

International

Darwin, Islam: Kosovo imam expelled for accepting both

Evidence of the growing threat to Kosovo's 'moderate Islam'

PRISTINA: When not leading prayers in his village mosque in western Kosovo, imam Drilon Gashi was scribbling some unorthodox thoughts on social media - like his belief in the theory of evolution. Eventually, the embrace of both Islam and Darwinism cost him his job. The 31-year-old was unceremoniously expelled from his post by top clergy last month, in what he says is evidence of the growing threat to Kosovo's traditionally moderate brand of Islam.

"Living creatures are created by evolution, but this evolution is led by God," Gashi said of his theory of how Islam and science can work in tandem. "Science reveals natural phenomena as God created them," he added. The political future of Kosovo, a young and troubled democracy on the EU's fringe, will be decided in a general election this Sunday - the fourth since the former Serbian province declared independence in 2008.

But behind the headlines is a different battle for the soul of its dominant faith. Embracing the theory of evolution would not seem that unusual in Kosovo, whose population of 1.8 million has long been known for its moderate flavor of Islam. More than 90 percent of Kosovars identify as Muslim, according to the 2011 census. Yet alcohol flows freely and abundantly, the people are famous for an ardent love of all things American, and most do not wear religious dress.

This identity has shifted over the past two decades, however, with a religious revival in the late 1990s opening a schism between traditional practitioners and a new wave of imams trained abroad. After the 1998-99 independence war with Serbia, an influx of Gulf charity money built hun-

dreds of mosques in Kosovo, spread new teachings and gave imams scholarships to study abroad in places like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

'Modern opinions'

Gashi was one of those beneficiaries, studying in Medina. But he didn't take to the ultra-conservative doctrine practiced there, and the religious establishment did not like his "modern opinions", he told AFP. Back in Kosovo, whose Muslim roots date back to Ottoman rule, he took up his mandate in a new, Dubai-funded mosque in Vitomirice, a village of around 5,000 people. On social media and in comments to the local press, he aired his controversial views. For the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK), the top clerical body, this constituted a "gross violation". "His principles are contrary to the principles of Islam and our internal regulations," Ahmet Sadriu, a BIK spokesperson, told AFP after his expulsion in September.

Globally, views vary on Darwin's theory in the Muslim world. Some scholars say the Koran is less explicit on creation than the Bible's book of Genesis. Xhabir Hamiti, a professor of Islamic studies, said Gashi's beliefs may be controversial but "it would be better and more useful if we had a debate" on the topic in Kosovo. For Gashi's fans, the sacking was the latest sign of a shrinking space for moderates. "Congratulations Drilon! You know far more than these ignorant and conservative religious representatives," one Facebook user wrote in support.

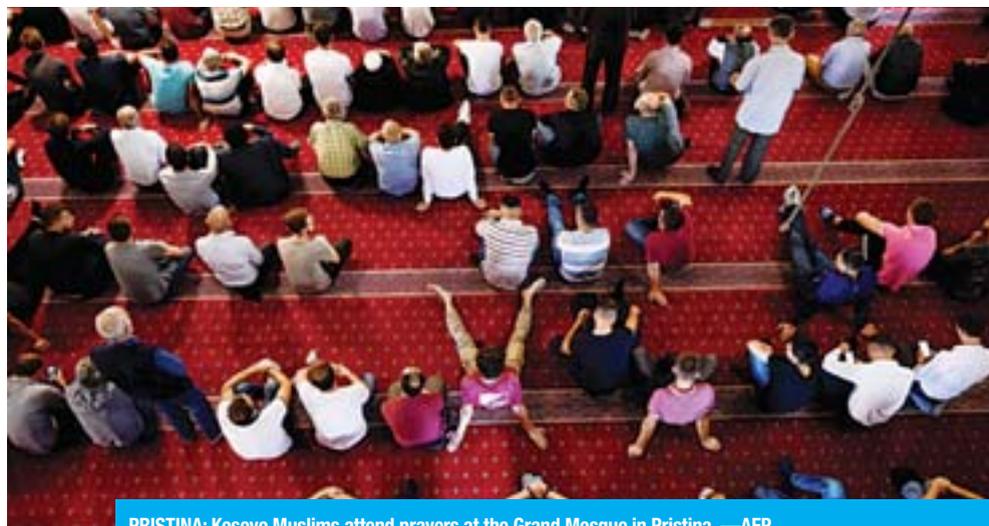
Radicalization

Visar Duriqi, a journalist who covers religious

latest plan includes several basic provisions - including a potential four-year time limit - that EU leaders have categorically rejected in the past.

After speaking by phone to Johnson, European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker pointed to "problematic points that will need further work in the coming days". Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said Johnson's proposals "do not fully meet the agreed objectives," although he promised to "study them in further detail". And the head of the European Parliament's Brexit steering group (BSG) Guy Verhofstadt suggested the UK offer was not a serious attempt at reaching a deal but an effort to shift blame for failure to Brussels. "The first assessment of nearly every member in the BSG was not positive at all," Verhofstadt said.

A leading voice in the "leave" campaign during the 2016 referendum on Brexit, Johnson rose to power in July on a promise to get Britain out of the EU come what may. He vowed to remove the most contentious part of the deal his predecessor Theresa May struck with the bloc in 2017: the so-called "backstop" solution for Northern Ireland. The stopgap arrangement is meant to keep the border open between EU member Ireland and British Northern Ireland after Brexit. The border issue is a delicate issue in Ireland, where sectarian violence killed thousands of people over the decades before the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Brexit supporters fear the backstop would leave Britain subject to EU rules. —AFP



PRISTINA: Kosovo Muslims attend prayers at the Grand Mosque in Pristina. —AFP

affairs, says he personally found the imam's views on evolution a step too far. But he drew a contrast between Gashi's treatment and support given by the Islamic Community to some radical imams accused of recruiting jihadists to Syria and Iraq. The Islamic Community "is not tough at all with imams who were investigated" on terrorism charges, and they continue to "keep the most radical imams in the most influential mosques", he said.

Kosovo's role as a breeding ground for extremism emerged several years ago, when it became Europe's highest per-capita contributor of jihadists to foreign conflicts. Of 400 Kosovar citizens who

went abroad, around 70 were killed and 200 are estimated to have returned. More than 50 people, including 10 well-known imams, have been prosecuted on terrorism-related charges in recent years.

While at least one was sentenced to 10 years in jail, others were acquitted, including the former imam of Pristina's Grand Mosque, who is now teaching Islamic law. As Kosovo authorities juggle how to crush the extremist fringe and de-radicalize returnees, a debate continues about the place of religion in society. The secular government has for instance held a ban on headscarves for civil servants and in schools, despite cries of Islamophobia. —AFP

Britain unveils new Brexit proposal with warning of a no deal

MANCHESTER: Prime Minister Boris Johnson has published his "final" Brexit proposals, warning EU leaders that Britain will walk out without a deal on October 31 if they do not accept his terms. Officials in Brussels and UK opponents of Brexit fear economic chaos if Britain ends its 46-year membership of the European Union without a formal divorce agreement. Johnson had earlier warned that this was his "final" offer. But his complex new solution met an initially cool response from Brussels. A senior MEP said the European Parliament's initial reaction to it was "not positive at all".

Johnson said the sides had until October 11 to hammer out the main outlines of a compromise so it could be included on the agenda of a EU leaders' summit in Brussels on October 17-18. "Let us be in no doubt... what the alternative is - the alternative is no deal," Johnson told his Conservative party conference in Manchester. "It is not an outcome we seek at all. But let me tell you my friends, it is an outcome for which we are ready." Johnson's

Mali army families demand answers after deadly raids

BAMAKO: Hundreds of wives and children of Malian soldiers demonstrated on Wednesday in the capital Bamako, demanding information from the government after at least 25 soldiers were killed and 60 went missing in attacks by suspected jihadists. The raids on Monday on two army camps in central Mali were among the deadliest this year against soldiers struggling to repel increasingly brazen attacks by militant groups, some with links to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

The roughly 300 protesters who gathered in front of a military base accused army chiefs of withholding needed resources from soldiers in the field. Some burned tyres, and one wore a t-shirt that read: "No to thieving generals." "We have

no news about our husbands," said one woman, who declined to be identified. "We learned that some are dead and others are missing, but we have received no clear information."

An army spokesman was not immediately available for comment. "We demand that our soldiers be equipped in accordance with the mission assigned to them," said Amadou Dembele, the son of a soldier in Boukessi, where one of Monday's attacks took place. "Otherwise we are going to resist any deployment of reinforcements." Protests over military losses have destabilized Mali before.

Renegade soldiers seized power in 2012 following protests over the government's handling of a Tuareg-led rebellion in the north. The resulting political chaos helped precipitate the fall of the northern two-thirds of Mali to the rebels and allied Islamist militants. France intervened in early 2013 to drive them back, but jihadist fighters have since regrouped and now use Mali as a launchpad for attacks across West Africa's Sahel region. —Reuters