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KAZAKHSTAN: "There can be no Tatar, Chechen or Tajik mosques"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Among the many religious communities denied the legal right to exist as Kazakhstan completes its compulsory and cumbersome re-registration process are mosques catering to Muslims mainly of one ethnic minority community. Members of Almaty's Azeri Shia community – already liquidated in court – told Forum 18 News Service they fear it may be forced to stop worship. Denied re-registration, the 160-year-old Tatar-Bashkir Din-Muhammad Mosque in the northern city of Petropavl is "on the verge of closure", community members complained. "This would be a blow not only to our religious traditions but also to our culture as a whole," one mosque member told Forum 18. "There are no divisions in Islam based on ethnic identity. There can be no Tatar, Chechen or Tajik mosques," Nurislyam Gabdullin, the religious affairs official who refused to approve the re-registration, told Forum 18. "I have in front of me the Charter of the Community, which calls itself the Tatar-Bashkir Din-Muhammad Religious Community. That is not possible in Kazakhstan."

Kazakhstan's authorities have not – so far – prevented worship at mosques predominantly belonging to one ethnic minority community. However, members of several have expressed fears to Forum 18 News Service that in the wake of the compulsory re-registration imposed on all the country's religious communities, which they failed to get, such bans may be imminent. Denied re-registration, the Tatar-Bashkir Din-Muhammad Mosque in Petropavl in North Kazakhstan Region is "on the verge of closure", community members complained to Forum 18. The Azeri Shia mosque in Kazakhstan's commercial capital Almaty is among many religious communities of all faiths liquidated through the courts. There too community members told Forum 18 of their fears for the future.

Baltabai Metezhanov, Chief of the Section of the government's Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) in the capital Astana responsible for work with Muslim communities, insisted to Forum 18 on 7 December that there is "no ban" on ethnic mosques.

Asked why the Azeri Community in Almaty was closed down, and why the Tatar Din-Muhammad Mosque in Petropavl cannot receive re-registration, Metezhanov insisted everything must be "in the frame of the Law".

Asked what he exactly means by "the frame of the Law", and whether in the frame of the Law mosques can be registered independently from the Muslim Board, Metezhanov declined to respond. "I think I answered, and now you must excuse I am busy."

"Ethnic" mosques

Many of Kazakhstan's ethnic minority communities of Muslim background have mosques catering to their religious needs, including Tatars and Bashkirs, Chechens, Azeris, Tajiks and Dungans. Some of these mosques are Sunni, others Shia.

Even before the harsh 2011 Religion Law was adopted, state officials obstructed the registration and functioning of mosques catering mainly to members of any one ethnic minority (see F18News 4 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1506).

Since the new Law was adopted, state officials have repeatedly insisted that only Muslim communities under the Muslim Board can register. A Muslim Board official told Forum 18 in November that only Hanafi Sunni mosques can be members of the Board and that no other types of Muslim communities exist in Kazakhstan (see F18News 22 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1769).

Members of some such "ethnic minority" mosques fear that if they join the Muslim Board, they will have ethnic Kazakh imams imposed on them.

Other religious communities – such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church – have been able to gain the compulsory re-registration, despite having ethnic designations in their names.

Compulsory re-registration of all religious communities was mandated in the 2011 Religion Law. Religious communities were given until 25 October 2012 to lodge re-registration applications in a process many have complained was "complex", "arbitrary", "unnecessary" and "expensive". Many communities – especially those unable to find 50 adult citizen founders – have been liquidated through the courts (see F18News 21 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1768).

Other mosques independent of the Muslim Board, as well as other communities including Protestants are experiencing re-registration denials and enforced closures. All unregistered exercise of freedom of religion or belief by people in association with others is a criminal offence, against the international human rights obligations Kazakhstan has solemnly promised to implement (see F18News 11 December 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1780).

160-year old Tatar-Bashkir mosque threatened

The Tatar Muslims told Forum 18 from Petropavl that Tatars and Bashkirs have lived in what is now Kazakhstan for 400 years. The Din-Muhammad Mosque was built by their ancestors 160 years ago. In independent Kazakhstan, it has had official registration for the past 16 years since the community restored and reopened it. Petropavl, which is about 50 kms (30 miles) from Kazakhstan's northern border with Russia, has an estimated 20,000-strong Tatar community.

"But now the authorities are trying close down our Mosque, which unites us, where our children receive Tatar language and traditions besides Koran lessons," mosque members, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, lamented to Forum 18 on 5 December. "This would be a blow not only to our religious traditions but also to our culture as a whole."

The mosque became "run down during the Soviet rule since it was used as a barn and storage, and was made into a sauna" in the years before the Tatar community restored it and officially registered it as a mosque. "Our community also built the city of Petropavl from scratch, which is testified in many published books, and we do not deserve such treatment," the Tatar Muslims complained.

The Tatar Muslims told Forum 18 that until now they have received no answer to their re-registration application, although more than a month had passed from the last day of the deadline, which is usually a maximum time given to the authorities to respond to applications.

Also, representatives of the Muslim Board announced at the Second Forum of Religious Scholars of Kazakhstan on 15 November that the Tatar-Bashkir Din-Muhammad Mosque had already been closed down.

KNB visit

What heightened their worries, mosque members told Forum 18, was that two officers of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB) secret police approached Imam Rafael Ryazapov at the mosque in the morning of 5 December "demanding the originals of all the mosque's documents". However, the Imam refused them, saying that he was in a hurry to go to a meeting organised by the Regional representatives of the Muslim Board and the local authorities, and that he could provide them with copies only later.

The Muslims said that when asked why the KNB officers wanted the documents they replied that the Regional Justice Department had lost all the copies their documents, and that they were there to get the documents for the Justice Department.

Members of the Din-Muhammad Mosque said that they had collected all the founding documents between 1994 and 1996 "overcoming such bureaucratic hurdles put in their way by the local authorities". They said it would be the "end of the story" if they gave them away now. They pointed out that one of the two officials who arrived on 5 December had visited the Mosque earlier, and told the Mosque that he was from the KNB.

"There can be no Tatar, Chechen or Tajik mosques"

Nurislyam Gabdullin, Chair of the North Kazakhstan Regional Department of ARA, insisted to Forum 18 on 4 December the authorities had no intention of closing down the Din-Muhammad Mosque, and that the re-registration of them depends on the Regional Justice Department.

However, Gulnara Kozhakhmetova, the Press-Secretary of the Justice Department, denied this. "We are an organ which only legalises the wishes of religious communities, once their documents are in order and they have a positive expert opinion from the ARA specialist," she told Forum 18 categorically on 4 December. "We are waiting for a signal from the Regional ARA Department whether or not to legalise the community."

Called back on 5 December, Gabdullin gave a somewhat different opinion. "There are no divisions in Islam based on ethnic identity. There can be no Tatar, Chechen or Tajik mosques," he told Forum 18. Asked what he exactly meant, he added: "I have in front of me the Charter of the Community, which calls itself the Tatar-Bashkir Din-Muhammad Religious Community. That is not possible in Kazakhstan."

Gabdullin told Forum 18 that "Kazakhstan wants to have a monolithic Islam, not ethnically divided movements." Asked whether he would approve their re-registration if the community removes the phrase Tatar-Bashkir from its name, the ARA official responded: "It's not only that, but they also need to become part of the Muslim Board. There is no other way now for mosques."

However, the Tatar Muslims objected to this, insisting that they do not want to become part of the Muslim Board. "We do not want to have a Kazakh Imam appointed to us by the Muslim Board," one told Forum 18, "and we do not want to lose our religious and at the same time cultural traditions and values."

Told the opinion of the Tatar Muslims, and asked why he and the other authorities pressure them to join the Muslim Board, Gabdullin responded: "We do not want all kinds of religious sects, movements, and extremists funded from England."

Asked whether he meant that the Din-Muhammad Community received funds from England or that they are a harmful community, Gabdullin backtracked. He said he does not mean the Din-Muhammad Community when he speaks of "extremists". He declined to answer questions further and put the phone down.

Secret police denies involvement

Kurman Yelubayev, Chief of the KNB's North Kazakhstan Regional Department, adamantly denied that the secret police was involved with the Din-Muhammad Community or that any of their officials visited Imam Ryazapov. "Religious communities are under the Agency of Religious Affairs - they are responsible for these organisations," he told Forum 18 on 5 December.

Yelubayev refused to comment on why the authorities do not want to re-register the mosque. Asked whether the community posed any threat to Kazakhstan's security or stability, he said: "No, and I don't have such information."

Asked about Gabdullin's allegations on England's financing of extremism in Kazakhstan, and why the authorities are afraid that registered religious communities might violate stability, Yelubayev responded: "Whoever gives you such statements, it is their words and their responsibility."

Azeri Muslim community liquidated through the court

Members of the Azeri Fatimai Shia Community in Zhetisu District of Almaty, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 that it had been officially liquidated by an Almaty court. "The court made a decision to close down the Community, and put an arrest on the property, which consists of a one-storey building and 600 square metre plot of land, whose estimated market value is 300,000 US Dollars [45 million Kazakh Tenge, 1.7 million Norwegian Kroner or 230,000 Euros]."

Judge Abdikarim Yelibayev of Almaty Specialised Inter-district Economic Court liquidated the community in response to a late-November suit from Almaty City Justice Department.

Community members lamented to Forum 18 that "we do not know whether in future we will be able to bury our dead according to our Shia traditions and also be able to gather for religious holidays and ceremonies since that the property was the only place for us in Almaty." They said they did not know the details of the closure, and asked Forum 18 to talk to Haji Azizaga Gambarov, the Chairman of the Community.

"It is true that a Court closed us down but we hope that we can negotiate with the authorities and restore our rights," Haji Gambarov told Forum 18 on 5 December. He declined to discuss the closure, saying that he is "still hopeful that everything will be resolved positively."

Official defends liquidation

Nurzhaz Zhaparkul, Chair of the ARA Department for Almaty, defended their liquidation of the Fatimai Shia Community through the court. "The Community applied too late for re-registration on 24 October, just one day before the official deadline," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 5 December. According to Zhaparkul, his Department "consulted the Community several times to put their founding documents in order", which he said they did not do. "So they didn't have enough time to make all the corrections to their documents, and we had to cancel their registration."

Zhaparkul denied to Forum 18 that the reason the Azeri community could not re-register was "because they refused to become part of the Sunni Muslim Board" as community members had told Forum 18.

However, Zhaparkul claimed that the community "can apply as a new organisation now after they bring their property and documents in order with the Law." He would not specify what exactly was wrong with the founding documents.

Zhaparkul also claimed that the Court heard the case on 5 December, and the members of the Fatimai Community did not appear before the Court, which was "irresponsible on their part".

Kayrat (who refused to give his last name), Assistant of Judge Yelibayev who heard the Azeri Shia Community case, declined to comment on the case or give any details. He said that Judge Yelibayev also was not available to talk. "If they don't like the decision they can of course make an appeal but I don't think they will get any positive results," he told Forum 18 on 7 December.

Hopes for continuing worship

Zhaparkul of the ARA told Forum 18 that the Community can continue with their activity while they are applying for new registration.

Haji Gambarov told Forum 18 that at the moment they are not having problems to meet for prayers, and that he hopes that there will be none in future. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY