

Tajik Mosque Clampdown Could Backfire

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The authorities in the capital are trying to stop the preaching of radical Islam, but intrusive action against mosques may anger a wider constituency of Muslims.

A clampdown on unofficial mosques in the Tajik capital is aimed at weeding out extremist preachers, but critics warn that heavy-handed tactics risk alienating moderate Muslims.

Like the rest of this predominantly Muslim country, Dushanbe has witnessed a boom in mosque construction in recent years. Mosques sprang up all over the place, often built on charitable donations or growing out of local community centres.

Islamic institutions such as mosques and madrassahs or religious schools formally come under an official "directorate" with close links to the state. The Tajik authorities keep a close eye on Muslim groups outside that structure, and have for example arrested many members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an outlawed group with extremist views. At the same time, Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state to have a legal and mainstream Islamic political party, the Islamic Rebirth Party, IRP.

Two years ago, the city authorities in Dushanbe decided to take a closer look at the situation for fear that the unsanctioned prayer houses might be being used to preach radical messages. A specially created commission ran checks on the city's mosques both for their legal status and to see whether the buildings met planning and public health requirements.

When that investigation concluded at the end of 2006, the prosecution service stepped in. Three months on, prosecutors have recommended that 13 mosques should be demolished, and that another 28 should be allowed to stay open as long as they formally register with the authorities. They also found that 29 of the "unofficial" mosques should be reclassified as legal.

An official from the Dushanbe prosecutor's office told IWPR that it was a question of ensuring that everyone complied with the law.

"We are all Muslims and we observe the precepts of Islam. But at the same time, we must obey the law. Any organisation has to operate within the law," said the official, who did not want to be named.

One imam in Dushanbe told IWPR that the reason many mosques remain outside the law is that the bureaucracy involved in winning registration is daunting.

"Sometimes they don't register us, or they delay granting legal status to mosques," he explained. "So it's simpler for us to operate illegally."

Said Ahmedov, a senior office-holder at a business institute in Dushanbe who formerly served as advisor to President Imomali Rahmon on religious affairs, believes that the authorities are right to clamp down on unregistered mosques because of concerns that some might have been used by extremist preachers.

Ahmedov said there was a danger that more radical forms of Sunni Islam – the main faith in Tajikistan – were being imported by clerics who had spent time abroad.

“If there are no controls, there’s a risk that other strands [of Sunni Islam] will be propagated and gain influence. Some imams [prayer leaders] have studied abroad, a number of them in Saudi Arabia, where they fall under the sway of Wahhabism, which is alien to Tajikistan. That poses some risk,” he said.

“Religious figures must work alongside the state to monitor the situation and ensure that these teachings are not perveyed in the mosques and madrassahs.”

Ahmedov concluded that while the kind of people who veer towards extremist views tend to be “uninformed about Islam and poorly educated”, the government should take care to ensure that supervision of religious affairs takes place within the law, “so that the rights of [other] believers are not abused”.

But critics of the mosque clampdown say it is part of a long-running and heavy-handed government campaign to contain and control the practice of Islam, and as such risks alienating devout Muslims and making them more receptive to extremist views.

The head of the IRP, Muhiddin Kabiri, accused the government of trying to make Islam the bogeyman because its own social and economic policies were bankrupt.

“When the authorities realise they’re running short of the trust people have invested in them, they resort to the tried-and-tested method of looking for the source of evil,” he said. “In recent times, religion has been this source of evil.”

Attitudes in Tajikistan are still imprinted with the experience of the 1992-97 civil war, in which the IRP led an armed insurgency against a government that is still largely in power. That conflict, which ended in a peace deal that gave the IRP legal status and some posts in the administration, has been widely if inaccurately depicted as a war between Islamic guerrillas and a secular government.

Kabiri argued that the attitudes of some senior officials are still coloured by this view.

“Even though public attitudes to religion and faith-based organisations have changed for the better, and people no longer see these things as a threat, there are certain groups which would like to revive this [anti-Islamic] sentiment and create the impression that it is specifically religious organisations that flout the law and other standards,” he said.

He accepted that many mosques fail to comply with planning and other legislation, but he said this was due merely to ignorance of the law.

Kabiri’s views were reinforced by another senior IRP figure, Hikmatullo Saifullozoda, who said, “There are people in the higher echelons of power who regard Islam - and religion in general - as their enemy.”

The authorities argue that they are simply upholding the law, but they may not have helped to win this argument when they decided to send police into a number of Dushanbe mosques in mid-March to catch children who should have been at school.

One such police raid, at Dushanbe's main mosque on March 16, ended in scuffles as angry members of the congregation tried to stop police taking away children who had come to attend the midday Friday prayers. Eyewitnesses said the confrontation began to turn nasty as police brought in reinforcements and the crowd swelled to 1,000 to defy them. In the chaos, the children managed to break free and the crowd turned into an impromptu demonstration.

Dushanbe's chief prosecutor Qurbonali Muhabbatov insisted the police had acted according to the letter of the law.

"Current legislation on religion states that children under 18 cannot attend the mosque for Friday prayers. They must be at school at this time," he said.

But Saifullozoda said this kind of incident creates bad feeling among observant Muslims, and warned that this in turn could be exploited by extremist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir which are looking for new recruits.

"It suits certain groups if the authorities move against religion, as they can turn this [resulting hostile] sentiment to their own advantage," he said.

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