

Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria
(Grand Mufti's Office in the Republic of Bulgaria)

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Written statement to working session 10: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief

Legal proceeding against Muslim clerics and citizens accused of radicalism and negative attitudes of the public opinion against the Muslim community

In September 2012 the Regional Court of Pazardzhik town started legal proceedings against 13 Muslim clerics accused of sermonizing radical Islam, and membership in an unregistered organization in Bulgaria.

Things in which the defendants were accused, are related to their personal life and do not threaten anyone. Wearing a long beard and praying 5 times a day does not mean belonging to an organization that preaches religious hatred.

The prosecutions are built on things that are nonpunishable, and Muslims in the country are surprised by this fact.

According to us the allegations are exaggerated and do not correspond with the truth, the claims are highly manipulative.

Such allegations undermine the authority of the religious institution of the Muslims, while constantly subjected to doubt the authority of those public figures of the Muslim community that the administrations of confession rely very much and need their administrative and religious competence for the effective exercise of guaranteed right to freedom of religion - collectively and through education.

In view of the history, customs, culture and traditions of Muslims in Bulgaria, and giving an account the performance and mood during the transition to democracy, the Chief Mufti and Bulgarian citizens professing Islam in Bulgaria declare that those citizens not endanger national security, public order and undermine the foundations of the constitutional order in Bulgaria, they do not incite ethnic and religious hatred. Bulgarian Muslims have always been and will be peaceful and tolerant to each representative of society.

The actions of the security services two years ago in the Rhodopes region were very bad signal to the Muslims in the country. Then in October 2010, officials of the National Security Agency held a very noisy action on homes, mosques and offices in several towns in the Western Rhodopes. Bags of books, mobile phones and computers were confiscated. The attitude and manner of holding the action sparked unpleasant memories from the past (totalitarian period).

The fabricated term "radical Islam" is taken as an insult among Muslims in Bulgaria. An expression imposed in circulation mainly after September 11, which is empty of content and used deliberately to specific purposes.

The case in Pazardzhik against 13 accused of spreading anti-democratic ideology and participation in unregistered organization in Bulgaria named “Al-Waqf al-Islam” is presented as a search for radical Islam. This helps tendentious presentation of the process by a part of the country’s media.

Such a presented picture causes fear and contempt for Muslims in general - misunderstanding. This builds a distorted image of Islam and Muslims, and a negativism toward Muslims accumulates. There are suspicions that the whole process is to justify the noisy operation of Security services in October 2010.

All about the trial is in informational eclipse that artificially created. Media talk mostly about clothing and appearance of the accused, and those are things that should not bother us. Chief Mufti’s Office in Bulgaria is very concerned that the case is custom made and used for political purposes. This can lead to very serious conflict that would adversely affect the country and its citizens.

We, the Muslims in Bulgaria believe that there is no radical Islam in the country. It is significant that even after the publication of the movie “Innocence of Muslims”, in Bulgaria had no protests that threaten the order and security of the country and its citizens.

We believe that it is a restriction of freedom of thought and free exercise of religion. Some of the defendants are employees of the Muslim denomination in Bulgaria, and they would not preach any ideology beyond the control of the governing bodies of denomination, as well ideologies that are unknown to Bulgarian Muslims. Among the defendants are regional muftis, imams and teachers. Our concerns are dictated by our need and desire to develop and provide better conditions for the Muslim community for development in religious aspect, which is a necessary condition for good co-existence of citizens of different faiths.

Recommendations to the Bulgarian authorities:

1. Prevent the interference of the state organizations in the religious matters and the political regulation of religious problems.
2. Guarantee freedom of belief and implement effectively anti discriminatory legislation.
3. Faciliate religious self-identification of the Bulgarian citizens by acknowledging that Christian and Muslim religious practices are traditional for Bulgaria.

Recommendations to OSCE:

1. OSCE and its institutions to observe closely the legal proceeding in Pazardzhik;
2. ODIHR’s Panel of Advisers on Freedom of Religion or Belief to observe whether Bulgarian authorities are implementing the Religious rights of Muslims in the country, as well to recommend and advise Bulgarian government on the issue of Religious freedom and Fundamental rights;
3. OSCE/ODIHR to observe closely the process of Freedom of Religion of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries.