

## Mosques Reopened in Azerbaijan

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Over the past two months the Azerbaijani press has printed several reports about mosques that have been closed since the 1930s being renovated and reopened for worship. This initiative was announced last October by the spiritual head of Azerbaijan's Shi Muslim community. In an interview given to TASS, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pasha-zade, the chairman of the Religious Board of Transcaucasian Muslims, claimed that religious activity in Azerbaijan was on the increase, that the registration of Muslim communities in the republic was continuing, and that mosques would be handed over to them.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, in December of last year, the press reported the reopening of a number of mosques in the city of Lenkoran: in the towns of Bine in Azizbekov Raion and Keshly; in Neftechala and Pushkin Raions; and the Azhdar-bek and Meshadi Garip mosques, whose location was not specified. Pasha-zade is reported to have attended the opening ceremonies in Lenkoran and Bine. Speaking to the congregation at Lenkoran, he noted that the Lenkoran mosque was built at the end of the last century and closed in the 1930s, which he characterized as "a period of numerous errors, when Leninist principles concerning religion were grossly violated." The townspeople had, nonetheless, he said, continued to care for the mosque, which is now under the jurisdiction of the Religious Affairs Board, and restoration work is being carried out there. Pasha-zade went on to say that several more mosques would be reopened in Azerbaijan before the end of the year and that thirty more would be built or reopened during 1989. He also said that personnel for them would be trained at a *medrese* in Baku located close to the Taza-pir Friday mosque.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking in the town of Bine later in December on the occasion of the opening of the mosque there, Pasha-zade asserted that the policy of *Perestroika* was "enriching" the state's relations with religious communities and that Leninist principles concerning freedom of conscience were being restored. The rights of believers as guaranteed by the USSR Constitution were, he said, becoming a reality.<sup>3</sup>

While the opening of these mosques is an encouraging development, it should be seen in the context of the extremely limited number of mosques officially permitted to function in the USSR until comparatively recently. An article published in the Azerbaijani press two years ago disclosed that there were, at the time of writing, 1,330 mosques officially functioning in the entire USSR, of which 69 had been built between the years 1977 and 1983.<sup>4</sup> (There were also, according to *Literaturnaya gazeta's* political commentator Igor Belayev, more than 1,800 unofficial, "parallel" mosques in the USSR.<sup>5</sup>) The number of mosques functioning in Azerbaijan at that time was eighteen, including two large and five small mosques in the republic's capital, Baku.<sup>6</sup> If the seven mosques that were opened last year and the thirty that are scheduled to be opened this year are added to the eighteen, a total of fifty-five mosques is arrived at - that is, only a fraction of the 2,000 mosques that were operating in Azerbaijan before 1917 and a number hardly adequate to meet the needs of the current population of the republic, which is close to 7 million.

Articles and official speeches published in the Azerbaijani press over the past two

months suggest that the republic's leadership was shocked and bewildered by the militant Islamic element participating in the mass demonstrations that took place in Baku in November and December, 1988. Both Western and Soviet sources reported that demonstrators were carrying green Islamic flags and portraits of the

Ayatollah Khomeini. One Soviet commentary also revealed that some of the leaders of the demonstrations "assembled groups of children, took them into the mosque, taught them how to perform the namaz and other religious rituals, and advocated the wearing of the *chador*."<sup>7</sup> Any speculation about what impact these recent events may have on plans for greater freedom for Azerbaijan's religious community would be premature. They serve, however, to underscore once again the relevance of Lunacharsky's pronouncement, "Religion is like a nail, the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes into the wood."

**FOOTNOTES:**

1 TASS. in English, October 13, 1988.

2 *Bakinsky Rabochii*, December 10, 1988; *Kommunist* (Azerbaijan), December 11, 1988.

3 *Kommunist* (Azerbaijan), December 21, 1988.

4 *Muslims in the USSR*, January 13, 1987.

5 see *Literaturnaya gazeta*. No. 21, 1987.

6 *Kommunist* (Azerbaijan). January 13, 1987.

7 *Kommunist* (Azerbaijan), January 8, 1989; *Bakinsky Rabochii*. January 11, 1989.