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CENTRAL ASIA: State policy towards religious minorities in Central Asia

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State policies in Central Asia towards religious minorities present a varied picture. Orthodox Christians say they have almost no problems at all, which is in stark contrast to the situation of other religious minorities such as Protestant Christians, and to the situation of Islam, the most widespread religion in the region. Throughout the region both Islamic radicalism and proselytism by non-Islamic faiths are viewed very seriously indeed by governments, which frequently seek to control and/or severely repress both Islam and proselytism. This is partially due to fear of religious diversity, and partially due to fear of radical Islamic groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Of all the religious minorities in the Central Asian states only the Orthodox say they have almost no problems at all. Paradoxically, the Orthodox, and not Muslims (the most widespread religion in the region), enjoy almost unlimited rights in all the Central Asian republics. A clear example is provided by Uzbekistan - a state in which, as in Turkmenistan (See Turkmenistan religious freedom survey F18News 2 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=151), international human rights organisations most frequently record that believers' rights have been infringed. (See Uzbekistan religious freedom survey F18News 16 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105)

"We hardly ever have problems with the authorities. We are allowed to open new parishes without difficulty," the Secretary of the Central Asian diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, Fr Nikolai Rybchinsky, told Forum 18 News Service in Tashkent. "The negligible number of Uzbeks who have converted to Orthodoxy experience no persecution from the authorities either. Sometimes, it is true, problems arise with middle-ranking officials, but all we have to do is to appeal to more senior people, and these problems vanish immediately. Here is a concrete example. The state administration for carrying out punishments refused us permission to visit the cells of prisoners sentenced to death, but as soon as we appealed to higher authorities, the problem was immediately resolved."

Fr Rybchinsky does not believe that the Orthodox experience any problems in Turkmenistan either. Dual citizenship with Russia has been banned by presidential decree in this state. The majority of people with dual citizenship were Russians who were therefore, at least by origin, Orthodox.

In another presidential decree, subscriptions to all Russian periodicals were forbidden, including subscriptions to the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate (this publication has 14 subscribers in Turkmenistan). However, Fr Rybchinsky believes that these are both purely political issues that have no bearing on religion. "All our priests in Turkmenistan hold only Turkmen citizenship, and so this issue has not affected us. As far as the decree banning subscriptions to Russian publications is concerned, that decree was of course not directed against us, but against political publications. The number of subscribers in Turkmenistan is simply negligible, and we can resolve the issue easily by importing our journal to Turkmenistan," says Fr Rybchinsky.

The situation of the other religious minorities in the Central Asian states is far from being as positive as that of the Orthodox. The main problem encountered by religious communities in all the Central Asian republics is the requirement to register with the state agencies. The laws on religion in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan state clearly that a religious community may only become active once it has been registered. Additionally, the law on religion in Turkmenistan even makes the activity of an unregistered religious organisation criminally accountable.

The law on religion in Uzbekistan contains nothing about what sort of punishment will be applied to an unregistered religious community's members. However, Article 240 (breaking the law on religious organisations) of Uzbekistan's administrative code prescribes either a fine of between 5 and 10 times the minimum wage (the minimum wage in Uzbekistan is 5,440 Uzbek Soms, or around 38 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros or 6 US Dollars) or up to 15 days' administrative arrest for unlawful religious activity. But in the case of continued "unlawful religious activity... once administrative measures have been applied", Article 216 (2) (breaking the law on religious organisations) of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code prescribes a fine of between 50 and 100 times the minimum wage or up to three years' imprisonment.

The term "activity of an unregistered religious organisation" is used by Ashgabad and Tashkent to include a believers' gathering,

including one held in a private home. Even a meeting between two believers in a private apartment belonging to one or other of them could be termed a gathering of this kind. For example, two Pentecostals who were reading the Bible in the home of one of them in Muinak (north west Uzbekistan) were taken to the police station, where they were subjected to beatings and were told to admit that they were preaching to each other (see F18News 17 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=7).

In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the law on religion does not require the registration of religious organisations. However, Article 375 of Kazakhstan's administrative code and Article 211 of Tajikistan's administrative code prescribes fines for "declining to register". "The very phrase 'declining to register' is not entirely clear. It is virtually impossible to prove that believers really do decline to register. Therefore I personally believe that here in Kazakhstan registration of a religious community is not compulsory. Nevertheless the courts do fine members of the International Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (the so-called 'non-conformists') for whom registration is unacceptable for ideological reasons. However, such cases are rare. In the past year I have not heard of one such excess," Roman Podoprigrora, a doctor of law who specialises in religion, told Forum 18 on 18 January from Almaty.

In Tajikistan the cases where fines are imposed on the leaders of unregistered religious associations are more frequent (and it is not just the Baptist non-conformists who are being fined), but they only occur sporadically in this state. "In general, the authorities turn a blind eye to the activity of unregistered religious associations, only occasionally reminding them of the requirement to register," Aleksei Tsirulev, pastor of the Protestant Hope church admitted to Forum 18 on 10 November in Dushanbe. (See Tajikistan religious freedom survey F18News 20 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190).

There is a more favourable situation in Kyrgyzstan. Although Kyrgyzstan's law on religious associations does not make registration of a religious community compulsory, in 1996 the president of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akayev issued a decree declaring that formal registration with the Committee for Religious Affairs was obligatory. "This decree does not in itself infringe the rights of believers," the chairman of the government's committee for religious affairs, Omurzak Mamayusupov, insisted to Forum 18 in Bishkek on 17 December. "We simply want to know precisely which religious communities are operating in the country. We do not apply any repressive measures against believers, but simply advise them about the requirement to register."

Overall, almost all those interviewed by Forum 18 confirm that in Kyrgyzstan believers in unregistered religious communities do not experience difficulties. "In my view, believers in Kyrgyzstan do not have any problems," Ambassador Markus Müller, head of the Bishkek mission of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, told Forum 18 in Bishkek on 15 December. At least, there have been no complaints to our organisation from believers, including those whose religious associations are not registered." (See Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey F18News 7 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222).

While there is also a requirement for Orthodox communities to register in the Central Asian states, unlike the other religious minorities the Orthodox have no difficulty doing so and therefore do not experience problems with the authorities. Fr Rybchinsky explains the authorities' benign attitude towards the Orthodox by saying that the Orthodox Church never engages in proselytism. "Many Protestant preachers and Jehovah's Witnesses knock at the doors of people's apartments and give out literature to people on the streets and on buses," he told Forum 18. "Naturally, such behaviour alarms not only the authorities but us as well. We are very concerned at the activity of Protestant preachers. Our parishioners complain to us that they are trying to convert their children to the Protestant faith."

Fr Rybchinsky is at least partially right. In the view of the authorities in the Central Asian states, proselytism, along with the existence of Islamic radicals, is judged a very serious religious issue. In all the Central Asian states there is an unspoken rule set by the authorities: "If you belong to the main nationality, they you must be Muslim, and if you are Russian, you must be Orthodox." One Tashkent Protestant, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 how a member of the National Security Service (the former KGB) explained to him why the authorities were fighting the spread of Protestantism: "Before, we were a colony belonging to the Russians, who followed communist ideology. Now the West wants to make slaves of us by promoting Protestantism."

But apart from the fear of the West's religious diversity, the Central Asian authorities have even more pressing reasons to do battle with proselytism. According to Shariah law, a Muslim who converts to a different faith must be punished (see commentary 'Religious freedom under Islam' F18News 13 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=227). Thus, proselytism arouses real anger among practising Muslims. This issue is particularly relevant for Uzbeks and Tajiks who are traditionally much more devout than the Kazakhs, who until fairly recently were nomadic, the Kyrgyz and the Turkmen.

For example, in 2001 a crowd of several hundred Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is densely populated by Uzbeks, tried to set up a kangaroo court to judge several of their relatives who had become Christians. These Muslims explained their actions to Forum 18 by saying that under the laws of Islam a Muslim who adopted another faith must be punished.

A number of cases have already been recorded in Kyrgyzstan where Muslims who have adopted Christianity or become Jehovah's

Witnesses have been beaten and turned out of their villages. The situation in Tajikistan is also quite tense. In October 2000, two students at a Muslim spiritual college put a bomb in the Protestant Grace Sonmin church, which was actively engaged in preaching to Muslims. On New Year's Eve 2000, an Adventist and an Orthodox church were also attacked with bombs. On 12 January this year, unknown intruders burst into the yard of a Baptist prayer house in the town of Isfara (in northern Tajikistan) and shot through a window straight at Sergei Besarab, a missionary and leader of the church. Besarab's active missionary work had aroused anger among some of the town's population. For example, Besarab had distributed Tajik-language evangelistic leaflets among Tajiks. (See F18News 14 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=229)

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the authorities in all the Central Asian republics, fearing the spread of radical Islam, are trying to keep the life of Muslims completely under their control. For example, the international Islamic organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which aims to unite Muslims world-wide under a single caliphate, is banned in all the Central Asian republics.

The situation is particularly difficult in Uzbekistan, where according to figures from international human rights organisations around 6,500 Muslim prisoners of conscience are being held. "We are monitoring the activity of mosques very closely, ensuring that their numbers do not exceed rational levels. Of course, if we give the 'green light' to the spread of non-traditional faiths while pursuing this policy, that rightly makes Muslims unhappy. Our people are very devout and Uzbeks could start taking reprisals against their relatives who have adopted another faith. Also, the extremely low quality of life provokes the situation, so that these reprisals can easily escalate into battles. Of course, we are doing all we can to prevent this from happening. We are obliged to advise that Christian churches and Jehovah's Witnesses do not preach in Uzbek and do not distribute religious literature in the state language," Forum 18 was told by a high-ranking Uzbek official, who preferred not to be named.

However it may be, this policy does bear some fruit. Unlike the Uzbek-populated regions of Kyrgyzstan, in Uzbekistan there has not been one case of reprisals against Muslims who have adopted Christianity. In Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, "Protestant missionaries are working actively in Uzbek-populated areas in southern Kyrgyzstan, which makes the local population very upset," Abdumalik Sharipov, a member of the Jalal-Abad human rights organisation Justice, told Forum 18 in Osh on 5 December. "The Muslims are particularly angry that the authorities are persecuting members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, but are not preventing the work of Protestant preachers. There are rumours circulating among Muslims that the authorities are deliberately following an anti-Islamic policy and are trying to turn Muslims towards Christianity."

A printer-friendly map of Central Asia and the Middle East is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=mideast>

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