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RUSSIA: Largest Tuvan Protestant church disbands to avoid liquidation

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

During a January check-up by the religious affairs department in the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva, officials complained the charismatic Sun Bok Ym church in the regional capital Kyzyl had violated its charter by sending its pastor to a neighbouring region and failed to inform the department of its new address. Officials of the Justice Ministry's Federal Registration Service, set up last October, began moves to liquidate it through the courts, so the church decided to disband to avoid this fate. Pastor Bair Kara-Sal told Forum 18 News Service he believes a promise by local justice department officials in court that they will not oppose a new registration application. Both Catholic and Salvation Army leaders have complained to Forum 18 that the Federal Registration Service has made nit-picking objections to terminology in their documents and refused to allow them to make simple corrections.

A pastor in the capital of the traditionally Buddhist Russian republic of Tuva has told Forum 18 News Service he is hopeful his independent charismatic church will be registered anew following local government attempts to liquidate it. Speaking from the Tuvan capital Kyzyl on 14 July, Pastor Bair Kara-Sal ascribed his optimism to a promise made in court by local justice department officials not to oppose a new registration application, duly submitted by the church in early July.

Founded by South Korean missionaries from the Full Gospel association in 1995, Sun Bok Ym is Tuva's largest Protestant church, with a predominantly ethnic Tuvan congregation of approximately 150. Speaking to Forum 18 in Kyzyl on 1 July, senior preacher Buyan Khomushku recalled that the authorities first began to pay closer attention to the church in 2001, when it experienced a sudden growth in membership and moved from rented premises to a church building funded by the South Koreans, who left Russia that year: "They wouldn't have done anything to us when the missionaries were here." Then, in January 2005, said Khomushku, the republic's religious affairs department carried out a check-up on the church while he was filling in for Pastor Kara-Sal, then on a visit to the neighbouring Russian republic of Khakassia.

Complaining that this arrangement was not provided for in the church's charter (a document outlining a religious organisation's internal workings which forms part of its state registration application) and that the church had not informed the authorities of its new address or submitted the annual confirmation of its ongoing activities as required by Russia's 1997 religion law, the inspectors told the church that they would file for its liquidation, said Khomushku. He added that the Sun Bok Ym had been unaware of most of these obligations, while the authorities had incorrectly recorded the receipt of one letter of annual confirmation: "In one sense they were right, but they could have just asked us and not gone via the courts."

Concerned, the church then resolved to disband itself before the start of February hearings in Tuva's Supreme Court, Pastor Kara-Sal told Forum 18. While the judge was thus unable to act, he said, the church is no longer able to use the name by which it has become known, "and now there will be a lot more bureaucracy". Having submitted its new registration application with the name "Good News", Pastor Kara-Sal explained that, as a newly registered independent religious organisation, the church would have to re-register annually for 15 years under the 1997 law. However, he doubted that there would in practice be any corresponding loss of rights, such as inviting foreign religious workers or distributing literature, which the law also prescribes.

While Pastor Kara-Sal was also unconcerned about the fate of the church building, Buyan Khomushku told Forum 18 that a justice department official had argued in court that the church did not need it, so that it would be better transferred to a social organisation. However, he shared his pastor's hope that the local authorities would eventually process the church's new registration application. "Even though at the moment they are constantly telling us that this or that word isn't right."

Beneath a large portrait of the Dalai Lama, Tuva's main religious affairs official confirmed to Forum 18 in his office on 1 July that the local branch of the Federal Registration Service (a body within the Ministry of Justice created by President Vladimir Putin's decree of 13 October 2004) had filed suit for Sun Bok Ym's liquidation. In addition to the reasons listed by Buyan Khomushku, Kambaa Biche-Ool claimed that the church's administration had not held sufficiently regular meetings or submitted notification of a leadership change, despite several warnings. He maintained that the Tuvan authorities moved to liquidate a religious organisation only if it had violated its own charter and/or the Russian Constitution, and confirmed that court liquidation had been prevented in

this case only because Sun Bok Ym had disbanded itself. The church has now been given three months "to put everything right," he said.

Biche-Ool also explained to Forum 18 that the Tuva authorities were following Article 25 of the 1997 law in this regard, which gives the government organ responsible for registering a religious organisation the right to monitor compliance with its charter. However, Tuva appears to be particularly diligent in this area, as Forum 18 has not encountered attempts to liquidate a religious organisation for procedural reasons anywhere else in Russia, especially since the country's Constitutional Court ruled in February 2002 that a religious organisation may be liquidated only if in violation of the Constitution or "properly proven to have ceased its activities".

According to Biche-Ool, lawyers for the Federation Registration Service and Tuva's expert religious council examine the charters of religious organisations, while he and representatives of the local police and FSB security service check the nature of their meetings. He showed Forum 18 the 2005 timetable of annual check-ups on the republic's 47 religious organisations: "If everything is in order, we don't bother them, but if there is a violation, we issue a warning." In this way, he said, the authorities closed down a Christian orphanage approximately a year ago (see F18News 25 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=615).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 2 July, Pastor Dmitri Ryabov of Kyzyl's 100-strong Glorification Church said state officials last checked up on his congregation "superficially" in the summer of 2004, in what he described as "normal" procedure. He added that all the church's documents had been in order thanks to legal advice from the Russia-wide Pentecostal union led by Sergei Ryakhovsky, to which the church is affiliated. In addition to monitoring charter activity and other functions mentioned in the 1997 law, Putin's 2004 decree specifically gives the Federal Registration Service the right "to send its representatives for participation in events conducted by social organisations, political parties and religious organisations".

While both government religious affairs official Andrei Sebentsov and religious rights lawyer Anatoli Pchelintsev told Forum 18 in November 2004 and April 2005 respectively that nothing would essentially change with the introduction of the Federal Registration Service, some religious organisations have reported their dealings with it to be far from straightforward. Speaking to Forum 18 in Saratov on 6 June, for example, Catholic Bishop Clemens Pickel pointed out that the registration of his St Kliment diocese in June 2004 should have resulted in the simple insertion of the diocese's title into the charters of its 55 parishes. On requesting this, however, registration service officials remarked that the existing charters were "full of mistakes," he said, so the process is taking some months.

On 26 April, Colonel Barry Pobjie of the Salvation Army similarly told Forum 18 that Church's central religious organisation had recently been informed by the Federal Registration Service that there was a discrepancy between a term on its registration certificate and in its charter: "As a layman, I understand it to be the difference between 'central' and 'centralised'." When he asked for this to be simply changed, however, officials reportedly told him that the organisation's entire registration documentation would have to be redone.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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

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