

No Place for Uzbek Muslims

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Uzbek government's mosque closures have left Muslims in Andijan with nowhere to go.

Every Friday at midday, traffic comes to a halt for an hour and a half as thousands of Muslim believers spill out from the main working mosque to pray in the streets of Andijan, a major city in Uzbekistan's Fergana valley.

It's a problem of space - and politics. There are 10,000 people trying to get into a building designed for a fifth that number. They have nowhere else to go, as so many other mosques in the city have been closed.

This is the outward symptom of the Uzbek government's clampdown on Islam in the Fergana valley, traditionally the most devout part of the country. As well as arresting thousands of people for alleged Islamic extremism, the authorities have simply closed down mosques in the hope that the problem will go away.

"The main mosque in Andijan was closed in 1998. The hokim [mayor] and the public prosecutor said that the mosque was not registered with the Uzbek justice ministry, and now look at what's happening here," complained Muhammadjan Mamatov, a 60-year old Andijan resident, pointing at people praying in the street.

The city's main mosque, equivalent to a cathedral, now houses an art museum, while a second large mosque has been converted to a centre for mothers and children. Such seizures of sacred buildings and transformation into non-religious institutions is a repetition of what happened in the Soviet Union.

It was not always like this, though. In the early 1990s the government of President Islam Karimov allowed former mosques to reopen and new ones to be built across the country as it used the language and imagery of Islam to legitimise the nascent Uzbek state.

However, the government soon began a crackdown on Muslims who attended mosques outside the officially-sanctioned Islamic structures. It arrested many religious leaders and their followers, branded them - inaccurately - "Wahhabis", and locked them up.

Perhaps the worst case was that of Abduvali Mirzoev, a prominent imam (mosque leader) who was Andijan's best-known Islamic leader. He disappeared at Tashkent airport in 1995 and for years the authorities flatly denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. However, Amnesty International discovered that he had been arrested by the Uzbek security service, tortured, and sent to a labour camp.

The arrests intensified after February 1999, when sixteen people were killed in explosions in the capital Tashkent for which the authorities blamed Islamic extremists. Thousands of members of banned Islamic organizations, especially the new Hizb ut-Tahrir group, were jailed. Arrests and trials continue to take place.

As it grew suspicious of all forms of public religious expression, the government used a new law passed in 1998 to make it much harder for new mosques to open and to force existing ones to re-register with the authorities.

As a result, out of 2,200 mosques that existed in and around Andijan in the mid 1990s, only 42 were able to re-register. The same was true in Namangan, another large city in the Fergana valley. A government commission from Tashkent stopped all but 240 of the of 1,000 mosques there from operating. According to Hoshimjon Jambulov of the Independent Human Rights Organisation, the authorities made sure that only pro-government imams were appointed to those mosques that stayed open.

Islamic activity - in its "approved" form - is controlled by the muftiate, an officially-sanctioned clerical structure, and by the government's committee for religious affairs. Interviewed by IWPR, the deputy head of the latter, Shukhrat Ismailov, rejected claims of oppression, declaring that, "The closure of these mosques cannot be linked to infringement of Muslims' rights."

Andijan's Muslims are also unhappy about the lack of a formal Islamic school, or madrassa. Adiljon-Haji Abdusalamov, a respected religious leader, founded one in 1990, but it was closed in 1998 under the unlikely pretext that it breached public health regulations. Abdusalamov himself was given a two-year prison sentence for spreading religious extremism. He has since been released, but is unable to run a school.

"To date I haven't been able to open a centre for religious education, even though there is a huge demand for Islamic education in Andijan," he told IWPR. Institutions such as the Islamic University or the official muftiate's madrassa, both in Tashkent, are firmly under the government's control.

State policies have targeted Islamic activists in the name of security, but their side-effect has been to leave Andijan's ordinary Muslims in the streets. Presumably the government calculates that they will do no more than pray there.

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