

Sufi Cleric Gunned Down in Dagestan

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August 04, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

Two unidentified men opened fire on a Lada car Saturday night in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, killing one of the republic's moderate clerics and severely wounding his driver, local investigators said in a statement.

A criminal case has been opened into the killing of Ilyas Ilyasov, 76, an active religious leader who was known for his critical stance toward the rise of the radical Salafi movement of Islam in Dagestan and across the North Caucasus.

The killing is the latest in a string of attacks against moderate Sufi clerics who promote the inner dimension of Islam instead of the more outward-driven Salafi movement. Since January 2012, 12 religious leaders have been killed, with Ilyasov being the 12th.

Ilyasov frequently warned that the government's inability to provide good governance and the rule of law was one of the reasons for the local population's radicalization.

Gregory Shvedov, a leading expert on the Caucasus and editor-in-chief of the [Caucasian Knot](#)

news agency, which tracks such killings, shed light on some other reasons for the current situation. It would be an oversimplification, he said, to limit the causes of what is currently happening in Dagestan to clashes between different branches of Islam.

"What is happening, for instance the fact that the targets are being chosen very selectively, forces me to be very careful about my analysis. The question is whether some people are using the inter-religious aspect in Dagestan to pursue their own goals," he said.

Investigators in Makhachkala who are working on the case said Ilyasov's religious work was one likely cause of the attack. When Ilyasov was working in a Makhachkala mosque in 2008, he received threats connected with his religious activities.

Perhaps the most troubling part of Ilyasov's murder is the fact that he is only one of many to be killed in the last year.

In August 2012, Said Afandi al-Chirkawi, widely considered the most influential Sufi religious sheikh at the time, was killed by a suicide bomber in his own home. Tens of thousands of people went to his funeral, and a day of mourning was declared in the republic.

Dagestan is the most violent region of Russia and one of the most violent in Europe today. Almost 200 people were killed in the North Caucasus as a result of armed conflicts in the first quarter of 2013, 67 of them in Dagestan, according to the Caucasian Knot's estimates.

The nationalist insurgency has gradually morphed into a religious one following two wars in Chechnya, with radical Islam becoming a refuge for many of the locals who have become disillusioned, unable to find work or seek justice in local courts.

"It seems clear that someone is targeting religious leaders in Dagestan. The question is who is doing it and why the government is not trying to protect these people," Shvedov said.

Dagestan has recently undergone a change of government, with acting head Ramazan Abdulatipov appointed in January 2013. The 15-year mayor of Makhachkala, Said Amirov, was dismissed in June after special forces were sent from Moscow to take him away on suspicion of organizing murders.

Some experts say the change of government has made matters worse.

"Acting President Abdulatipov has fully rolled back the integration process, he does not support dialogue, moreover, he resorts to very polarizing rhetoric. The security services have visibly increased pressure on non-violent Salafi communities and their leaders. All this is likely further escalating tensions. Terrorists should be dealt with militarily, but the sectarian schism can only be overcome through a meaningful dialogue and state neutrality with regard to religious groups," said Yekaterina Solaryanskaya, head of the International Crisis Group's North Caucasus project.

According to Shvedov, it is still too early to come up with any definite conclusions about why Ilyasov was killed and who may have been responsible.

"With many of the terrorist acts [that have happened], we are only able to come to a definite conclusion after several years," he said.

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