

Dagestan
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Calls for, and practical attempts of introduction of the *sharia* laws are the core issue of the contemporary process of Islamic resurgence in the North Caucasus. In 1997 the Chechen Republic officially proclaimed itself an Islamic State living by the *sharia*. Despite some shortcomings of the Chechen experience in this respect, the idea of the *sharia*'s enactment is nevertheless getting more public attention and proponents in other north-Caucasian republics, Dagestan in particular.

Historically, Dagestan has been the major centre of Islamic culture in the whole North Caucasus. Through the years of Soviet rule peoples of Dagestan, Avars and Dargins in particular managed to keep their Islamic traditions alive. That is why the difficulties of the transition to the post-Soviet development and the aggravating crisis of Dagestani society, especially its spiritual-ethical dimension, provoked a reaction with discernible Islamic overtones. The government's inability to put an end to the spread of crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution and other moral deviations little known to Dagestanis' life-style before *perestroika*, draws many people to consider Islamic religious and juridical principles as a means to society's spiritual and moral recovery, and possibly a way to the establishment of more righteous socio-political order.

There are two major forces pushing the cause of Islamization in Dagestan: the official Muslim clergy represented in the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Dagestan (SBMD) and adherents of Islamic fundamentalism, generally but not quite correctly called 'Wahhabis'. They are bitterly opposed to each other. The SBMD is controlled by followers of sufi sheikhs and thus advocates the ideology of Sufi brotherhoods ('*tariqat*'), which has been dominant in Dagestan since the early Middle-Ages. So, official clergy condemns 'wahhabism', whose presence became noticeable in Dagestan only since the late 1980s, as a an ideology 'imported' (from Saudi Arabia), which is absolutely alien to Dagestani traditions and which is nothing more than a tool of dividing the Muslims and a religious disguise for those seeking political power and personal wealth.

On their part, the 'Wahhabis' blame the Sufi '*tariqat*' Islam for having distorted the authentic Islamic beliefs and practices established by the Prophet Muhammad, for various reasons. One reason is because the sufis allegedly worship their sheikhs (saints) alongside Allah which is incompatible with the basic Islamic principle of monotheism (*tawhid*); another reason being that they have introduced many new traditions that did not exist in early Islam and left out many others that are essential to Islamic doctrine (such as *jihad*). Criticizing the cooperation between the SBMD and Dagestani authorities, the 'Wahhabis' accuse the tariqatist Sheikhs of selling the religion to the 'unbelieving' secular government.

Despite this rivalry between 'tariqatists' and 'Wahhabis', the results of their accumulated efforts leads to further Islamization of the society. Yet, while the official clergy and sufi brotherhoods are concerned mostly with building their institutional infrastructure and religious propaganda through the opening of new mosques, 'madressas', Islamic charitable foundations, publishing religious books and newspapers, celebrating religious holidays and organizing pilgrimages to Mecca; the 'Wahhabis' skilfully combine this agenda with practical efforts to introduce Islamic regulations into daily life of some local, and mostly rural communities. Although institutional resources and access to mass-media are relatively more limited for the 'Wahhabis', they undeniably hold the initiative in practical, on-the-ground Islamization.

In sharp contrast to the behaviour of the SBMD leaders who, just a few years ago had

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made an abortive attempt to convince the government to declare Friday an official holiday in Dagestan, and still tend to appeal to the authorities on every small issue; the 'Wahhabis' in recent years have persistently worked on establishing the Islamic order in regions where they feel most self-assured. Thus, the contours of Islamic enclaves in some villages of Buinaksk and other districts have been in the making since 1995-96. In August, the villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, and Qadar, proclaimed 'a separate Islamic territory governed by *sharia* laws'. By the beginning of September this conflict was resolved through an agreement between the 'Wahhabis' and the authorities, which brought the villages back under the political and administrative control of the government. The agreement tacitly accepted the socio-cultural hegemony of the Islamists at the local level, leaving them free to keep the *sharia* rulings applicable in the villages.

No less challenging for the government, a different pattern of Islamization can be observed in Kirovaul, a village in the Kyzilyurt district (about 50 km. west of Makhachkala). Kirovaul is one of those many villages that emerged in 1940-70 due to the enforced resettlement of mountainous *auls*' dwellers in the plains of Northern Dagestan. It has some 3 000 inhabitants, almost all of them Avars. 70% of them came from the village of Sildi, Tzumada *rayion*, and the rest came from other Tzumada villages.

By the early 1990s, its population had also become divided into adherents of traditional '*tariqat*' Islam and 'Wahhabis'. The 'Sildis' turned out to be more disposed to fundamentalist ideology, and by now almost half of them are considered 'Wahhabis', while there are virtually no 'Wahhabis' among those coming from other villages. Thus, the 'Wahhabis' make up roughly 1/3 of Kirovaul's population.

Ideological controversy could not be avoided. Religious disputes had been occurring even during prayer times in the village mosque. To prevent these disputes from disrupting the prayers, it was eventually decided to pray separately: the 'Wahhabis' were to stay at the existing mosque, and the 'tariqatists' began to construct a new mosque for themselves. The solution had been negotiated peacefully and satisfied both parties. Since then the relationship between the followers of the two trends has been quite normal. It is amazing that the village madressa 'Sildi' makes room for both 'Wahhabi' and 'tariqat' scholars teaching there side by side. Contacts are also normally maintained in everyday life. Children from Wahhabist and tariqatist families play together, while in many other Dagestani settlements they are dragged into their parents' quarrels (for instance, the 'Wahhabis' are often accused of inciting their children to tease tariqatists' children by calling them '*mushriks*', meaning 'polytheists'). One possible explanation of such unusual mutual tolerance is the fact that the majority of tariqatists in Kirovaul follow Naqshbandi Sheikh Tadjuddin of Khasavyurt and not Sheikh Said-Efendi of Chirkey, whose *murids* (disciples) control the SBMD and are consequently much more hostile to Wahhabis.

Recourse to Islamic regulations is not something absolutely new in Kirovaul, whose inhabitants have kept much of the traditional mountain dwellers' respect for religious values. Selling of alcoholic beverages had been virtually banned for several years. But this did not prevent alcohol abuse from spreading. Intoxicated persons were quite often seen in the streets using foul language and provoking quarrels. Besides, drug dealers from neighbouring Chechnya started to come to the village, selling 'anasha' (a sort of narcotic) and recruiting local, unemployed youngsters for their criminal networks. Thefts of livestock, crops and personal property have become frighteningly frequent. Families have been increasingly anxious about the moral integrity of women and young girls. Local police paid almost no attention to people's requests to restore safety and order, which led many village dwellers to believe that the police were corrupt and unreliable.

It is against such a background that the gathering of Kirovaul inhabitants voted in May 1998 for the establishment of the *sharia* court and *sharia* guard to fight alcohol and drug abuse, theft and moral laxity. Tariqatists and Wahhabis got equal representation among the 6 judges (3 most competent scholars from each side) and the guard, which consisted of some 40-50 people. Leaflets informing the population about the principles of the *sharia* structures' activity were posted on the mosques' walls. Then the *sharia* guard started patrolling the village streets, especially at night.

All those picked up in the street for appearing drunk or committing theft are being brought before the court, which determines an appropriate punishment in accordance with the *sharia*. Of course, such measures as the cutting off of hands or throwing stones have never been applied, and the only punishment in use is beating with a stick. The number of blows depends upon the nature of the transgression. There are no public floggings in Kirovaul. All punishments are executed in the madressa building in the presence of the judges and guard members only. However, the names of the punished become immediately known all over the village.

At least within the first month of its activity the *sharia* guard did not face serious resistance on the part of the transgressors or their families. On the contrary, some women suffering from their husband's addiction to alcohol, started urging the *sharia* guard to step in. Most of the respondents in Kirovaul admitted that since the enactment of the *sharia*, the situation in the village has become more safe and relaxed, there have been less thefts and other crimes.

Assessing the implications and the prospects of the Kirovaul experience however, one should not overestimate its relevance for other regions of Dagestan.

The initial success of the *sharia*'s enactment was facilitated by some peculiarities of the microcosm of the Kirovaul society, such as the relatively high incipient level of religious feelings; relatively strong tradition of self-government typical of mountainous and recently

resettled communities used to settling internal problems by themselves, without recourse to official authorities (the element of change is that the power of Islam has become more pronounced than the power of elders); and the monoethnic composition of the village which makes it difficult for the opponents of the Islamization to hamper it by playing on inter-ethnic rivalry. Besides, virtually all the Kirovaul inhabitants are bound by ties of close or distant blood relations; thus going against the *sharia* guard would be tantamount to going against one's own relatives, which is considered extremely reprehensible by Caucasian traditions.

The character of punishments applied and the list issues regulated by the *sharia* show that the scope of Islamization in Kirovaul remains rather limited. The Islamists confine mostly to maintaining public order, and so far it is not even clear how they would handle the issue of 'immoral behaviour' and if this implies the enforcement of the veil and Islamic dress for women. All socio-economic issues, including the land ownership disputes that are so crucial for Dagestan, and political and administrative issues are regulated by state legislation. Enactment of the *sharia* does not seem to be a strategy to drive out the state structures as much as an attempt to fill the security void left by weak and corrupt authority.

The fate of Kirovaul will also depend upon the local Islamists' ability to restrain their ambitions and to take public opinion into account. It is essential to understand that people's support of Islamization is conditional to how much it meets their social expectations rather than of any special ideological commitment. If, in their religious zeal, the Islamists go too far, if people feel any infringements on their traditional values and life-style which do not necessarily correspond to some Islamist blueprints, a substantial part of the population risks turning against the Islamists. As the *sharia* structures lose their legitimacy, it will be much easier for the government to split and neutralize the Islamist forces. Conversely, as the local authorities are losing faith in assistance from the central government, they may increasingly opt for joining this protest movement under Islamic slogans.

It is obvious that the Islamization and enactment of the *sharia* do not necessarily imply violent, separatist and anti-state inclinations, as some incidents have shown. The issue of integrating some Islamic legal regulations into the legislation of Dagestan, and maybe some other predominantly Muslim republics of North Caucasus, should be paid more serious attention. ◆

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