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# Bid for Sharia Court in St. Petersburg Fails

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ST. PETERSBURG — A Muslim lawyer's attempt to create St. Petersburg's first sharia court flopped just weeks after the court opened amid a storm of criticism from local Muslim leaders and human rights activists that climaxed with an order from prosecutors for its closure.

The court, which adhered to Islamic law, had no judicial power, and its activity was limited to civil disputes, such as reconciling members of estranged families, founder Dzhamaliddin Makhmutov said.

“Our resolutions have no judicial power; what we do would be perhaps best described as honor trials,” Makhmutov said before prosecutors intervened this week.

“We offer solutions and advice rather than punishment, especially in a physical form,” he told The Moscow Times.

Sharia law prescribes severe penalties for some crimes, such as the amputation of hands for theft and stoning for adultery.

"The solutions that we give to the people who come to us are based essentially on the ethics and principles of the Quran," Makhmutov said, referring to the Islamic holy book.

But local prosecutors saw things differently, announcing that the court was in violation of the law and Makhmutov might face extremism charges if he refused to close it.

Makhmutov subsequently backed off on his comments about the court, calling it a "tribunal" instead of a sharia court and saying he had been misunderstood by journalists.

But Makhmutov explicitly said it was a sharia court in his interview with The Moscow Times.

Many Muslim and non-Muslim leaders in St. Petersburg also understood it to be a sharia court and roundly condemned it.

St. Petersburg deputy mufti Ravil Poncheyev slammed the court as anti-constitutional. “We refuse to recognize this group,” Poncheyev said. “It was created by charlatans who do not have any rights to engage in such an activity. Besides, any decision by such a court does not have any legal power, which makes the court an unnecessary and artificial organization.”

St. Petersburg ombudsman Alexei Kozyrev also spoke critically of the court, calling it “inappropriate” and “potentially damaging to the climate of ethnic tolerance in town.”

“We have a stable judicial system in the country that works efficiently, and no substitutes are needed,” Kozyrev said. “In a multifaith country like Russia, it is especially important to adhere to the principles of an independent legal system where people of all religious beliefs are treated equally."

He said his office was looking into the court's work.

Makhmutov said criticism from the Islamic community might be motivated by reluctance to share power. He also said he had faced pressure to close his legal center and received anonymous telephone threats.

Before prosecutors stepped in, he sent a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev asking for protection from what he described as a “witch hunt,” and also sought the support of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov said in May that he considers sharia law to be more important than federal law.

Sharia courts were created in Chechnya in 1995, when the republic became a de facto independent republic, and the secular judicial system was only restored after the start of the second Chechen war in 1999.

More than 20 countries in Africa and Asia, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt, Libya and Sudan, currently base their legal systems on sharia law, although most of them incorporate elements from other judicial systems as well.

Some Western countries, like Britain, have sharia courts based in mosques that handle civil

disputes.

Several dozen people, many of them newly arrived immigrants, sought the advice of the court, located at the Islamic Prayer House on Moskovsky Prospekt in central St. Petersburg, in the weeks after it opened, Makhmutov said.

Issues brought up had little to do with the intricacies of faith, he said. People came to complain about bribes demanded by local schools and kindergartens to admit their children, impeded access to qualified medical help and threats from non-Muslim neighbors.

Shukhrat Mavlyanov, a leader of St. Petersburg's Uzbek community, welcomed the court as a way to help Muslim newcomers integrate into St. Petersburg life.

"Uzbek immigrants find it very difficult to adapt to their new lives in St. Petersburg," he told the Gazeta.spb.ru news web site. "They have lived in an Islamic state all their lives, and here they find a civil country. I think that for many of them it would be easier to seek advice from a Muslim *qadi* [a sharia judge] than a magistrate."

But the court could have just the opposite effect, by further isolating members of the Muslim community who already had problems adapting to city life, said Valentina Uzunova, a senior researcher with the St. Petersburg Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography.

"I would recommend an integration strategy, rather than locking themselves in seclusion," said Uzunova, who often acts as a consultant on hate crimes in the city's courts.

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