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KAZAKHSTAN: How threatening are President Nazarbayev's comments?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Kazakh officials have played down to Forum 18 News Service the significance of President Nursultan Nazarbayev's recent call to "suppress the activity of illegal religious movements." He also claimed that "tens of thousands of different missionary organisations work in Kazakhstan. We don't know their purposes and intentions, and we should not allow such unchecked activity." Independent Kazakh observers are unsure how seriously to take the comments, but do not think that they are meant to start a campaign against religious communities. A state programme "On the provision of freedom of belief and enhancement of state-confessional relations" has been introduced by the Justice Minister because of "radical religious movements whose aim is total Islamisation or evangelisation." Recently, Protestant churches, a Hare Krishna commune, Jehovah's Witnesses and an independent mosque have faced threats to their property, cancellation of their registration and harassment of their members. Accusations of espionage and high treason have also been made.

Although officials have played down harsh comments by the Kazakh President on religious movements in the country, the government has stepped up pressure on various religious communities, Forum 18 News Service has found. President Nursultan Nazarbayev was quoted as telling a council meeting of his Nur Otan (Light of the Fatherland) political party on 17 January that "it is necessary to suppress the activity of illegal religious movements in Kazakhstan," Nazarbayev also claimed: "Today, tens of thousands of different missionary organisations work in Kazakhstan. We don't know their purposes and intentions, and we should not allow such unchecked activity."

Nazarbayev added the comment, Kazinform stated, "We are a secular state, religion is separate from the state, but this does not mean that Kazakhstan should become the dumping ground for religious movements of all kinds." Nur Otan should strengthen its position on the religious question "given the growth of influence of religions, above all of Islam and Christianity, on the life of society."

Nur Otan is the only party to have any deputies in the Kazakh parliament. The President's remarks follow a speech to parliament in October 2007 by Justice Minister Zagipa Baliyeva. In it, she warned of what she believes to be growing problems from the spread in Kazakhstan of "radical religious movements" aiming for either "total Islamisation or evangelisation".

Yerlan Bayzhanov, the President's press secretary, downplayed the significance of Nazarbayev's comments. "It was just a remark, nothing more serious," he told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 29 January. "The President said that there are too many missionaries, the situation is uncontrolled, and it must be regulated," he insisted. However, he would not say what practical measures would follow. Bayzhanov did not see any connection between the President's comments and recent moves against religious communities, such as the raids on the Grace Church across Kazakhstan.

Forum 18 has found members of various religious communities wondering whether Nazarbayev's comments herald new restrictions. Recently, Protestant churches, a Hare Krishna commune, Jehovah's Witnesses and an independent mosque have faced threats to their property, cancellation of their registration and harassment of their members (see F18News 12 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1060). Accusations of espionage and high treason have also been made (see F18News 30 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1078).

In her 29 October 2007 speech to parliament, excerpts of which were published in Russian by Kazinform <http://inform.kz/showarticle.php?lang=rus&id=190466>, Justice Minister Baliyeva spoke of the growth of the number of religious organisations in Kazakhstan, though she said relations between religious communities and the state remain stable. "Because of external factors the possibility exists of the emergence of problems connected with the spread in Kazakhstan of radical religious movements whose aim is total Islamisation or evangelisation."

She said this was why a draft state programme "On the provision of freedom of belief and enhancement of state-confessional relations in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2007-2009" was prepared to solve this problem and sent to the government to be ratified. Two local agencies, the Scientific Research Institute and the Analytical Centre on Religious Issues, will be monitoring and analysing the religious situation in the country for this purpose.

The State Programme, which Forum 18 has seen, aims to strengthen government supervision of religious activity both on a national and local level. It aims to develop "partnership" between the state and religious organisations and "social accord". However, the stress on the role of "traditional religions" and the extensive government supervision of the religious situation could make life difficult for religious communities out of favour with the authorities. The authorities aim to license religious education and step up monitoring to make sure they abide by the law. They also intend to prevent religious organisations from misusing their contact with poor people to encourage them to change their faith. The Programme also aims to "reduce the numbers of violations on the law on religion".

The Programme claims that, from the experience of countries such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, it is "much more effective" for mutual relations between the state and religious communities to have a state religious affairs agency. Alongside this agency, the programme claims that there should be consultative bodies that include "representatives of various confessions".

However, the then Human Rights Ombudsperson, Bolat Baikadamov, criticised the State Programme. He stated that it "does not justify its name as it pursues the basic aim of defending the interests of the state and state security while questions of protecting the freedom of religious belief in the given document take second place." Baikadamov has since been moved from this post.

Forum 18 spoke to Sholpan Abydyreeva, advisor to the Justice Minister, on 5 February and asked her to explain what exactly the Minister meant and why such a state programme is necessary. Abydyreeva declined to answer and referred Forum 18 to the Religious Affairs Committee. Asked whether the recent raids on the Grace Church all over Kazakhstan and the problems of other religious communities were connected to the speeches by President Nazarbayev and Minister Baliyeva, she responded: "I don't think these check-ups on the religious communities have anything to do with those remarks of the President or the Justice Minister. After all we are a peace-making country."

Forum 18 spoke to Nazym Mukanova, of the Analytical Department of the Religious Affairs Committee, on 5 February to find out what the statements from the President and Justice Minister were aimed at. She did not comment on Nazarbayev's remarks but said that Minister Baliyeva was referring to radical organisations that want to register and become established in Kazakhstan. Asked whether peaceful groups, such as the unregistered Baptists, were considered a radical movement she declined to answer. She asked Forum 18 to send written questions which they would then consider answering.

Mukanova confirmed that the State Programme regulating religious life in Kazakhstan was adopted. Asked whether the seemingly coordinated check-ups of different religious organisations were related to the State Programme or the recent statements from the President and the minister she said, "The situation with the Grace Church is not clear yet, but so far they have not even been found guilty of anything, and other organisations may face problems because probably they have violated some laws."

Reached on 29 January, Vyacheslav Kalyuzhny of the Human Rights Ombudsperson's office refused to tell Forum 18 the attitude of the Ombudsman's office to the President's recent comments. But he insisted to Forum 18 that there is no religious persecution in Kazakhstan.

Amanbek Mukhashev of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee told Forum 18 on 29 January that he had not heard President Nazarbayev's speech. "You should talk to the President's office about those comments," he said. Mukhashev could not explain why Kazakhstan's Religion Law includes provisions which contradict international norms on freedom of conscience, particularly the ban on unregistered religious activity.

Independent Kazakh observers are unsure how seriously to take President Nazarbayev's remarks. Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan commented to Forum 18 on 26 January that the President probably did not mean to start a campaign against religious communities. "But local authorities may understand those remarks as they please," he warned.

Asked whether the unregistered Baptists would fall into the category of "radical movements" since they often have problems with local authorities over their unregistered religious activity, Klyushev said radical movements may be trying to register in Kazakhstan but the unregistered Baptists are not such a movement. "I do not understand the stance taken by local officials against the unregistered Baptists who on principle refuse being registered with the state," he told Forum 18. "The unregistered Baptists have existed since Soviet times, and they never posed any danger to society."

He added that former Ombudsperson Baikadamov publicly admitted that, even though the unregistered Baptists refuse to register, they are a religious organisation that functions openly.

Roman Podoprigora, a law professor at the Caspian Public University in the commercial capital Almaty, who studies the legal position of religious communities, believes President Nazarbayev's remarks are part of a continuing official attitude rather than something new. "I don't think it's the beginning of a wide-range campaign against religious communities," he told Forum 18 on 25 January. He said that the attitude that existed towards religion during the Soviet times still exists today in Kazakhstan, and religious

organisations will continue having problems.

"The President may have said those words to address certain negative attitudes towards different religious movements among the public," Podoprigora speculated. "It was more like a standard remark to me than a hint to start a campaign against religious communities."

The authorities have long expressed the intention to amend the country's Religion Law (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916). Other highly restrictive legal changes were introduced in 2005 (see F18News 15 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=608), but provisions to make registration compulsory contradict themselves (see F18News 4 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=625). However, Podoprigora told Forum 18 he is not aware of currently active proposals to change the Religion Law. "If legislators are preparing a new Law then it must be being done very secretly because no one knows about it."

Already operating in Kazakhstan is a "State Programme of Patriotic Education of Citizens of Kazakhstan for 2006-8." This was approved by a Presidential Decree on 10 October 2006, and attacks so-called "non-traditional" and "extremist" religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees (see F18News 3 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=939).

Seminars have been held around Kazakhstan, apparently as part of this programme. On 29 January one was held on the "education of youth in the spirit of patriotism and moral values" in the southern city of Shymkent. Local officials, law enforcement officials as well as clergy and public figures attended. Among the "negative factors" affecting young people discussed at the seminar, a Kazinform report noted, was "the influence of religious movements alien to us".

Also in 2006 the Justice Ministry issued a booklet, "How not to fall under the influence of religious sects", attacking Baptists, Ahmadi Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses. Law professor Podoprigora expressed concern over the impact of such official attacks on the life of religious minority communities. "Such intolerant statements can influence whether religious communities or missionaries can register or not, which way court decisions will go on religious issues such as over unregistered organisations or missionary activity, and legislative initiatives," he told Forum 18 (see F18News 3 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=939). (END)

For a personal commentary on how attacking religious freedom damages national security in Kazakhstan, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=564.

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=701.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806 and a survey of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>.

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