

“They explain their interest on the grounds that a new convert has definitely been recruited by the terrorist underground in the republic for money. But we can’t base our actions just on guesses and assumptions.”

Diana Alieva is a correspondent for Svobodnaya Respublika newspaper in Dagestan. This is a version of an article originally written for the newspaper supplement 43rd Parallel, supported by IWPR and published in the North Caucasus.

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