

FSB Faulted as Islamic Center Closes

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May 26, 2011

The  Moscow Times

An influential Islamic organization with offices across the country has been forced to close, highlighting a political struggle over the country's millions-strong Muslim population.

Representatives of the [Islamic Cultural Center](#) and analysts said a Supreme Court ruling upholding the center's closure was politically charged.

"This is a bureaucratic order from people who want the Muslim part of society to be represented by puppets," the center's chairman and founder, Abdul-Wahid Niyazov, told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday confirmed a decision from the Justice Ministry last fall to close the center for "multiple violations of financial regulations," Interfax reported.

Among the objections mentioned by the court was that 21 of the center's 54 regional branches lacked proper legal documentation.

But Niyazov said the evidence presented by the Justice Ministry was obtained under pressure from the Federal Security Service. "Any member of our regional staff will testify that they were threatened and pressured," he said at a Supreme Court hearing Tuesday, Interfax reported.

He said many of the center's regional directors had resigned after receiving intimidating calls from the FSB.

Niyazov said Thursday that he would appeal the decision in every possible way, including with a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

He said he would also appeal to the All-Russia People's Front, the political vehicle set up by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin earlier this month. Putin is widely seen as the country's most powerful politician and in control of the security services.

The Islamic Cultural Center, whose work has been suspended since last fall, held exhibitions, news conferences and readings and hosted visiting Islamic dignitaries.

It describes itself as the "public arm" of the Council of Muftis, one of four organizations representing the country's Muslims.

Council spokeswoman Gulnur Gaziyeveva said the center's work was directed at the well-being of the country's Muslims.

"We believe that we can correct the legal problems and re-register the organization," she said by telephone.

But the center's closure was welcomed by the All-Russia Muftiate, a rival organization set up last December, reportedly with active help from the Kremlin.

"This so-called public arm of the Council of Muftis was just a poor excuse for a sham," the muftiate's executive chairman, Mukhammedgali Khuzin, told Interfax.

He said the center had done real harm to the Muslim community and to the country's interfaith relations. He did not elaborate.

Asked to comment on Khuzin's allegations, Gaziyeveva said only that it was "very sad to hear such a smear" coming from within the Muslim community.

Analysts linked the struggle to authorities' desire to bring the country's Muslims under tighter control.

Alexander Soldatov, a religions expert with Portal-credo.ru, said the Kremlin was frightened after the Council of Muftis organized mass prayers at Moscow's central mosque for the Eid al-Adha feast last November.

"After the prayers last fall they introduced the All-Russia Muftiat — which is obviously directed against the council," he said by telephone.

Soldatov also said City Hall has shown extreme reluctance to Muslims' demands to build new

mosques in the capital after last year's nationalist rioting on Manezh Square.

Last November, authorities backed away from plans to build a mosque in the southeastern Tekstilshchiki neighborhood after complaints from local residents.

Although the capital boasts scores of mainly Muslim migrants, it officially only has four mosques.

On Thursday afternoon, City Hall officials held talks with Muslim representatives over the issue. No results of the meeting were immediately released.

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