

Tajikistan: The 'women's mosque' burnt to ashes

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Islamic Party Cries Foul As Tajikistan's 'Women's Mosque' Burns

Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) says a fire that destroyed the party's cultural center in Dushanbe — widely known as the "women's mosque" — was not an accident.

The building, adjacent to the party's headquarters and its main prayer hall, was almost completely destroyed by fire on the afternoon of October 23.

The religious center functioned as the only mosque in Tajikistan that allowed women to pray alongside men.

Mahmadali Hayit, a deputy head of the IRP, suggested the building was set ablaze deliberately. "I think it was arson and it was done with some type of fuel," he said. "The fire started from the back of the building, which does not have any electrical line."

Authorities in Dushanbe say the incident is under investigation and that "nothing is clear at this point." Interior Minister Abdurahim Qahhorov visited the site to talk to party leaders and assess the situation.

Religion And Politics

IRP leaders say the incident took place a day after officials from the country's Religious Affairs Committee visited the center to tell the party to stop using the building for prayers.

The IRP's Ahmadali Hayit believes the fire was no accident. "I see a direct connection between the delegation's visit and this fire," Hayit was quoted by the IRP's website as saying.

Earlier in the week, the party headquarters was raided by law enforcement agencies. They disrupted prayers and "also took away some disks and literature on display there for sale," Hayit said.

Interior Ministry spokesman Mahmaddullo Asadulloev said the IRP had repeatedly been told not to use its headquarters for prayers and for selling religious compact disks.

"Such raids were taking place for years. But now they are reinforced," Asadulloev said. "Tapes and disks that are being sold there illegally should be confiscated."

Closure Order

The mosque is at the center of a long-running dispute between Tajik officials and the IRP, the only officially registered Islamic party in Central Asia.

The state Committee for Religious Affairs insists the building is not officially registered as a prayer house and that political parties should not have mosques.

Party officials have in the past said the government was seeking to close down the mosque to prevent any future growth in the party's influence.

Hayit said the party previously had been warned by the Religious Committee that the mosque would be closed by October 13. However, according to Hayit, the party was hoping "the issue will be resolved peacefully."

According to party officials, between 2,500 and 3,000 people attend Friday Prayers at the party headquarters' mosque.

Women attend Friday Prayers at Islamic Renaissance Party headquarters in Dushanbe. At least 100 women took part in Friday Prayers in the adjacent prayer room, which is separated by a partition from the main hall where the men pray. The IRP, however, calls it a women's religious cultural center.

Traditional Islam

Tajik religious authorities banned women from attending mosque prayers in 2004. No official reason was given, but pro-government clerics had argued that the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam — followed by a majority of Tajiks — does not require women to attend mosque prayers.

But the decision sparked some protests by women and religious leaders, who criticized it as a violation of women's rights.

Women and girls in Tajikistan do not traditionally attend mosque prayers.

In certain places, most notably in the Muhammadiya Mosque in the Vahdat district outside Dushanbe, and in a mosque run by prominent Mullah Hoji Mirzo in the southern city of Kulob, some women used to participate in Friday Prayers.

However, in recent years the authorities have ordered both mosques to stop holding women's prayers.

written by Farangis Najibullah with contribution from RFE/RL's Tajik Service

P.S.

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http://www.rferl.org/content/Islamic_Party_Cries_Foul_As_Tajikistans_Womens_Mosque_Burns/2200792.html