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KAZAKHSTAN: Bookshop censorship, ban on all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature

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

Kazakhstan continues to ban all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature. State-backed Muslim Board spokesperson Ongar Omirbek told Forum 18 News Service that "only Islamic literature from the Sunni Hanafi school can be distributed, as all other Muslim schools - including Ahmadis - are banned". Shia Muslims across Kazakhstan, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that Shia literature cannot be found on sale. Local authorities and "law enforcement" agencies have been enforcing censorship – including severe limitations on the numbers of bookshops allowed to sell any kind of religious material – across Kazakhstan with raids and fines. Even some shops with permission to sell religious books such as Korans and Bibles have told Forum 18 that they do not want to do so, to avoid trouble from the authorities. Yerlan Kalmakov of Kostanai Regional Internal Policy Department, asked why people must ask for permission from the authorities, replied: "Imagine what could happen if we allow just anybody to distribute religious materials". He added that "unregistered religious organisations, which are illegal in Kazakhstan will use this and attract people to their ranks. They will thus continue their illegal existence".

Kazakhstan continues to ban all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. Local authorities and "law enforcement" agencies have been enforcing censorship – including severe limitations on the numbers of bookshops allowed to sell any kind of religious material from any belief – across Kazakhstan with raids and fines. For example in Kostanai [Qostanay] Region, which has an area of 196,000 square kilometres (76,000 square miles) and a population of about 900,300 people, only two bookshops are allowed to sell religious material.

Some shops from across Kazakhstan, which have permission to sell religious books, have told Forum 18 that they do not want to do so, to avoid trouble from the authorities. Police Major Kanat Amrin, Head of North Kazakhstan police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism, asked by Forum 18 why people must ask the authorities for permission to read, sell, or purchase books replied: "We must know who sells books, and whether books which are not officially allowed are among the books they sell."

Ban on all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature

Kazakhstan is continuing to ban all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature, and is targeting both Shia and Ahmadi Muslim literature. State-backed Muslim Board spokesperson Ongar Omirbek, who edits the Board's newspaper, told Forum 18 on 20 February that "only Islamic literature from the Sunni Hanafi school can be distributed, as all other Muslim schools - including Ahmadis - are banned". (There are four schools of legal thought, including the Hanafi school, within Sunni Islam.)

Imam Muhammad-Hussein Alsabekov, Deputy Head of the Muslim Board, told Forum 18 on 20 February that Ahmadi Muslim literature was banned by the Muslim Board. He also stated that mosques controlled by the Board cannot teach or use Ahmadi literature. Asked about Shia Muslim literature, he said that Shia books could be freely distributed at licensed bookshops.

Only a limited number of bookshops are allowed to sell any kind of religious literature or other materials, such as Orthodox Christian icons (see below).

In November 2012 Agabek Sydykov, spokesperson for the Muslim Board, told Forum 18 that all the Board's communities "must be Hanafi Sunni Muslim". "We don't have other sorts of Muslims here," he stated. Asked about Shia mosques or mosques affiliated with other schools of Sunni Islam, he responded: "There aren't any" (see F18News 22 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1769).

Shia Muslims across Kazakhstan, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 February 2013 that Shia literature cannot be found on sale. One Shia Muslim told Forum 18 in the south-eastern city of Almaty that they usually try to get Shia books from the Iranian Culture Centre.

Kazakhstan has nationwide forcibly closed all Ahmadi Muslim communities, banning their meetings for worship, and only one

Islamic organisation – the Muslim Board – is permitted by the state to exist (see F18News 22 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1769). Mosques are being denied re-registration – and so permission to exist – if they will not join the Muslim Board, with independent and ethnic minority mosques being particularly targeted (see F18News 25 January 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1794).

Nationwide censorship

The Muslim Board's censorship appears to be being implemented throughout Kazakhstan. A Muslim from the western Atyrau Region, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 February that "in Atyrau Muslim books are almost exclusively sold at bookstalls next to mosques, and they usually propagate Hanafi teachings".

Another Muslim, from Almaty, told Forum 18 on 20 February that: "In recent months, the volume of religious books including Muslim books sold openly in public places has decreased sharply, and I have only seen books approved by the Muslim Board being sold".

An Imam outside the capital Astana, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 February that it is "not possible to teach, preach or distribute literature of other [non-Sunni Hanafi] Islamic movements since the Muslim Board and its Charter were officially approved and registered."

The Board was re-registered in June 2012 (see F18News 22 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1769). Article 1.1 of its Charter states that the Board is a "union of citizens of Kazakhstan confessing the religion of Islam of the Hanafi Sunni school". Article 2.2 states that the Board's "subject of activity is ensure correct and systematic teaching of Hanafi movement". Article 13.8 states that "the clerks of Mosques preach Islam according to the Hanafi school".

Imam Abdimutali Dauranbekov, the Muslim Board's Chief Imam of the western Aktobe Region, told Forum 18 on 18 February that "Ahmadis are a movement, and as such do not qualify as part of Islam, and therefore have no rights to sell their books as Muslim books". Asked whether the officially recognised and propagated Hanafi Sunni Muslim school, is not a movement or another school of Islamic thought, the Imam said, "No."

Asked why Kazakh Muslims should ask for the permission of the Muslim Board to read, purchase or sell books, Dauranbekov told Forum 18 to call back later as he was busy. As soon as he heard the name of Forum 18 when called back the following day on 19 February, the Imam put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Agency of Religious Affairs involvement?

Imam Alsabekov of the Muslim Board claimed that the censorship was only a Muslim Board decision, not a decision of the Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA) (which is the state agency charged with restricting freedom of religion and belief). He claimed to Forum 18 that although the Muslim Board uses books propagating the Hanafi school of thought, it is not against other peaceful Sunni schools of thought. Their literature can, he claimed, be publicly distributed in Kazakhstan.

However, the ARA would not confirm or deny whether it was also behind the censorship. ARA Deputy Head Marat Azilkhanov referred Forum 18 to their Press Secretary when asked why the authorities impose censorship, who decided to impose censorship, whether only Hanafi Islamic books are allowed, why only a limited number of bookshops are allowed to sell religious literature and materials, and why should people have to ask the authorities whether they can read, sell or purchase even unbanned books?

ARA Press Secretary Saktagan Sadvokasov on 20 February refused to answer any of these questions. After listening to each question he gave the same response: "send that question in writing, and we will answer you." No answer has yet been received by Forum 18.

No official notification of Ahmadi book banning

Ahmadi Muslim Imam Rufatzhan Tukamov told Forum 18 on 20 February that they did not receive an official notification that the ARA or courts had banned their literature in Kazakhstan. But, he said, "we are aware that the Muslim Board has banned our books". Imam Tukamov said that "we are not distributing our literature at the moment, as we still have not received re-registration from the authorities".

All Ahmadi Muslim communities have been forcibly closed by the state, and banned from meeting for worship. The imam said that the Ahmadi community is trying to restore its legal status through the courts (see F18News 22 November 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1769). "And so in the meantime our believers only read their books in their private homes, so as not to get into trouble with the authorities."

Nationwide bookshop censorship

In summer and autumn 2012, local Akimats (local government authorities) throughout Kazakhstan issued decrees authorising named local bookshops which they had approved and licensed to sell religious literature. Almaty city Akimat, for example, approved eight named bookshops in a 31 July 2012 decree, approved by the local Justice Department on 13 August 2012. Such bookshop licences are required under Article 5, Part 4 of the 2011 Religion Law, and it is illegal to sell books and other religious material in other places without a license (see F18News 23 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617).

ARA Chair Kairat Lama Sharif on 25 January 2013 told the BNews news agency, that in the one and a half years of its existence the ARA had banned 150 religious books, 148 of which were prevented from distribution. 3,500 books underwent "expert analysis", he claimed. "If we give a negative 'expert opinion' on a book, it is then removed from all bookshops. We have the list of books that received positive opinions on our website, and any reader can purchase them". Censorship Regulations came into force in March 2012, with the ARA being tasked with conducting censorship (see F18News 8 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1698).

Lama Sharif also told BNews that "It is prohibited to sell books in open air markets". He claimed that "those who distribute books removed from circulation will receive administrative fines, and after repeated fines more serious measures will be taken."

Nationwide raids on booksellers

Akimats and "law enforcement" agencies across Kazakhstan has been enforcing censorship with raids on people suspected of selling religious books. Forum 18 has, for example, had accounts of such raids from bookshops in four different widely separated regions of Kazakhstan.

The owner of one bookshop, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 14 February that they have received permission to sell religious books from the local Akimat's Internal Policy Department. But, "as soon as we sell the few books we have left, we will stop selling any religious materials". Asked why, they said they "do not want to get in trouble with the authorities because of religious books". They further elaborated that "there are things which I cannot tell you over the phone, and I am a small person".

A bookseller from another region, who also wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 13 February that "I obtained permission from the authorities after my bookstall was raided. But I am not selling any religious books or materials any longer". Asked for the reasons, they replied, "I did not like all the hassle when a large group of officials with men in military uniforms visited my shop".

The bookseller confirmed that some of the officials on the raid were not police, but troops from the Interior Ministry or army.

The bookseller said that they would like to sell Korans, Bibles, and other religious books, but that they "do not want to have similar visits from the authorities".

A bookseller from yet another region told Forum 18 on 15 February that they had been fined for selling religious literature. "I was selling Christian books, icons and other legally permitted Christian items", they explained. "I will not sell religious books in the future", they added. The bookseller did not wish to elaborate on this, for fear of state reprisals.

A seller of Muslim books from another region, who also asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 their bookstall in a shopping centre had been raided by the National Security Committee (KNC) secret police. "I do not mind this, and if I am not sure about a book I take it to Muslim Board officials to give their opinion."

The bookseller added that there are some books, like those of the Russian Imam Shamil Alyautdinov, which are not banned but which the bookseller does not want to sell. Alyautdinov's books have state permission to be sold, but in 2011 the ARA banned a visit by him to present his books (see F18News 8 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1698).

Aktobe Region raids

Nurlan Kaldygozhin, of the north-western Aktobe [Aqtobe] Regional Prosecutor's Office, told Forum 18 on 19 February 2013 that raids began throughout the Region in early January, to reveal individuals, who "distribute religious literature against the regulations and fine them". He said that he cannot give specifics of how many individuals were raided, and how many of them belong to religious communities in the region. This is "secret information", he claimed, going on to claim that "inspections still continue".

Kaldygozhin said that all confiscated books were submitted for "religious expert analysis" by regional ARA "experts". "All the individuals were warned by us that they distributed the books without official permission, and their bookstalls were closed down", Kaldygozhin stated. He also told Forum 18 that he did not know whether or not Ahmadi Muslim books are banned, as he is not a "religious specialist".

Dana Imangaliyeva, an "expert" of Aktobe regional ARA Department, told Forum 18 on 19 February that neither Director Baurzhan Yesmekhan, nor other officials who could give specifics of the recent bookstalls raids, were available. She also said that "I think the Ahmadi literature is banned, as it is not on the website of the ARA in Astana in the list of authorised books".

Kostanai Region censorship

Religious books or materials can only be bought in two shops in the entire north-western Kostanai [Qostanay] Region. The Region has an area of 196,000 square kilometres (76,000 square miles) and a population of about 900,300 people.

The two shops - both with the same name, Book House of Ahmet Baytursynov – in the towns of Kostanai and Rudny were designated in the local Akimat's decree 410 of 24 September 2012.

Why only two bookshops in the entire Region?

Asked why in all of Kostanai Region only two shops are allowed to sell religious materials, Anna Sagitova, Head of the Internal Policy Department of Zhitikara District, on 18 February claimed to Forum that: "We publicly announced that those individuals or entrepreneurs wishing to sell religious materials must receive official permission from the Regional Administration but no one applied in our District." She added that religious materials are not now being sold in any shops or any public places in Zhitikara. Asked why such censorship is imposed, Sagitova responded: "The Religion Law demands this. We are not the ones who adopted it, we are only responsible for executing it".

The Religion Law claims that everyone has the right to acquire and use religious literature. However, distribution of such literature is only permitted, according to Article 9, Part 2, in registered places of worship, approved religious education institutions and "special stationary premises determined by local executive authorities" (see F18News 23 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617).

Yerlan Kalmakov, Deputy Head of Kostanai Regional Internal Policy Department, admitted to Forum 18 on 18 February that the fact that only two shops can distribute religious materials "limits the opportunities" to acquire religious materials. "This is so because only two shops in the whole Region applied for permission, after we publicly announced the regulations in the media", he claimed. He was quick to add that "we are at the moment looking for opportunities to expand the list of such shops".

"Imagine.."

When asked why individuals or shops which would like to distribute religious books, such as the Bible or Koran, must ask for permission from the authorities, Kalmakov replied: "Imagine what could happen if we allow just anybody to distribute religious materials". He added that "unregistered religious organisations, which are illegal in Kazakhstan will use this and attract people to their ranks. They will thus continue their illegal existence".

Kalmakov declined to explain what was wrong with the existence of unregistered and peaceful religious communities. He then halted the conversation and asked Forum 18 to send him questions in writing.

Kostanai Region bookshop raided and fined

A bookseller in Kostanai Region's town of Zhitikara, who did not have state permission, has been fined and closed down. Judge Altay Abdygali of Zhitikara District Court on 30 November 2012 fined Nadezhda Sheina, an individual entrepreneur, 100 Minimum Financial Indicators or 161,800 Tenge (6,100 Norwegian Kroner, 815 Euros, or 1,080 US Dollars). According to the verdict, which Forum 18 has seen, she was fined under the Code of Administrative Offences' Article 375, Part 1, and had been selling a variety of Christian books and other items.

A new Administrative Code Article 375 ("Violation of the Religion Law") - replacing the previous Article 375 - was introduced in an Amending Law along with the 2011 Religion Law. It punishes a wide range of often unclearly defined "offences" with possible fines for individuals and groups with state-registration, and bans on the activity of "guilty" religious groups (see F18News 23 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617).

Asked why such a large fine was imposed, Judge Abdygali told Forum 18 on 15 February that the bookseller "violated the Administrative Code by selling religious materials without official permission". Told that the shopping centre is no longer selling religious materials, and asked whether he does not consider the raid and fine pressure on people to stop selling or distributing religious materials, the Judge responded: "There are shops authorised to sell such literature".

When asked what he thought of the fact that even some shops in Kazakhstan with permission to sell books do not want to do so, to avoid trouble from the authorities, Judge Abdygali said that he does not wish further to discuss the issue. He then asked Forum 18 to send him questions in writing.

Asked about the fine, Sagitova of the Internal Policy Department said it came after a raid by Prosecutor's Office officials on the bookstall, which was in a shopping centre. "I warned the bookseller and the shopping centre that they must ask for permission, but they ignored this and so the Prosecutor's Office opened the administrative case." Asked why such a harsh fine was imposed, and whether the authorities could not have just given a warning, Sagitova said that the bookseller "violated the Administrative Code, and ought to carry the punishment".

According to the verdict seen by Forum 18, the bookstall was open from 30 August until mid-November 2012. The verdict claims that the bookseller "admitted guilt, and told the Court that they were warned by the Zhitikara Administration of a possible administrative penalty".

Valery Beloziorov, the manager of the shopping centre, told Forum 18 on 18 February that "we are not selling religious books any longer". Asked for the reasons, he replied: "I personally am not involved in selling anything, I only rent space to vendors. It is up to them what they choose to sell." Asked whether the shopping centre would rent space to people with official permission to sell religious books and materials, he repeated his previous response.

Kostanai Region Prosecutor's Office announced on its website on 20 December 2012 that it had launched a case under Administrative Code Article 375, Part 1 against the owner of a supermarket in the town of Arkalyk. It complained that the supermarket was selling copies of the Bible without a permit as an authorised seller of religious books. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the owner was punished.

Prosecuted for distributing religious books in Akmola Region

In the northern Akmola Region's Burabai District, the local police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism is prosecuting Vyacheslav Cherkasov, an unregistered Baptist from Shchuchinsk.

Pyotr Zimens, a co-believer, told Forum 18 on 18 February that between January and February police stopped Cherkasov and another fellow believer 15 times on various days in Shchuchinsk while they were distributing Christian books on the street to passers-by. Police Major Bekmyrza Bayakhmetov questioned both Cherkasov and Zimens several times in early February. Bayakhmetov "demanded that Cherkasov stop distributing books on the street", Zimens said. Major Bayakhmetov also told Zimens that he "must influence" Cherkasov to do this.

"Why should I ask my brother to stop doing what our faith teaches us to do," Zimens asked Forum 18. He added that Kazakhstan Constitution "gives us the right to religious freedom, and we have the right to share our faith with others and to distribute Christian literature for free."

Burabai Police on 18 February, with Galina Bessmertnaya, a specialist in Akmola regional ARA Department, "came to Cherkasov's home demanding that he sign police reports", Zimens told Forum 18. "He refused to sign the reports, as he does not think he has violated the Law."

Bessmertnaya of the ARA told Forum 18 that "we read the police report to him [Cherkasov] in the presence of two witnesses, and according to the procedures we could refer the case to the Court, which we did". She told Forum 18 that Cherkasov was distributing religious literature in "an unauthorised place." She stated that "distribution based on the Law can only be allowed in authorised places by Akimats, or in religious buildings."

Asked what would happen if Cherkasov's co-believers continue to distribute literature despite being fined, Bessmertnaya stated that "more serious measures will be taken. If they do not want this, then they had better obey the Law". She refused to specify whether more serious measures include prison sentences.

Both Major Bayakhmetov and Lieutenant Colonel Bakhtiyar Utekin, Head of the local police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism, on 19 February refused to comment on the case. When asked about the case, Utekin responded, "Please, send us your questions in writing. I don't know who you are, and why should I talk to you about this over the phone." He then put the phone down.

The case will be heard in Burabai District Administrative Court on 27 February. The case is being brought under Administrative Code Article 375 Part 1 ("Violation of the Religion Law"), Bessmertnaya of the ARA told Forum 18 on 19 February.

Raids in North Kazakhstan and the capital

Raids also took place in North Kazakhstan Region and Astana. Police Major Kanat Amrin, Head of North Kazakhstan police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism, was asked by Forum 18 on 18 February why people must ask the authorities for permission to read, sell, or purchase books – even officially authorised books.

Major Amrin replied: "We must know who sells books, and whether books which are not officially allowed are among the books

they sell." Asked why such harsh penalties for breaking the censorship regime are imposed, he replied "we only execute the Administrative Code and Religion Law."

Yerlan Kusainov, Head of Astana police Department for the Struggle against Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism, told Forum 18 on 19 February that police "exposed 44 individuals, as a result of operational measures between 21 and 25 January. Most violated the Religion Law, as they carried out illegal missionary activity, and two were individual entrepreneurs not belonging to any religious organisations. They distributed religious literature in unauthorised places." Kusainov said that administrative cases were only opened against the two involved in illegal book distribution.

However, Sofia Kolyshbekova of Astana Akimat's Internal Policy Department told the media on 11 January that "all 44 individuals were charged under Part 1 of Article 375 for illegal distribution of religious materials". Police, she said, "confiscated 259 pieces of religious literature and audio-video materials". Kusainov of Astana Police claimed to Forum 18 that Kolyshbekova had been "misinterpreted" by the mass media. "Only two had administrative charges brought against them, we only warned the rest", he claimed.

Kusainov refused to give specific details of the raids and prosecutions saying that it "is secret operational information." He also said that the "inspections will continue since we need to execute the [Religion] Law, and stop illegal distribution." (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.

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