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KYRGYZSTAN: What will new "Coordinating Council on the Struggle Against Religious Extremism" do?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Kyrgyzstan has established a state Coordinating Council on the Struggle against Religious Extremism, Forum 18 News Service notes. The execution of Council decisions will be obligatory for the different parts of the government, but officials are unclear when asked by Forum 18 what they mean by religious extremism and what the Council will do. It will be led by the State Agency for Religious Affairs, the Interior Ministry and the NSS secret police, and will have members from other parts of the government, the Muslim Board, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Civil society and religious organisations have reacted with concern, Raya Kadyrova of the Foundation for Tolerance International pointing out that "unfortunately our laws give a very wide definition of religious radicalism and extremism." She suggested that the Collective Security Treaty Organisation might be a reason for the Council. The Jehovah's Witnesses said they needed to wait and see what it would do. They noted that some officials have previously described them as "a destructive movement," but "hoped" the Council would not listen to such opinions. One Protestant asked why there was a need for the Council, given the other responsible state organisations.

Kyrgyzstan has recently transformed its state Interagency Council on Religious Affairs into a state Coordinating Council on the Struggle against Religious Extremism, Forum 18 News Service has learned. However, although the Council will apparently be powerful, uncertainty surrounds what it will do.

The Decree establishing the Council – signed by Prime Minister Igor Chudinov on 5 August – states that it was established "for the purpose of ensuring concerted action and coordination of activity of State agencies and local governments of Kyrgyzstan in prevention of the spread of and resistance to religious extremism, fundamentalism and conflicts on religious grounds". The Decree goes on to state that: "Constructive and effective mutual relations between State agencies and religious organisations aimed at efficient solutions of issues related to prevention of the spread of religious extremism, fundamentalism, and conflicts on religious grounds, will allow suppressing the ideas of various extremist and destructive groups."

Kanybek Osmonaliev, Head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, told Forum 18 on 18 August that the Secretariat of the Council will be led by himself, the Deputy Interior Minister, and the Deputy Head of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The members of the Council will be representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Health, Culture, and Finance, heads of Regional Administrations, as well as representatives from the state-favoured Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church.

It appears that much power will be given to the Council, as the Decree states that Council decisions must be executed by "Ministries, State Committees, administrative units, and other executive authorities, as well as local state administrations and local self-government".

What issues will the Council address?

"The reason for the decision was to turn the Interagency Council, which was more of an amorphous structure to a more effective one to fight religious extremism," Osmonaliev of the State Agency for Religious Affairs told Forum 18. "We will meet no less than twice a year and report to the Vice-Prime Minister," he said. The State Agency will be responsible for preparing the agenda for each meeting. However, Osmonaliev said that he "cannot say what exact issues we will discuss, as we are only in the phase of formulating our policy." He also did not say what principles would serve as the basis of the Council's policy.

Father Igor Dronov of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bishkek told Forum 18 on 19 August that he is aware of the new Council, but has not yet accepted the invitation to it. "I cannot say at the moment what issues the Council will be occupied with," he stated. Reminded that he'd told Forum 18 on 7 August that some Protestant Churches are "aggressive," Father Dronov said "that's not religious extremism but aggressive proselytism." The new Religion Law bans – without defining - "aggressive action aimed at proselytism" (see F18News 13 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1240). Asked if he would bring these type of issues at the Council, Fr Dronov repeated his previous answer that he did not know what the Council would be doing.

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The Muslim Board and Osmonaliev of the State Agency have, along with Fr Dronov, welcomed the restrictive new Religion Law. In a written explanation of the "need" for a new Law – placed on the parliamentary website - Osmonaliev expressed concern about what he described as the "abnormality" of a rising number of people changing faith, especially young ethnic Kyrgyz joining Christian churches. He also complained of "illegal" activity by "various destructive, totalitarian groups and reactionary sects", among whom he included the Hare Krishna and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons) communities, and "uncontrolled" building and opening of mosques, churches and other places of worship (see F18News 2 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1197).

Who decided what the Council's membership is?

Asked why representatives of other religious organisations were not invited as members to the Council, Osmonaliev of the State Agency said the question should be put to the government.

Suyun Musaliyev, who works for the department overseeing religious issues in the Cabinet of Ministers, said that the members from the religious organisations were proposed by the State Agency for Religious Affairs. "If they [the State Agency] would like to propose a representative of Protestants, for instance, they could," he told Forum 18 on 18 August. "We will make a decision on their proposal."

What is religious extremism?

Officials were unspecific when asked what they meant by religious extremism, and how the struggle against it would be carried out. "It is the Coordinating Council's duty to expose destructive and extremist religious movements in the territory of Kyrgyzstan," Musaliyev of the Cabinet of Ministers responded. Osmonaliev of the State Agency said that "only courts" in Kyrgyzstan can decide which religious movements are extremist. "So far, such decisions have been made on organisations like Hizb ut-Tahrir" (see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170 for an outline of this group's views), he stated. "None of the existing and registered organisations are considered as extremists here," Osmonaliev assured Forum 18. He did not discuss the situation of unregistered organisations, or those whose registration the new Law threatens.

Asked what would happen if names of existing organisations were claimed in Council meetings to have negative effects, Osmonaliev would only said that the Council "would need to make a collective decision" on cases of extremism.

Reactions from civil society and religious communities

Raya Kadyrova, President of the Foundation for Tolerance International in Bishkek, pointed to one possible problem in the Council's work. She told Forum 18 on 19 August that "unfortunately our laws give a very wide definition of religious radicalism and extremism. For instance, any criticism by independent Muslim organisations of the work of the Muslim Board can easily be interpreted as radicalism and extremism." She also said that she "hoped the Council will also listen to the opinion of Kyrgyzstan's so-called minority faiths before making any decisions affecting their activity"

Various religious organisations expressed their concerns to Forum 18 about the Council. A Protestant Pastor, who wanted to remain unnamed, said he does not understand why there needs to be such a Council. "We already have law-enforcement agencies in the country to detect who breaks the laws," he told Forum 18 on 18 August from Bishkek. The Protestant added that the State Agency is also supposed to work with religious organisations. "I am afraid they are trying to tighten the noose around our necks," he complained. He said he believed that the Council was created to "make life hard" for the Protestant churches in the country.

Vladimir Gavrilovski of Jehovah's Witnesses said they needed to wait and see what the Council would do. "It has been re-organised very recently, so we have to wait to see," he told Forum 18 on 18 August. "Some officials have spoken about us as being a destructive movement in the past," he noted. "When we explained our position on different issues, they told us that they were given wrong information on us." He said he "hoped" that the Council would not listen to such opinions.

Synarkul Muraliyeva (Chandra Mukkhi) of the Hare Krishna community said she did not know what the position of the Council on their community would be. "The NSS secret police has told us that we are a totalitarian sect, and are in a list with the banned terrorist organisations."

Why is the Council being established?

Kadyrova of the Foundation for Tolerance International told Forum 18 that the establishment of the Council was "official recognition that the country's security is under threat from religious extremism." She thought that a reason for its establishment may be that the authorities "need to determine" what the security threats are. She added that the Council may also have been established "to integrate into national policy a policy adopted at a recent meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)." She noted that "the policy of the CSTO is that special attention needs to be given to religious radicalism and new religious movements, as a threat to security in the region."

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The CSTO, consisting of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, added some Muslim movements to its list of terrorist and extremist organisations in May 2009. These included Tabligh Jamaat and Salafism (see F18News 15 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1297), as well as "Nurdzhular" - as it calls followers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi. Muslims who follow Nursi's approach to Islam have been attracting increasing state hostility in the former Soviet Union. Increasing numbers of Muslims following his approach have been jailed in Uzbekistan (see eg. F18News 31 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1333). Translations of many of his writings are banned in Russia, and those thought to possess them have been raided (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1328).

The Kyrgyz legal background

Since a repressive new Religion Law came into force in January, religious communities of all faiths have experienced increased official hostility. One example of this has been that unregistered communities of Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Ahmadiya Muslims in many parts of Kyrgyzstan have been ordered by the authorities to stop meeting for worship (see F18News 13 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1336).

Officials have claimed to Forum 18 that they have formed a Commission to resolve three controversial provisions of the Religion Law: restrictions on sharing faith and distributing religious literature, and the high threshold of members required before religious communities can register.

Separately, a legal challenge to the Law was mounted by Protestants (see F18News 27 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1301). The Constitutional Court on 24 July dismissed the complaint, in a ruling signed by Judge Chinara Musabekova. She stated that the "concrete constitutional rights of the applicants have not been violated." (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=30.

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 of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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

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