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BELARUS: Ahmadiyya Muslims among banned religious organisations

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has learnt that a Belarusian government list of 16 banned religious organisations includes the British-based Ahmadiyya, who are generally considered to a sect of Islam. State officials reportedly "do not register sects of Christianity or Islam as there will be conflicts between them," Forum 18 was told. Even if a group has state registration, it can still encounter state opposition such as that experienced by the charismatic Full Gospel Association. The Association has been officially classed as a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" of Belarus.

A government list of 16 religious organisations banned in Belarus includes Ahmadiyya Muslims, the Belarusian Orthodox Church's main researcher on new religious movements confirmed to Forum 18 News Service on 19 September. According to Vladimir Martinovich, who heads the Minsk-based Venerable Iosif of Volotsk Consultation and Information Centre, the list also includes Aum Sinrikyo, satanists, the Church of Christ (Boston Movement), the White Brotherhood, Scientology, Vissarion's Church of the Last Testament and the Bogorodichny Tsentr.

"We aren't free," Ahmadiyya follower Tanveer Ahmad remarked to Forum 18 in the western city of Grodno on 17 September. When acquaintances ask why they have not heard of Ahmadiyya on inquiring about Ahmad's faith, he continued, "I tell them that it's because we're banned." According to Ahmad, there are currently at least 30 Ahmadiyya followers at several locations in the republic, including some 13 native Belarusians. A Pakistani citizen who has been studying medicine in Belarus for almost ten years, Ahmad has left the republic to become a surgeon since Forum 18 spoke to him.

Generally considered to be a sect of Islam, Ahmadiyya followers are not permitted to call themselves Muslims in Pakistan, Ahmad told Forum 18, and their current leader lives in exile in Great Britain. Unlike other Muslims, he explained, the group reveres its nineteenth-century founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (India) as "the Messiah for the present age" and believes that the prophet Jesus was not taken up to heaven by God but died a natural death in Kashmir.

"It is an obligation of our faith to say how we differ from other Muslims," Ahmad maintained. Even though Ahmadiyya followers in Belarus would like others to know about their beliefs, he said, it is possible to speak about them only informally in response to individual inquiries. Unable to obtain state registration in the republic, Ahmadiyya believers "can do nothing collectively" there, said Ahmad. They cannot import or distribute literature or have an official representative as in other countries. They cannot gather legally, let alone rent premises, he added, "so we read prayers by ourselves." While Ahmad himself did not deal with what he believes to have been Ahmadiyya's only application for registration in Belarus in 1994 or 1995, he told Forum 18 that state officials rejected it. "They said that they do not register sects of Christianity or Islam as there will be conflicts between them."

Ahmadiyya followers in Belarus have not fought against this decision, however. "It is a sin not to obey the law," remarked Ahmad, who maintained that while jihad ("holy struggle") is justified either when a state does not allow Muslims to observe their religion or against Muslims who kill other Muslims, violence is its worst form. "We are a peaceful community," he told Forum 18. "We can talk or write about our grievances but we cannot try to change the situation by force."

Speaking on 23 September, the official in charge of religious affairs in Vitebsk region confirmed to Forum 18 that Ahmadiyya was banned in Belarus, but said that he did not know why. "It is OK if they keep to themselves and if their prayers do not attract others," Nikolai Stepanenko remarked. Ismail Aleksandrovich, who heads the Religious Association of Muslims in Belarus, told Forum 18 on 20 September that Pakistani student followers of Ahmadiyya had been active in the republic some five years ago. He maintained that they had since left the country of their own accord on failing to win local support, however, and that the Muslim community had turned down their offers of funding and religious literature.

Vladimir Martinovich told Forum 18 that his centre conducts "research into sects" ("sektovedeniye") and that he regards the terms "sect" and "cult" as neutral and primarily dependent upon circumstances, since "any religious organisation can be dangerous at a particular time or place." With its definitive list of "destructive sects," however, the Belarusian state appears to take a different view.

On 16 September the religious affairs official for Brest region told Forum 18 that state analysis of religious literature prevented only that produced by "destructive sects" from entering the republic. When Forum 18 then asked whether controversial groups in Russia, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, were included on the state's list of banned organisations, Vasili Marchenko replied that "the law recognises them and they are registered, so we can't call them a destructive sect."

Registration is not necessarily a guarantee that the Belarusian state will adopt a neutral position towards a particular religious organisation, however. While registered, the charismatic Full Gospel Association encounters various forms of state opposition (See recent F18News articles, eg 7 October 2003 'Home worship by registered groups illegal' http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155). In addition, a five-page March 2000 expert analysis of one of its member churches approved by Professor Anatoli Kruglov in his capacity as chairman of the Expert Council attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs concludes that the church is a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" of Belarus.

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