TAJIKISTAN: PRAYER LEADERS DETAINED IN LATEST ANTI-ISLAM OFFENSIVE

- 07.04.2016

Eurasianet, April 6, 2016

For the first time in Tajikistan, mosque prayer leaders have been arraigned on terrorism charges.

The six people on trial are accused of membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization banned in Tajikistan.

This marks a departure from the norm since prayer leaders, or imam khatib, are more commonly targeted with charges of sexual molestation or even witchcraft.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Libertys Tajik service, Ozodi, reported on April 5 that the group was arrested in March and have since been in pre-trial detention. Authorities have declined to provide any further information, arguing that it could interfere with the course of investigations.

A lawyer for one of the accused told EurasiaNet.org that the men were detained at various locations around Sughd and that all of them were graduates of the Islamic University of Madinah, in Saudi Arabia.

The detention of other imam khatibs and spiritual leaders belonging to this group is carrying on. At the moment, their detention has been sanctioned by the court and they are facing official charges, the lawyer, Faizinniso Vohidova, told EurasiaNet.org.

Vohidova said that investigators argue that the group was recruited to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s.

The Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Tajikistan in 2006 and declared a terrorist group. That created some discomfort in the period following the revolution in Egypt, when Muslim Brotherhood

leader Mohamed Morsi was ushered into power through elections in 2012.

Despite implicitly considering Morsi the leader of a terrorist group, Tajikistan demurred from severing diplomatic relations with Egypt.

While it is known that six imam khatibs have been detained, official sources say the number is in fact greater.

Last week, General Prosecutor Yusuf Rahmon stated in an interview to state-owned newspaper Jumuhuriat that imam khatibs are using their platforms in mosques to encourage people to join the ranks of the Islamic State group. No documentary evidence has come to light indicating that this is a favored or even effective recruitment mechanism. Rahmon himself suggested in the same interview that most alleged IS recruits were initially groomed in Russia and that social media apps are also a popular channel for spreading the word.

It is worth noting that imam khatibs are appointed in agreement with the governments committee on religion. They are obliged to follow refresher courses annually and must routinely re-register. Also, they are paid salaries from the state budget.

Questions remain about whether anybody in the committee on religion will face sanctions for letting so many suspected extremists through the net.

Surveillance on figures of religious authority is being tightened across the board.

On March 28, Dushanbe Mayor Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev issued a decree to install close-circuit cameras and metal detectors in the citys mosques at the mosques own expense in what has been cast as a preventative measure. The goal is ostensibly to ensure that mosque-goers not act excessively Muslim.

Kaynak/Source: