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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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KAZAKHSTAN: Should the state remove "inconsistencies" in Muslim rituals?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The leader of the independent Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan (UMK), Murat Telibekov, has told Forum 18 News Service that mosques only join the official Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (the Muftiate) under state pressure. Telibekov has been fined for writing to a newspaper as head of the UMK, before it received state registration. The authorities freely admit that they want all mosques to be under the Muftiate's control. Baktybai Duisebekov, head of the Internal Policy Department of South Kazakhstan Regional Administration, told Forum 18 that this is because "religious rituals in north and south Kazakhstan differ from each other. If all mosques were governed from one central point, we could get away from these inconsistencies." He did not explain why such "inconsistencies" need to be removed by the government. Forum 18 has found that tension exists between ethnic Uzbek Muslims and the Muftiate in South Kazakshtan region.

The leader of the newly-formed Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan (UMK), who believes mosques have the right not to be dragooned into the government-sponsored Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (the Muftiate), reports that "quite often" mosques agree to join the Muftiate only under pressure from the authorities. Murat Telibekov told Forum 18 News Service from the commercial capital Almaty on 6 July that all Kazakhstan's central mosques are now governed by the Muftiate.

The authorities freely admit that they want all mosques to be under the Muftiate's control. "Legally, a Muslim organisation may be independent from the Muftiate," Baktybai Duisebekov, head of the Internal Policy Department of the South Kazakhstan Regional Administration, told Forum 18 in the regional centre Shymkent on 1 July. "But the state doesn't deny that it wants all mosques to be governed by the Muftiate."

There has been consistent state pressure on imams to join the Muftiate (see F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=250) and the Muftiate has reportedly used a re-attestation campaign to fire independent imams from their posts (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=472).

Duisebekov of the Regional Administration insists this is a way to end regional differences in the way Islamic rituals are carried out. "Religious rituals in north and south Kazakhstan differ from each other. If all mosques were governed from one central point, we could get away from these inconsistencies." He did not explain why such "inconsistencies" need to be removed by the government.

Suleiman Kadairbaly, assistant to Kazakhstan's Chief Mufti, says around 90 per cent of Kazakhstan's mosques are governed by the Muftiate. "All of them are obliged to give 30 per cent of their income to the Spiritual Administration," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 6 July. "We use this money to build new mosques and to fund various charitable and propaganda initiatives."

Of the imams who refuse to join the Muftiate hierarchy, Telibekov of the UMK believes one of their main reasons is financial. "Those attending mosques don't see that the money taken by the Muftiate is spent on genuine needs," he told Forum 18. "They believe they are simply feeding the Muftiate's bureaucracy."

But Telibekov also gives another reason. "Although formally the Muftiate is an independent organisation, in reality it is part of the state apparatus and carries out the behest of the authorities unquestioningly," he insisted. He said that in setting up the Union of Muslims, he and his colleagues were aiming to create a truly independent Muslim organisation. "This prompted strong displeasure from both the secular authorities and the Muftiate."

Telibekov reports that on 4 April he wrote an article for the Kazakh newspaper Megapolis and signed himself head of the Union of Muslims in Kazakhstan. When the article appeared, the Union had not been registered with the justice ministry (the organisation received its registration documents on 7 April) and this served as the basis for an administrative case against him. On 17 May, the inter-regional court in Almaty, under judge Rosa Utegenova, sentenced Telibekov to a 9,710 tenge fine (474 Norwegian kroner, 60 Euros or 72 US dollars) under Article 347 (knowingly giving false information to the media). The court believed that because the Union did not then have registration (although registration is not compulsory under current laws) it was an offence for Telibekov to represent himself as its leader.

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Judge Utegenova defended the fine. "Telibekov could have contested the court's decision," she told Forum 18 from Almaty on 6 July, "but he paid the fine, and so admitted his guilt."

Complicating the issue of deferring to the Spiritual Administration is the ethnic factor, believes Anatoli Kosichenko, president of the Almaty Centre of Social and Political Research. "Muslims tend to gather at mosques according to the ethnic flag," he told Forum 18 on 1 July at a round table discussion on cooperation between Muslims in Shymkent. He pointed to the existence of Uighur, Dungan and Chechen mosques as well as Kazakh mosques. "Formally they are all governed by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims," he reported, "but their relations with the Muftiate are far from perfect, given that out of the 15 leaders of the Muftiate, 13 are ethnic Kazakhs."

Forum 18 found the greatest tension to be between the Muftiate and ethnic Uzbek Muslims, due to South Kazakhsstan's history. Virtually all Kazakhstan's ethnic Uzbeks live in the densely populated areas in South Kazakhstan region bordering Uzbekistan, where they make up nearly a fifth of the population. Kazakhs are often regarded as more superficial Muslims, most devout Muslims being from the ethnic Uzbek minority. After the independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan was formed with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the deliberate removal of ethnic Uzbek imams began, leading to serious tensions in Shymkent region in the mid-1990s.

In early July, Forum 18 found that virtually all of South Kazakhstan's imams are ethnic Kazakhs, including those in the main regional mosque in Shymkent. The only remaining ethnic Uzbek imams in the region are in settlements where almost all residents are ethnic Uzbeks. This does not please the local Uzbeks, whose imams have come under state pressure to join the Muftiate (see F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=250).

Ethnic Uzbek Muslims, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that in some cases the Muftiate demanded that imams who received theological education in Uzbekistan should undergo "retraining" in Kazakhstan's medressehs, with dismissal for those who refused. But Kadairbaly of the Muftiate denied this to Forum 18, saying that degrees obtained in Uzbek religious institutions are recognised in Kazakhstan (see F18News 8 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=472).

Only in very few cases have imams with Uzbek degrees been sacked. Virtually all the ethnic Uzbek imams in south Kazakhstan studied in Uzbekistan and nevertheless continue to work in the mosques governed by the Spiritual Administration. "When I was forced to leave my position as imam-hatyb in South Kazakhstan region in 1992, I opened my own medresseh which was not governed by the Muftiate," Shukurolla Mukhamejanov told Forum 18 on 1 July. "In principle, no-one stops me from working, but the authorities have tried to persuade me to join the Muftiate." He pointed out that the Muftiate's current leadership does not include even one ethnic Uzbek.

Most tension has developed in Sairam district 15 kilometres (10 miles) from Shymkent, where 90 per cent of the population are ethnic Uzbeks. Of the 21 mosques active in the district, the three largest (including the central mosque) are governed by the Muftiate, reports Ibadula Khajimetov, imam of the district's central mosque and an ethnic Uzbek. He told Forum 18 on 2 July that he believes the reason for the independence of mosques from the Muftiate is not inter-ethnic tension, but that Muslims at the small and therefore poor mosques do not want to pay tax to the Muftiate.

One month earlier, the Muftiate tried to sack Khajimetov and replace him with a Kazakh, but when local Muslims said that if this happened they would meet for prayers outside, the Spiritual Administration abandoned its plans.

For a personal commentary on current legal moves to seriously restrict religious freedom in Kazakhstan under the guise of "national security", 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=249

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http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh

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