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KYRGYZSTAN: Restrictive Religion Law passes Parliament unanimously

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Kyrgyzstan's proposed new Religion Law has been adopted unanimously by the country's parliament today (6 November), Forum 18 News Service has found. The Law will go to President Kurmanbek Bakiev around 15 November, who then has at least a month to sign it or return it to Parliament. The Law as passed states that 200 people will be needed to register a religious organisation, contrary to assurances that Deputy Zainiddin Kurmanov, the main author of the Law, gave a visiting delegation from the European Parliament. Deputies significantly harshened this part of the Law, by voting unanimously that the identity of all 200 founders must now also be confirmed by local keneshes (elected local administrations). "How can we gather 200 people to sign official papers for the State Agency for Religious Affairs, and then get them to go to local keneshes with their passports to be identified?" the Baha'i community complained. "People are usually reserved about signing official papers." Christian leaders are also very concerned about the new Law. No changes were made to bring the Law into line with either Kyrgyzstan's international human rights commitments, or the Kyrgyz Constitution.

Kyrgyzstan's restrictive Religion Law has been adopted unanimously by 79 deputies in the country's single-chamber parliament, the Zhogorku Kenesh, today (6 November) Forum 18 News Service has found. Now that the Law's second and final reading is complete, it will go to President Kurmanbek Bakiev for signature. He will have at least one month to either sign the Law or send it back to Parliament.

The Law as passed states that 200 people will be needed to register a religious organisation, contrary to assurances that Deputy Zainiddin Kurmanov, Chair of the parliamentary Committee for Constitutional Law, Legality and Human Rights, gave a visiting delegation from the European Parliament. Kurmanov is the main author of the Law (see F18News 5 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1213). Deputies significantly harshened this part of the Law, by voting unanimously that the identity of all 200 founders must now also be confirmed by local keneshes (elected local administrations).

The Baha'i community told Forum 18 on 6 November that this harshening of the Law was very significant. "How can we gather 200 people to sign official papers for the State Agency for Religious Affairs, and then get them to go to local keneshes with their passports to be identified?" the Baha'is complained. "People are usually reserved about signing official papers."

Alexander Schanz of the Lutheran Church told Forum 18 they are worried about the new Law. "At this stage we can only pray about the situation, and many churches are praying at the moment," he told Forum 18 on 6 November. His concerns were echoed by other Christian leaders, who did not wish to comment publicly.

Despite earlier claims of Deputy Kurmanov, no changes were made to bring the Law into line with either Kyrgyzstan's international human rights commitments or the Kyrgyz Constitution, which the Law openly breaks (see F18News 5 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1213). Yildiz Kamchibekova, a senior aide to Kurmanov, told Forum 18 on 6 November that he did not take part in the vote as he was "on a business trip." However, she added that had Kurmanov been in the parliament "he also would have voted for the Law."

Alisher Sabirov, the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Ethics and Procedure, told Forum 18 on 6 November that the Law will be sent to President Bakiev around 15 November. The delay is because of the need to finalise the text according to amendments made by deputies in the second and final debate.

Kamchibekova, Deputy Kurmanov's aide, claimed to Forum 18 that Parliament must formally approve the final text of the law after amendments are incorporated into it. However Deputy Sabirov, whose Committee is responsible for parliamentary procedure, denied this claim. "Kamchibekova is leading you into confusion," he told Forum 18. "There will be no more votes on the text, and it should be published on the Parliament website by Monday 10 November."

Kamchibekova – who is responsible for preparing the final text – stated that it will be ready in "a maximum of 5 to 10 working days". She also stated that it will then be published on the parliamentary website. Religious communities and human rights defenders

have frequently complained about the secrecy surrounding the various proposed texts of the Law, and the absence of meaningful public consultation (see F18News 5 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1213).

Dostan Dostan, an aide to the Kyrgyz foreign minister, State Secretary Nur uulu Dosbol – who also advises President Bakiev on social issues – told Forum 18 on 6 November that it is too early for them to comment on whether the president is likely to approve the law. "The law was just adopted by Parliament today," he told Forum 18. "We need to see what is in it." (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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