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KAZAKHSTAN: "Great political efforts are made"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev and the Mayor of the commercial capital Almaty have recently called for greater controls on unspecified religious communities, which they describe as "sects". The calls come as smaller religious communities are experiencing greater pressure including police and KNB secret police raids, Forum 18 News Service has found. Prominent in these measures are state-funded so-called anti-sect centres, which members of many religious communities state are encouraging public hostility through statements in the state-controlled national and local mass media. Communities targeted have included Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants, described as "destructive religious movements". Also Ahmadi Muslims in the southern city of Shymkent are facing threats by the authorities to close their community down. It has been suggested to Forum 18 that the "anti-sect" campaign is intended to prepare the ground for restrictive laws against freedom of religion or belief.

Both Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev and the Mayor of the commercial capital Almaty Akhmetzhan Yesimov have called for greater controls on unspecified religious communities, which they describe as "sects". The calls come as smaller religious communities are experiencing greater pressure against them, Forum 18 News Service has found. Prominent in these measures are state-funded so-called anti-sect centres, which members of many religious communities state are encouraging public hostility through statements in the state-controlled national and local mass media. Communities targeted have included Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants, described as "destructive religious movements".

These claims have been repeated by officials during police and National Security Committee (KNB) secret police raids, for example in a raid on New Life Church in Aktobe on 29 April, when church members who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that police told them they are "a dangerous sect". Some religious communities Forum 18 talked to did not wish to describe raids or "anti-sect" propaganda openly, for fear of state reprisals.

"Take personal charge of this issue"

President Nazarbaev, speaking to the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan [a state body without legislative functions] in the capital Astana on 18 April, claimed that: "The sphere of scientific research of interethnic and interfaith relations requires the most serious attention. I want to particularly mention religious affairs in our country. Here we should understand it, and our associations of Muslims and Orthodox Christians should play a major role in protecting our religious relations from various sects and organisations, which have different views from what we need, entering Kazakhstan. Therefore, I instruct the Minister of Education and Science to take personal charge of this issue."

The speech was broadcast by the state-run Khabar TV the same day

Officials have repeatedly refused to comment on President Nazarbaev's speech. Deputy Education and Science Minister Makhmetgali Sarybekov, the President's Press Secretary Baglan Maylibayev, and the Press Officer (who would not give his name) of Deputy Culture Minister Gaziz Telebayev - who oversees work with religious organisations - all asked Forum 18 on 28 April to send written questions. They promised to reply, but have not yet done so to questions sent on 28 April.

An independent religious affairs specialist in Kazakhstan told Forum 18 on 6 May that "this is an attempt at state interference in the affairs of religious associations and clearly violates the Constitution." They added that this is an instruction of the President passing certain state functions to the Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. In conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Science they are being instructed to organise public campaigns against religious minorities."

Kazakhstan has used a controversial school textbook to promote intolerance of people exercising their freedom of religion or belief in schools (see F18News 18 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458).

Pressure on independent Muslims

Pressure has been exerted on independent Muslim communities to join the state-backed Muslim Board (see F18News 14 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1498), and both Sunni and Shia Muslims from Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities

have told Forum 18 of great difficulties they face from the state and the Muslim Board in opening mosques (see F18News 4 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1506).

An independent Muslim observer in Kazakhstan told Forum 18 on 28 April that Muslims have "not been a specific target" of the anti-sect centres, "that is to say, they have not so far publicly spoken against us." But they noted that "there are concerted efforts by the authorities against religious communities, especially those who are very active and are large in numbers".

Threat to close down Shymkent Ahmadi Muslims

Judge Yerlan Seraliyev of the specialised Economic Court in the southern city of Shymkent is today (6 May) scheduled to hear a case brought by the Regional Property Inspection authorities. They claim that the local Ahmadi Muslim Community does not have the right to use their land and the building on it for religious purposes.

Ahmadi Muslims told Forum 18 on 6 May that they are "afraid that the authorities are trying to close down their community in Shymkent."

Judge Seraliyev told Forum 18 on 6 May that the Shymkent authorities "want the Community to suspend their activity until they correctly legalise their property". The Judge added that "We are not intending to take away their property", and declined to give further comments on the details of the case.

In the past the authorities have often used property cases as a means of targeting religious communities (see eg. F18News 20 August 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1174).

Almaty Mayor Yesimov follows President's lead

Mayor Akhmetzhan Yesimov of Almaty followed the President's lead a day later. On 19 April his Press Service announced that that day he had instructed city administration directorates to step up supervision of "religious sects" activities. "We are being drawn back to the Middle Ages, and young people are coming under that influence. The Education Directorate, the Youth Policy Directorate and the Domestic Policy Directorate should step up work," he was quoted as saying.

"At schools and higher education institutions, it is necessary to call for a secular and modern way of life," Yesimov emphasised, adding that "security should be the motto and integral part of thinking of every [Almaty] city resident". He also said that "crime prevention measures must be reinforced, and the religious sects specifically must be checked."

Mayor Yesimov also referred in his statement to murders on 30 March in Almaty's Auezov District. One ethnic Kazakh individual was claimed to have taken part in the murders who allegedly several years ago attended a Protestant church and then joined a Muslim movement.

A Kazakh academic, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 28 April that the Almaty city authorities "are using the occurrence of crime to harass religious organisations". The academic commented that "the authorities dislike certain religious organisations, and violations against those religious organisations continue".

Speaking of the role of anti-sect centres in organised attacks against religious communities, they stated that "these centres are very active, and hold endless press conferences where they invite former members of these organisations to publicly discuss and condemn them".

Forum 18 is aware of raids in April on centres in Almaty of a Christian religious community, which wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals. "In the past month police have raided our locations in Almaty. They took computers, files, literature, interrogated people and took them into the KNB secret police headquarters for questioning. Unfortunately the government has formed an organisation to promote propaganda against non-traditional religions and has branded Christians as dangerous cults and sects."

An official of Mayor Yesimov's Press Service, who would not give his name, asked Forum 18 on 28 April to send questions in writing. No reply has yet been received, despite a promise of a reply.

Why the anti-sect campaign?

Almaty-based religious studies Professor Artur Artemyev told Forum 18 on 28 April that he thought the "anti-sect" activities are being carried out to prepare the grounds for a new restrictive religion law. However, he noted that there have been no official statements about this yet.

Professor Artemyev noted that the "anti-sect centres" are given a lot of air time on leading TV channels, publish numerous articles on newspapers and lead televised press conferences, where they attack officially registered religious organisations.

Officials and ruling party politicians have long tried to make harsher the 1992 Religion Law. In the latest attempt, highly restrictive revisions to it and a number of other laws were rejected shortly before Kazakhstan became 2010 Chair-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (see F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1255).

However, human rights defenders have long predicted the proposals' return. The National Human Rights Action Plan - published in September 2009 – indicated that a draft Law would be introduced in 2011. A member of the Senate, the upper house of Parliament, Garifolla Esim told Forum 18 in June 2010 that the draft Law is being worked on (see F18News 18 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458).

A July 2010 internal document from the ruling Nur Otan Party attacking "non-traditional" faiths and calling for laws on religion to be harshened aroused concern among human rights defenders and some religious communities (see F18News 30 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1493).

"Great political efforts are made"

Yelena Burova of the Perspective anti-sect centre refused to talk to Forum 18 on 6 May saying that she is "driving at the moment". Then she changed her mind about where she was, and said "my land line phone is ringing, I cannot talk to you."

However in a December 2010 conversation Burova told Forum 18 that there is an official list of destructive cults and sects. But she refused to say who is on it, who compiled it and what is supposed to happen to groups on the list.

"Great political efforts are made to form negative public opinion of the destructive cults and we are an important part of it," she told Forum 18. "We hold public events, actions, TV programmes with the participation of victims of these cults, who are former members of those organisations". Burova said that they even used a mobile phone operator to send sms messages to all of its subscribers, asking them to contact her organisation if they or their relatives were victims of "destructive cults".

Gulnara Orazbayeva of a Kokshetau-based anti-sect centre told Forum 18 on 6 May that "besides Kokshetau newspapers, my articles were published in serious newspapers and publications," she said. "Religiya i Pravo" [Religion and Law] the official magazine of the Ministry of Culture and Supreme Attestation Commission of the Almaty State University in its periodical published my articles", she added.

Asked what she thought of the raids by the authorities on religious communities – for example against New Life Church – she said that "New Life is clearly a sect, which propagates ideas foreign to Kazakhstan's values and mentality."

Earlier in December 2010, Orazbayeva told Forum 18 that "along with various Islamic movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, we deem churches belonging to Grace Presbyterian and New Life movements, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, to be destructive cults".

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international political movement vowing to re-establish a single Islamic state, or caliphate, and claiming to be entirely peaceful. However, Forum 18 notes its denial of key human rights, including religious freedom, and its antisemitic views (see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

Asked why she states that the Karaganda-based Grace Church is a "destructive cult", Orazbayeva said that "people who attended their churches have complained to us". She would not tell Forum 18 what those people had complained about. "We have not had many complaints in numbers yet," she said. "Maybe 15 people complained about various sects and cults, and not all of them are members of those sects but their relatives".

Asked how she could draw her conclusions from a small number of apparently unspecific complaints, Orazbayeva said that "it is not only my opinion but also of many of my colleagues from anti-sect centres". She added that she herself attended "many of these sects before," and knows "what goes on inside." She would not tell Forum 18 which of these "sects" she had attended.

Grace Church members told Forum 18 on 6 May that "unfortunately these organisations not only are creating a bad image of us within society, but Perspective's articles openly calling us destructive sects were published in Spring 2010 in an official book for the staff of the state Religious Affairs Committee."

"A tense atmosphere"

New Life Protestant Church members told Forum 18 on 5 May that they are going to complain to Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General, the Religious Affairs Committee and the Presidential Commission on Human Rights about a "public smearing campaign" against them by Perspective. "Perspective representatives have been very active since the summer of 2009 giving interviews to various TV Channels and writing articles in numerous newspapers across Kazakhstan about us and other religious organisations, insulting our faith and branding our Church as pseudo-religious organisations and our members as brainwashed zombies," they said.

They complained that these articles "create a tense atmosphere in society by forming a very negative opinion of us. Our members feel pressure at their work and in society, where they are told not attend these 'destructive cults' as Perspective describes us". Church members also told Forum 18 that there were cases of their members being fired from their jobs after their employers found out that they attended "destructive cults".

A church member who wished to remain anonymous told Forum 18 of a 29 April raid on their church in Aktobe by the ordinary police Department for the Fight against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism and the KNB secret police. "Officials broke in and started filming speakers and the attendees. They were telling us that we are a dangerous sect, despite the fact that they know very well that we are officially registered." The Pastor, his wife and their three young children were taken to a police station for questioning lasting several hours.

The church member also told Forum 18 there is "special surveillance of Pastor Ivan Kryukov by the police and KNB secret police. This showed itself both in Kryukov being questioned and his documents being checked at the Kazakhstan-Russian border for a long time, and in Kryukov not being able to change his old car to a new one because the Transport Police told him that his old car is "on the KNB list".

Concept of destructive cults "non-existent in the law"

Vladimir Voyevodin, the legal expert of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 on 15 December 2010 that the concept of destructive cults is "non-existent in the law. If we were registered on the basis of the law then we have the right to exist". He added that "a victim is a legal concept, which means someone's rights were violated. And it is the competence of law-enforcement agencies to establish victims, not anti-sect centres."

Official funding

Both Orazbayeva and Burova, as well as several other leaders and officials in anti-sect centres across Kazakhstan refused to tell Forum 18 how much funds they receive from the government for their campaigns.

Religious studies Professor Artemyev told Forum 18 that it is "illegal for the state to give financial grants to the anti-sect centres." The state, he commented, "punishes taxpayers who are members of religious organisations with the taxpayers' money. On the one hand the State officially registers the religious organisations, and on the other hand it pays other organisations to organise campaigns against the same religious organisations".

Burova told Forum 18 that Perspective had received several grants since her organisation's establishment in 2009. "If our government asks to publish this information we will do so but we are not obliged to tell you", she said. Orazbayeva also said that they have received several grants from the Culture Ministry for six month periods, but refused to give figures.

Zhanna Onlasheva, Chief Expert of the Religious Affairs Committee, refused to talk to Forum 18 between 28 April and 4 May, each time saying that she is busy and asking Forum 18 to call back later. In December 2010 she told Forum 18 that "Some anti-sect centres may receive funds from the state budget as non-commercial organisations but we as the Religious Affairs Committee do not cooperate or work with them." Onlasheva then claimed that she did not know how much funds these anti-sect centres receive.

Lyudmila Ryazanova, the Chair of the Public Association, Civil Initiatives Centre, which inspects the execution of Government Orders, also in December 2010 refused to give Forum 18 the figures of how much government funds is given to anti-sect centres. "We have many specialists but I could not find who exactly inspected the activity of these Centres," she told Forum 18 when asked how those funds were used. "But I am sure whoever the leaders of these anti-sect centres are they do their job professionally. Otherwise the Ministry would not support them. Many organisations ask the Government for financing, but not many can win tenders."

Between 28 April and 5 May Religious Affairs Committee officials in the Culture Ministry refused to put Forum 18 through to Committee Chair Ardak Doszhan, or to themselves answer Forum 18's questions.

Askar Smagulov, Advisor to Culture Minister Ermukhamet Ertysbayev, refused on 3 May to answer why his Ministry gave funds to the anti-sect centres. "Please, talk to the Religious Affairs Committee, I am no specialist in religious matters," he said. (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=1352.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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