

Wahhabis Unsettle Nalchik Regime

Author: IWPR

Even in a republic with long Islamic traditions such as Kabardino-Balkaria, the authorities are deeply suspicious of extremist religious tendencies

The young effendi, Ali, graduated from an Islamic institute in Saudi Arabia. On his return to Nalchik two years ago, he went to work in one of the city's more depressed districts, where he opened a mosque. He was young and energetic: what he lacked in knowledge, he made up for in passion.

Soon young children were flocking to Ali's mosque in droves. It was easy enough to tell his disciples - they seemed older than their age, they didn't go to discos and kept themselves to themselves.

"We don't like the way our girls dress," said one. "They wear see-through blouses and very short skirts. They arouse desire in men and that's a sin. Kids of our age spend all their time in discos. The music and the dancing are the devil's work..."

Ten of Ali's converts studied in the same school. No one paid them much attention until the teachers heard that they were taking other children aside, reproaching them for bad behaviour or sloppy dress and encouraging them to come to Ali's meetings...

The school authorities were swift to react. The spectre of Wahhabism - fundamental Islam - has cast a long shadow over the North Caucasus. In the current atmosphere of unrest, Islamic sects are perceived as dark, subversive forces which work to brainwash young people and encourage their militant tendencies.

Ali was duly approached and warned; the children were threatened with expulsion. They were fortunate the police were not involved. Rustam, another young religious leader, was arrested after the authorities discovered young people were meeting at his apartment and attending services together. Rustam was questioned over his links with Wahhabi organisations and threatened with a jail term.

This reactionary attitude to religious sects seems all the more strange in a republic with long Islamic traditions. The Circassians who live in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea and Karachaevo-Cherkessia converted to Islam long before Christianity came to the Caucasus. However, they tempered their religious credo with the old pagan traditions - a code of honour known as the "khabza".

When the Soviets cracked down on all religious beliefs, the Circassians offered the authorities little resistance and Islamic instruction all but vanished.

But, hard on the heels of perestroika, a number of mosques and teaching institutions were opened across Kabardino-Balkaria. The Islamic Institute in Nalchik boasts teachers from across the Arab world and every year several dozen graduates leave the republic for further instruction abroad.

But if Islam offers converts a spiritual escape from alcohol and drugs, it also makes enormous demands on its converts. Zalina is 19 years old, a Kabardinian from a traditional family who takes evening classes at the State University.

This year, Zalina agreed to marry Timur, a graduate from Nalchik's Islamic Institute, who has made no

secret of his vision of married life. Zalina will be expected to pray five times a day, to shun jewellery and cosmetics, to wear clothes which conceal her figure and a scarf which covers her head.

"If I didn't love him, I would have said 'no' a long time ago," says Zalina.

The greatest problem the authorities have to face is that religious zeal is not spread by money, ambition or greed but by youth, idealism and passion.

Maya Bitokova is a print, TV and radio journalist in Nalchik

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