

## **North Ossetia: Arrest of Muslim Leader Fuels Tensions**

Detention highlights the authorities' growing suspicion towards some parts of the Muslim community in predominantly Christian North Ossetia.

Concerns about anti-Muslim feeling in North Ossetia are increasing after police in Vladikavkaz arrested a leading Islamic figure in Vladikavkaz and claimed that explosives and detonators had been found at his home.

Yermak Tegayev, emir of the Ossetian Jamaat Islamic community and head of North Ossetia's Islamic Culture Centre, was detained on February 2. He was the unofficial leader of a group of Muslims opposed to the state's appointment of Ruslan Valgasov as the area's mufti or spiritual leader.

The arrest of such a prominent Islamic figure has highlighted the authorities' growing suspicion towards some parts of the Muslim community in North Ossetia, the only republic in the North Caucasus with a majority Christian population.

Observers say that anti-Muslim feeling has been on the rise in the area since several Chechen and Ingush extremists seized control of the No. 1 School in Beslan last September, leading to the deaths of more than 330 people, half of them children. The only known Ossetian hostage-taker at the school, Vladimir Khodov from the village of Elkhotovo, was also a Muslim.

Tensions also increased last year after the authorities announced that Valgasov was to serve as mufti of the area's Muslims, who comprise around 20 per cent of the population.

This decision was opposed by a group of young Muslims, who have declined to recognise his leadership. "Valgasov is dependent on the North Ossetian authorities and is a mouthpiece for their policy, but our only authority is the Koran," said one of the dissenters, who declined to be named.

Before his arrest, Tegayev had emerged as the alternative leader of the Muslim community and was backed by Suleiman Mamiev, the imam of the prominent Sunni mosque in the centre of Vladikavkaz.

Mamiev told IWPR that officials in North Ossetia are trying to suppress and intimidate alternative Muslim voices in the republic, and were using Valgasov to that end. He also claimed that police had planted the explosives allegedly found at Tegayev's house.

"No one trusts the government after the Beslan act of terror, so now they are trying to switch public attention to Islamic militancy, and using Valgasov to achieve this," he claimed, adding that the official mufti had physically attacked him and his parents.

"[Valgasov] kicked my mother- a devout woman who reads the Koran - twice. You cannot touch people like that even when a holy war is on," Mamiev told IWPR, lowering his sunglasses to reveal a black eye.

"Obviously they were trying to bully us into some kind of retaliatory action, so that the whole Jamaat could be arrested for inciting unrest or religious extremism," he claimed.

However, when asked about these allegations, Valgasov replied that “he can say what he wants”, and called Mamiev a “provocateur”.

The town of Beslan was founded as a Muslim settlement some 200 years ago. A large number of its population is still Muslim, although in most cases, their practice of faith is strictly nominal. The effects of the extremist attack on School No. 1 are still reverberating throughout the area.

The local mullah Vladimir Gavisov told IWPR that he has not experienced a sharp rise in anti-Muslim feeling since the school siege. “Sometimes they will confuse Islam and terrorism, but not very often,” he said.

Atsamaz Besolov, a young Muslim from Vladikavkaz, agreed. “The Muslim community has always experienced problems and pressure, but I wouldn’t say things have become worse in the wake of the terrorist act,” he said.

However, others claim that attitudes are changing. A 25-year-old resident of Vladikavkaz, who asked not to be named, told IWPR that radical Islam was on the rise. “I first started going to mosque when I was 20,” he said. “We all prayed and I found this exhilarating. But then something changed.”

He said that around a year into his study of Islam he began to feel pressure from other worshippers in the mosque. “They started telling me not to associate with those of my family and friends who were of a different persuasion. They called them ‘infidels’ and pressured me. That’s when I developed this fear of Islam,” he said, adding that he has felt “even more scared” since the school siege.

Community leaders told IWPR that several Muslims had been converted to Christianity since the Beslan siege ended. One man and his two children – all of whom had been held hostage – came to the local Russian Orthodox Church a few days after the tragedy, and asked to join.

Mufti Valgasov agrees that the Beslan tragedy changed many things. “People are now wary and sometimes fiercely opposed to Islam, but we understand and we don’t judge them too harshly,” he said. “What a regular person knows about Islam comes from news reports of terror attacks.”

The mufti added that Beslan was just the latest in a series of setbacks suffered by Islam in North Ossetia in recent years, beginning with the Ossetian-Ingush conflict of 1992, “Also, there is our proximity to Chechnya and many acts of terror, culminating in the most terrible blow to our religion, the school seizure in Beslan.”

Yury Sidakov, chairman of Ossetia’s Commission on Human Rights and himself a Muslim told IWPR that the split in the Muslim community is “a serious crisis”.

“Marginalised youth [can fall] under the power of false ideas about Islam,” he warned. “But whether they are Wahhabis [Islamic radicals] or not, they are our citizens and we have to work with them.”

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