

Analysis-Fight over Islam, money and power brings violence to Volga



By Thomas Grove

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(Reuters) - Not far from glitzy boulevards where an oil boom has sent up stadiums and high-rises overlooking the Volga River, women in headscarves wander through Islamic bookstores selling pamphlets on the institution of sharia in Russia.

Kazan, capital of Russia's mainly-Muslim Tatarstan region, has long had an image as a showcase of religious tolerance. But that reputation was shattered last week by car bomb and shooting attacks carried out only hours before the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

On the wall outside the bookshop, a flyer in the local Tatar language calls Muslims to unite against the region's top religious leader, Mufti Ildus Faizov, who was wounded in the attacks which also killed his deputy.

"Things will only get worse here and Muslims will be the ones who suffer the most," said Anisa Karabayeva, 43, her face framed by a white hijab, or traditional headscarf.

"Will there be more bombs? Probably," she says flatly, standing in front of a display case stocked with Korans and prayer rugs.

The attacks came against a background of anger among many Muslims who complain that the authorities in Tatarstan are restricting Islam in the name of fighting radicalism. It is a dispute that also involves a struggle for money and influence in the increasingly prosperous oil-producing region.

President Vladimir Putin, who started a new six-year term in May, has repeatedly called for national unity and religious concord in a predominantly Orthodox Christian nation with deep-rooted ethnic minorities, many of them Muslim.

For decades, Russia has endured violence in mostly Muslim provinces in the North Caucasus on its southern fringe, where tens of thousands of people were killed in two separatist wars in Chechnya after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and insurgents are still fighting to set up an Islamic state.

But booming Tatarstan - 2000 km (1,200 miles) away from the war zones - had largely avoided unrest until now.

Moderate Muslims in Tatarstan blame the violence on the arrival of radical groups, such as followers of Sunni Islam's strict Salafi movement and the outlawed organization Hizb ut-Tahrir which seeks an Islamic caliphate.

Last week's attack resembles strikes against moderate muftis in places like the Caucasus region of Dagestan next door to Chechnya. Kazan is now on increased alert for more attacks. Outside of mosques, police rifle through the belongings and bags of the faithful, who line up in front of metal detectors.

"Today Islam is growing strongly in Kazan... But there are different sects and movements that you simply cannot control," said Ramil Mingarayev, an imam at the al Marjani Mosque.

"We try to fight radicals, we have tried to clean our city of them, but there are hidden mosques, where they gather and distribute forbidden literature, in basements and in the forests."

Some of those fears arise from threats made by North Caucasus militants far away. Russia's most wanted man, Chechen Islamist guerrilla leader Doku Umarov, called for an uprising among Russia's Muslims last year, mentioning Tatarstan by name.

"I want to appeal to the Muslim brothers who live on Russian-occupied Muslim land... I call on you to destroy the enemies of Allah wherever you are. I call on you to destroy them where your hand reaches and to open fronts of jihad," he said in a video posted on insurgency-affiliated website Kavkaz Centre.

SELLING TOURS

Since becoming head of the Tatarstan branch of the Russian state's Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in April last year, Faizov has been praised by Kremlin authorities for what they say are measures to clamp down on radical sentiment and encourage traditional forms of Islamic practice seen as more moderate.

Religion is also a big business, which has made him enemies. Four months ago Faizov gave near-exclusive rights in Tatarstan to sell tours to Mecca for the annual haj pilgrimage to Tatar Business World, a company his office's web site says it controls. Many Muslims complained that the price went up.

Rustem Gataullin, the chairman of the company that previously had rights to sell pilgrimage tours, was one of between 40 and 100 people who were detained in relation to last week's attacks, according to Interfax.

"He had his enemies," said Gabid Hayruddinov, 73, who reads prayers for the Muslim faithful who come to him in search of help in the city's main mosque of Kul Sharif.

"He promised to make the haj tours cheaper, but instead they became even more expensive: they went from 120,000 to 150,000 roubles (\$4,600)," he said, his light blue eyes set deep against his dark wizened skin.

Small protests against Faizov had bubbled throughout the year in Kazan, culminating with an open letter to him published in Russian and Tatar in various newspapers and on the Internet, calling for the price of haj tours to be cut.

Faizov was unavailable to talk when Reuters called his office. His deputy was likewise unavailable as was another imam with strong ties to the directorate.

A MORE JUST SOCIETY

Beneath the 18th century al Marjani mosque a dark tunnel leads from the room for prayer to the Islamic school across the street. Five times a day the dozens of students make their way through the stone entrance, perform ablutions, pray and return.

For those who experience Russia's failing social welfare programs and chronically corrupt court system and police force, stricter versions of Islam hold out the hope for a more just society.

"It's good we have the authorities - without them there would be chaos," said Zakhid Anovarov, a burly 20-year-old student with a thin black beard.

"But it's not a just system, because it's a man-made system. If we were governed by shariah, then life would be better, more just," he said of the Islamic law code.

Many of the students are migrants from elsewhere in Russia or other former Soviet states to Kazan, where construction money has created new jobs, including sprucing up the city to hold the World University Games next year.

Zarifa Kamilova came to Kazan in 2004 to escape the aftermath of the second Chechen War in her hometown of Grozny, where federal forces had toppled a separatist government.

Like other Chechens in Kazan, she was drawn to its Muslim majority and the possibility to find work. But she says she fears pressure by the authorities will marginalize Muslims, leading more and more of them to radicalism.

"I have already taken five books off my shelves this year because they were considered too radical," she said, referring to an ever-expanding list of literature outlawed by Russia's Justice Ministry. She and other Muslims say they have felt increasing pressure since Faizov assumed his post.

"This alone is turning normal people into radicals. It's not that more people are becoming radical it's that their definition is encompassing more and more people," she said.

She says she fears a government crackdown on Muslims that will ban more religious literature she would otherwise sell in her store, where everything from electronic Korans to prayer rugs to Chinese-made clocks with prayers on them is on offer.

Referring to previous crackdowns on illegal groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, which thrives in Central Asia and has been brought to Russia by immigrants, she says she has never faced arrest. But: "I have learned one thing, never think it can't happen to you".

Muslims in Kazan say Faizov also launched a bid to take over leadership at the Kul Sharif Mosque, a visual symbol of the renaissance of Islam in Kazan. Completed in 2005, it sits on the site of a medieval mosque destroyed in the 16th century by Ivan the Terrible, who conquered the Kazan Khanate, a Tatar state ruled by descendants of Genghis Khan.

TAKEN IN THE NIGHT

In his battle with radical Islam, perhaps none of Faizov's efforts were as divisive as his demand that imams of all mosques undergo a course in traditional Hanafi Islam, the movement traditionally associated with Tatarstan.

In December, angry Muslims stormed the main mosque in the town of Almetevsk, 270 km (170 miles) and for hours refused to let local religious authorities enter. The confrontation was eventually defused by Faizov, but resentment still burns.

Near Almetevsk, in the village of Novoye Nadyrovo where roosters and chickens wander freely along gravel paths, authorities removed the local imam, Ilnar Kharisov, from his post a few months ago. Friends say he was detained on Friday night, the day after the explosions in Kazan.

Kharisov, a young scholar who had studied abroad and taken the name Abdulmalik, still has a religious following in the village and his sacking as imam split the community. Neighbors say a former communist functionary has been placed in charge of the village mosque. They speak darkly of Kharisov's arrest.

"They've taken all the good imams away and they've replaced them with clowns in their places, and they protect them there with police. People are very unhappy here," said a neighbor of Kharisov who gave his name only as Ramil. (\$1 = 32.7652 Russian roubles)

(Reporting by Thomas Grove; Editing by Peter Graff)

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