

Tajikistan's Only Synagogue Awaits End

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Small Jewish community believe destruction of their place of worship leaves them facing a bleak future. The destruction of the only remaining synagogue in Tajikistan has left the small Jewish community angry and shocked that the government should ride roughshod over religious sensibilities.

Appeals from international Jewish organisations have fallen on deaf ears, as the authorities insist they will bulldoze the site to make way for a major urban development project.

The synagogue building in the capital Dushanbe, dating from 1947, has been under threat since April 2004 when the government decided to resurrect Soviet plans from the Sixties to build a Palace of the Nation. The palace will serve as the residence of President Imomali Rahmonov.

The redevelopment means the synagogue has to go, say the authorities, although it is not clear whether destroying the building is essential if the palace is to be built, or just that it does not fit in with their architectural vision. According to the Dushanbe mayor's press-secretary Shavkat Saidov, the synagogue is on the route of a road that will lead to the palace.

Shamsiddin Nuriddinov, head of the department for religious affairs in the mayor's office, the synagogue occupies a dilapidated building of no historical value which was originally a private house.

For some in the congregation, the dispute seems to come down to resources – they might consider moving but they just do not have the funds for a complete new building, making the current one irreplaceable.

According to Nuriddinov, the Jewish congregation has been given a plot of land elsewhere as compensation, as well as office space which it can use rent-free for three months while the new synagogue is being built. Officials argue that this is a fair offer as the current premises stand on government-owned land.

But Jews in Dushanbe say a plot of land alone will not help their dwindling community. The last census held in Tajikistan in 2000, showed just 200 Jews left in the country – representing both the Bukharan Jewish community of Central Asia and the Ashkenazis who were part of the influx of Russians in the Soviet period.

Yury Sigal, originally from Ukraine but resident here for 38 years, says the community members are now mostly elderly and are not well off. "We just can't build a new synagogue out of our own money," he said.

Another member of the older generation, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR, "There is a small Jewish community left in the country and the synagogue is the only place where we can gather together to pray and interact. Its location is very convenient, and easy for elderly people to get to.

"For me personally, demolishing the synagogue means scattering our community and threatening our rights as a minority group."

A minority rights expert who asked to remain anonymous suggested that the government was within its rights to reclaim the land and that Jewish communities abroad should help fund an all-new synagogue.

Others appear opposed on both principle and religious grounds to the idea of moving out of the present building.

“Of course we understand Imomali Rahmonov’s wish to build a Palace of Nations and an adjoining park in the city centre, but I do not think that a place held sacred by any group of people should be destroyed to achieve this,” said the chief rabbi of Central Asia, Abe David Gurevich.

“History [shows that] combining modern structures and historical buildings can make a city look especially beautiful.... We are prepared to refurbish the synagogue, however much it costs us, especially as according to the construction plans it’s located almost two kilometres away from the Palace of Nations.”

Gurevich, who has conveyed messages of concern to the authorities from diaspora Bukharan Jewish associations, thinks the government’s refusal to budge could harm its image abroad.

“Even when the Taleban ruled Afghanistan, they did not touch the only synagogue in Kabul,” he said.

Like their Afghan neighbours, Tajikistan’s people are mostly Sunni Muslims. But there is no indication that the synagogue dispute is about the majority faith picking on the minority.

Instead, the secular government appears to be disregarding the sensitivities of the local Jewish community in favour of a prestige construction project, and to be oblivious to how its seemingly unsympathetic stance will be received abroad.

“The Jewish community says that according to their beliefs, a synagogue cannot be moved or demolished,” Nuriddinov told IWPR. “But the Tajik Jews forget that they are living in another nation, which is naturally ruled by its own laws.”

Negotiations between the community and the Dushanbe authorities have come to nothing. Last month, the city authorities moved in and destroyed the classroom, the kosher slaughterhouse and ritual bathhouse which formed part of the synagogue complex. Mayoral spokesman Shavkat Saidov said the synagogue itself will be gone by the end of June.

With their attempt to protect their synagogue defeated, community members are left hoping that some kind of future can be salvaged.

“This synagogue is very important so that future generations can continue our culture,” said Irina, who has two children. “We don’t have the capacity or resources to build a new one, but we hope that the government will consider the matter and provide some support.”

Location: Central Asia
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