

Memorial recognizes Moscow imam Makhmud Velitov as a political prisoner

Makhmud Velitov, the imam of Moscow's Yaryam mosque, has been sentenced to three years in a general-regime prison colony for a sermon given in 2013. The FSB and the court considered that Velitov committed the offence of public justification of terrorism (Article 205.2, Section 1, of the Russian Criminal Code) on the grounds that he advocated in public the "doctrine of political Islam" characteristic of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, which is banned in Russia, spoke about the need to create a caliphate, and also expressed approval for the activities of Abdulla Gappaev, a Muslim killed in Dagestan, whom the FSB believes was a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Abdulla Gappaev, a representative of the organization "Union of the Just" in Dagestan, was killed by automatic gunfire on 15 September 2013 in Kizlyar; the killers fled the scene of the crime).

In point of fact, Velitov did not mention Hizb ut-Tahrir once in his speech. He spoke of the caliphate in the context of Islamic prophecies: the idea of the future caliphate is an inseparable part of the Islamic doctrine as a whole, and no particular Islamic organizations have a monopoly on the idea. Although Velitov in his speech talked of the desirability of introducing Sharia law, "at the state level, and not at the level of some local community," he made no calls to violence.

Accusing a person of "justifying terrorism" on account of a few good words and a prayer addressed to a murdered man, who, it should be said, had not been found guilty of any crime, is utterly beyond belief.

The link between Velitov's sermon and the "terrorist organization" was invented and artificial. Moreover, in the view of Memorial, the very designation of Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organization is unjustified. There is no evidence that this community, which is registered as a legal political party in the Middle East, is complicit in even a single act of terrorism anywhere in the world. In the countries of Western Europe (with the exception of Germany) and North America, the party is not banned. We consider there are no grounds to prosecute the members of Hizb ut-Tahrir as terrorists, and we have regularly recognized people convicted for taking part in this organization as political prisoners.

For more than 15 years Memorial has observed various forms of pressure against Muslims in Russia, including the fabrication of criminal cases for non-existent crimes of extremism and/or terrorism. Government propaganda manipulates and exacerbates grassroots Islamophobia, as well as apprehensions about the threat of terrorism, and substitutes the simulation of a fight against terrorism for the real thing. Recognition of Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organization has proved a "goldmine" for the FSB. It has meant that "high results" (in terms of tens of convictions) in the struggle against terrorism can be achieved with minimal effort. We see a continuous intensification of repressive measures against pseudo-terrorists, and the cases against Hizb ut-Tahrir have been part of this process.

Makhmud Velitov has disabilities (classified under "group 2" in Russian law), and has previously suffered a heart attack and a stroke. Imprisonment, considering the condition of healthcare in the Russian penitentiary system, constitutes a threat to his life.

We demand the immediate release of Velitov and an end to the simulated fight against terrorism.

Recognition of an individual as a political prisoner, or of a prosecution as politically motivated, does not imply that Memorial Human Rights Centre shares or approves the individual's views, statements or actions.

For more information about our opinion on this case, see [our website](#).

PayPal – an e-wallet for giving help to all Russian political prisoners helpmemorial2016@gmail.com.