

4 November 2010

KAZAKHSTAN: Ethnic-based mosques "cannot be opened"

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Sunni and Shia Muslims from Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities have told Forum 18 News Service of great difficulties they face from the state and the state-backed Muslim Board in opening mosques for people of the same minority ethnicity. When they have been able to register Islamic houses of prayer, they are subject to state or Muslim Board limitations on religious activity – such as being banned from conducting Friday prayers. Muslims are often extremely reluctant to discuss why ethnic minorities cannot conduct religious activity together, including hearing sermons in their own language. Those who do discuss the issue indicate very strongly that they are fearful of state reactions, and often ask for anonymity. Officials also mainly refuse to discuss the issue, insisting that such mosques "cannot be opened". An independent Muslim expert on Islam within Kazakhstan, who wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that the State wants to "keep the Muslim Board's monopoly over the mosques". Appointing Kazakh imams and making Kazakh the priority language in mosques may be part of a wider state attempt to make the Kazakh ethnicity dominant, the expert suggested.

Sunni and Shia Muslims from several of Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities have told Forum 18 News Service that they want to open mosques where they could worship with fellow-believers who speak the same language and have the same cultural background. They insist that they do not want to exclude people from other backgrounds from coming to their mosques, but they want to hear sermons in their mother tongue alongside the prayers which commonly are said in Arabic in all mosques. Forum 18 has found that opening such mosques with national imams is now almost impossible.

Muslim ethnic communities which have been able to register houses of prayer are subject to state or state-backed Muslim Board limitations on their religious activity – such as being banned from conducting Friday prayers. (Shias worldwide normally hold their main weekly prayers on Thursday evenings.) Prayer houses are forbidden architecturally to look like mosques, and so are seen as having a lower status than mosques. They therefore generally attract fewer worshippers.

Restrictions on Muslim religious activity with the same ethnicity particularly affect Shias, who are mainly Azerbaijanis – a small minority among Kazakhstan's Muslims.

The state and Muslim Board are strongly hostile to any mosques being outside state control (see F18News 14 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1498).

Many Muslims have been extremely reluctant to discuss with Forum 18 the issue of why ethnic minorities cannot conduct religious activity together, including hearing sermons in their mother tongue. Those who do wish to discuss the issue very strongly indicate that they are fearful of state reactions, and often ask for anonymity. Officials similarly mainly refuse to discuss the issue.

Who is affected?

Of people from non-Kazakh groups who are mainly but not exclusively Muslims, the 2009 official census recorded 457,000 Uzbeks, 223,000 Uyghurs and 203,000 Tatars out of a total population of 16 million. There are also smaller communities of Kyrgyz, Azerbaijanis and people whose origins are in the multi-ethnic Russian North Caucasus, including Dagestan. Some within these groups believe the census figures understate their numbers.

Tatars have neither a mosque nor a Tatar imam. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan's Constitution and Religion Law allow citizens to establish religious communities freely and choose their own leaders, an official of East Kazakhstan Regional Administration, where there is a large Tatar community, told Forum 18 that it is the Muslim Board's sole responsibility to appoint imams to mosques.

Similarly, the large Kyrgyz community in Jambyl Region does not have a Kyrgyz imam or mosque of its own, a local human rights defender complained to Forum 18. Echoing his colleague from East Kazakhstan Region, an official of Jambyl Regional Administration also said that the Muslim Board's central regional mosque appoints imams.

The Azerbaijani Shia community in Almaty, the country's largest city and former capital, had to register its worship place as a prayer house instead of a mosque. Forum 18 understands that it is under official pressure not to spread its beliefs or traditions. The

community founders also told Forum 18 that they decided not to install a dome on the top of the building.

Other religious communities seem not to have been affected by state-imposed language or ethnic restrictions, representatives of several communities including Protestant Christians and Ahmadi Muslims told Forum 18.

Why?

An independent Muslim expert on Islam within Kazakhstan, who wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 on 26 October that the reason Kazakhstan's authorities do not want to register independent Muslim communities as mosques is that they could attract more people. The state wants to "keep the Muslim Board's monopoly over the mosques". Yet legally it should make no difference whether or not a religious community is registered as a mosque or prayer house, the expert added.

The Islamic expert told Forum 18 that in Kazakhstan the state is trying to make the Kazakh language and culture dominant over others. This may in part be a reaction to the Russification of the Soviet period. Appointing Kazakh imams and making Kazakh the priority language in the Muslim community and mosques may be part of this attempt to make the Kazakh ethnicity dominant.

For example, Muslims who wished to be unnamed told Forum 18 that Kazakh imams have been appointed to many mosques built by Uyghurs. Examples in Almaty are the Aksay-Aysha mosque in the Aksay district and the Muzammil mosque in Auezov district, mainly attended by Uyghurs with some Kazakhs. Both mosques were built by Uyghurs with their own funds. Imams of both mosques told Forum 18 that they are ethnic Kazakhs and give their Friday sermons in Kazakh. Imam Abdykul Azbergenov of the Muzammil mosque said that his deputy was Uyghur, and every other week the Uyghurs hear their Friday sermons in Uyghur. An ethnic Uyghur, who wished to remain unnamed, did not wish to comment on this for fear of the authorities.

"There are Uyghur imams in small villages populated predominantly by Uyghurs in the Almaty region," the Muslim expert noted. Commenting on ethnic communities wanting an imam who speaks their own language, the expert noted that "it may not only be because of the language or cultural issues". Another factor "may be that they don't want to be part of the Muslim Board, because of rumours that bribes are paid to get official positions in the Board."

Among the conditions imposed by the Board on mosques which join it is that 30 percent of a mosque's income from offerings must be paid to the Board (see F18News 14 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1498).

Mosques based on ethnic origins "cannot be opened"

Officials at the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee – one of the agencies responsible for state control of religious activity – refused to discuss the matter of ethnic-related mosques with Forum 18 between 22 and 29 October. Forum 18 on 22 October was referred to Serik Yelemesov, the Committee's Chief Expert, who said he was not authorised to comment on the subject. He said Ardak Doszhan, the Committee Chair, and Zhanbolat Mukhametkaliyev, Deputy Chair, were in an important meeting. Called back over several days, Yelemesov or Doszhan's secretary (she did not give her name) each time said that both the Chair and Deputy Chair were either in a meeting or out of the office.

Local administration officials in several of Kazakhstan's regions insisted to Forum 18 that imams are only appointed by the Muslim Board, and mosques based on ethnic affiliation "cannot be opened".

Muhammadhusein Alsabekov, Deputy to Kazakhstan's Chief Mufti Absattar Derbisali and Deputy Head of the Muslim Board, said that the Muslim Board appoints imams for the country's mosques. Asked by what right the Muslim Board, which is merely one officially registered religious organisation, can appoint imams to mosques, in other words to other religious organisations which have equal rights as the defined by the country's Religion Law, Alsabekov said, "Based on Islamic Sharia Law, the Muslim Community elects the Ulema [Islamic scholars], and the Ulema then appoint imams."

Told that Kazakhstan is a secular State and not ruled by Sharia Law, he insisted without explanation that this is the "accepted order".

Mother tongue "closer to the soul"

Gabdulhak Akhunzhanov, Head of the Tatar Cultural Centre in Semey in East Kazakhstan Region, told Forum 18 on 26 October that there is no Tatar imam to serve the 11,000-strong Tatar community of the Region. "During Soviet times there were two Tatar mosques in the region with Tatar imams, but now there is one mosque which people call the Tatar mosque, but which, in reality, is not a Tatar mosque," he lamented. "The sermons are given in Kazakh."

Akhunzhanov added that it is "closer to the soul" when a person hears the Koran preached in their mother tongue, as well as ceremonies like blessing a new-born child or burying a family member.

But no imam for Tatars

Speaking of the situation for the Tatars nationally, Akhunzhanov of the Tatar Cultural Centre stated that there are no officially recognised Tatar imams or mosques. Asked why, he stated that there is "no official pressure", and that "it is the Tatar community's problem". In East Kazakhstan Region, for example, Tatars "do not know their traditions well, and most of them do not attend mosques". When Forum 18 asked whether more Tatars would attend if they could attend mosques where sermons were in their language, Akhunzhanov made no comment.

Deputy Chief Mufti Alsabekov of the Muslim Board objected to the notion that there are no Tatar imams in Kazakhstan. "Call me back tomorrow at noon, and I will give you a whole list of Tatar imams," he said. Called back the next day at the requested time, Alsabekov's family answered his cell phone, and told Forum 18 that he had a meeting in Almaty City Administration and left his cell phone at home. The numbers at the Muslim Board went unanswered.

Akhunzhanov of the Tatar Cultural Centre said that his community contacted the East Kazakhstan Regional Administration several years ago asking for a mosque for the Tatar community. They were told in reply that the issue needed to be solved with the Muslim Board.

Akhunzhanov did not want to discuss further their communications with the regional authorities and the Muslim Board. "I know that we will have Tatar mosques sooner or later," he told Forum 18. "We need to raise educated Tatar imams in Kazakhstan."

Mosques "must not be established" on minority ethnic lines

Like other state officials, Zhaksylyk Omar, Head of East Kazakhstan Regional Administration's Internal Policy Department, insisted to Forum 18 that mosques "must not be" established on minority ethnic lines. Asked whether local Tatars can elect a Tatar imam and build a mosque for themselves, Omar responded categorically: "That is the competence of the Muslim Board."

Told that according to the Religion Law, the Muslim Board is equal to the other religious communities and not their superior, Omar declined to comment further.

Can Kyrgyz choose their own imam?

An independent Kyrgyz human rights defender from Jambyl Region in southern Kazakhstan, who wished to remain unnamed, complained to Forum 18 on 22 October that there are no Kyrgyz mosques or Kyrgyz imams in Kazakhstan. "We have a large Kyrgyz community in Jambyl, which borders Kyrgyzstan," he said, "but Kazakhstan's authorities suppress our cultural and religious freedoms." The human rights defender preferred not to discuss the problems in detail for fear of the authorities.

Rakhiya Turmakhambetova, Head of Jambyl Regional Administration's Internal Policy Department, said that mosques in Kazakhstan are not divided on the basis of ethnic background. "There are no Kazakh, Kurdish or Kyrgyz mosques," she emphatically told Forum 18 on 27 October. Asked how she could explain why there are no Kyrgyz imams in her region where there is a large Kyrgyz community, she said: "I don't know which specific village you are talking about, but let them present their imam, if they have one, to the Central Mosque in Taraz, and get their consent."

Told that Kazakhstan's Religion Law does not make either the Central Mosque or the Muslim Board superior to any other community, Turmakhambetova changed her statement. "Yes, you are right, they should choose their own imam, and establish their own mosque if they wish to do so."

Azeri Shias can have houses of prayer – but no mosques

Azizaga Gambarov (Chair of Almaty's Fatimai Mosque, the city's registered Azerbaijani Shia Muslim community) and Gahraman Bashirov (a founder of the Mosque) told Forum 18 on 26 October that there is only one other registered Azerbaijani Shia community in Almaty Region to serve the roughly 30,000 Azerbaijani Shias in the Region. There are, they said, eight mosques nationwide for the total Azerbaijani population of 140,000 (according to the 2009 census) or 350,000 (according to the community's estimates).

None of the mosques are registered as mosques - all are registered as houses of prayer, Bashirov said. Houses of prayer are subject to state or state-backed Muslim Board limitations on their religious activity – such as being banned from conducting Friday prayers. They are also forbidden to architecturally look like mosques, and so are seen as having a lower status than mosques.

Bashirov lamented that their mosque was registered with Almaty City Justice Department in 2000 as a prayer house "to avoid problems." He explained that the community first intended to build a mosque, but in the end "we did not put up a dome, and did not register it as a mosque". Bashirov told Forum 18 that in 2000 the Justice Department told him to obtain the agreement of the Muslim Board to build a mosque. "For five months I struggled to get the permission of the Muslim Board, but they had their conditions to which we did not agree," Bashirov said.

Among the conditions stipulated by the Muslim Board, Bashirov stated that it wanted to install an offering box in front of the mosque and receive a percentage from the collected offerings. Another condition was that the Board would appoint the mosque's

imam. "Of course we could not agree to this since we are Shia Muslims, and we have our own traditions," Bashirov told Forum 18. This has also been the experience of non-ethnically based mosques (see F18News 14 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1498).

Asked if the way the community was officially registered limited it in any way, Bashirov said that "when some Shia holidays are celebrated, especially the Muharram days [the Shia commemoration of Ashura], police may visit us". However, "when we show our registration they leave us in peace". He added that the community can observe all the traditions, and that he does not know how the way they are registered could limit them.

Imam for Shias said not to know Shia traditions

A member of the community, who wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 on 22 October that the current imam is a Kazakhstan-born Azerbaijani, and he neither knows nor teaches Shia traditions extensively. "We no longer invite the well-educated imams from Iran who used to come to teach us," the Muslim complained. It was thought that leaders of the community may have been told by the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police and the Muslim Board, whose officials have in the past visited the mosque, "to stop inviting Iranian imams and not to speak too much about Shia traditions".

Mosques "cannot be ethnic"

Vladimir Ivanov, Chief Religious Affairs Official of Almaty city Administration, also insists that mosques "cannot be ethnic". "Only Judaism is an ethnic religion, Islam is an international religion," he told Forum 18 on 22 October. Told about the Shia Azerbaijani community he said that it was the Azerbaijani community's "natural" right to register their worship place "as they wished" to. "There's no difference whether you are registered as a mosque or a prayer house," he claimed to Forum 18. Ivanov denied that there has been any pressure on the Azerbaijani community.

"It is the order of things" for Dagestanis

Musa Alyshayev, Head of the Dagestani Cultural Centre in Atyrau Region in western Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 on 22 October that the Dagestani community has a place of worship and a Dagestani imam. But for Friday sermons they attend the central mosque in the central city of Atyrau. Asked why the community could not hold Friday sermons, he responded simply: "It is the order of things."

Alyshayev declined to explain to Forum 18 who gave the order and what exactly the order was. He said that although sermons in the Central mosque are in Kazakh and the Russian-speaking community members do not understand Kazakh well, it is "fine because we are all Sunni and follow the same traditions".

In 2007 the at-Takhwa mosque of the Darussalam Muslim community in Atyrau was dissolved by a court, and the mosque given to the city's Muslim Board. Kenes Kosybaev, the then Deputy Akim (head of the executive authority) of Atyrau Region, claimed to Forum 18 that the community did this "voluntarily" (see F18News 12 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1060). (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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>.

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