

Tajikistan moves to ban adolescents from mosques

18 JUN - Tajikistan has taken the first step toward banning children and adolescents from worshipping in mosques and churches, drawing criticism from Muslim leaders who oppose the Central Asian state's crackdown on religious freedom. The lower house of parliament in the impoverished ex-Soviet republic this week passed a "parental responsibility" bill that would make it illegal to allow children to be part of a religious institution not officially sanctioned by the state.

Authorities say the measures are necessary to prevent the spread of religious fundamentalism in the volatile republic, the poorest of the 15 former Soviet republics, where government troops have been fighting insurgents in the mountainous east. Muslim leaders said the law, the brainchild of long-serving President Imomali Rakhmon, would only increase discontent among the majority Muslim population of a nation that fought a civil war in the 1990s in which tens of thousands were killed.

"It's a black day for Muslims. Even in Soviet times, such punitive measures and religious persecution did not exist," said prominent Muslim theologian Akbar Turadzhonzoda. "If the state doesn't want to, the people will defend their faith themselves."

Tajikistan, which shares a 1,340 km (840 mile) border with Afghanistan, has accused religious groups of stoking unrest. Rakhmon last year called home students from religious schools abroad and criticised a growing trend for Islamic dress.

The law now passes to the upper house of parliament, but few doubt that the docile Senate will approve the bill for Rakhmon to sign into law. The president has ruled Tajikistan since 1992.

Turadzhonzoda, who became deputy prime minister after the power-sharing agreement that brought the 1992-1997 civil war to an end, said he sympathised with all Muslims about the new bill.

"You cannot frighten believers with fines, arrest and imprisonment," he said. "If discontent grows, it could lead to a stand-off with the government of the likes seen in Tunisia and Egypt."

More than 98 percent of Tajikistan's 7.5 million population is Muslim. Groups representing the Christian minority also expressed unhappiness and confusion about the new laws.

"Churches and Christian organisations are faced with a dilemma: how can we help our parishioners without breaking the law, but continuing to honour our rules?" the evangelical group 'River of Life' said in a statement.

The group represents most of Tajikistan's 2,500 Protestants. The country is also home to another 70,000 ethnic Russians, most of whom are Orthodox Christians.

The bill would also ban young girls from wearing jewellery beyond a single pair of earrings and make it illegal for them to be tattooed or visit night clubs until they turn 20 years old.

Parents must also give their children a "suitable name" and ban them from drinking alcohol, smoking and taking drugs. The penalties for breaching the new laws have not been published.

In a separate legal change passed by the lower house this week, the founders of unregistered religious schools attended by adolescents could be jailed for between five and 12 years.

Tajik authorities imprisoned 158 people last year on charges of belonging to banned religious organisations, up from 37 in the previous year. A local BBC correspondent was detained this week on such charges.

(Writing by Robin Paxton; Editing by Alistair Lyon)