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KAZAKHSTAN: Religious musical banned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Kazakhstan's Religious Affairs Committee warns organisers they would face prosecution if they did not cancel mid-May performances of religious musical in Astana and Almaty. If a show is religious "it requires permission in accordance with the law", a Committee official told Forum 18.

At the last minute organisers were forced to cancel presentations of a religious musical in Kazakhstan's capital Astana and the commercial capital Almaty on 13 and 15 May after state officials warned that going ahead without state permission would be a violation of the law. "No-one banned anything," an official of the "Expert" Analysis Department of the Religious Affairs Committee claimed to Forum 18 from Astana on 16 May. "But if a show or presentation is religious it requires permission in accordance with the law."

The official – who would not give his name – denied that the ban on the musical, *Conversation with the Soul: Time to Talk*, represented censorship. "We don't have censorship," he claimed.

The telephones of Marat Azilkhanov, Deputy Culture and Sport Minister who oversees the Religious Affairs Committee, and Committee Chair Galym Shoikin went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 May.

Under Kazakhstan's harsh 2011 Religion Law, all religious materials – including books and films – require approval from the Culture and Sport Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee before they can be produced or imported into the country. Those who break these provisions by producing or distributing uncensored religious materials risk fines, deportation (if they are foreign citizens) and confiscation and possible destruction of the religious materials (see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1939).

First scheduled Central Asian performances

Conversation with the Soul: Time to Talk, written by the Moscow-based imam Shamil Alyautdinov, tells the story in song and dance of a young Muslim businessman who blames everyone else for the faults in his life, according to the show's website. After a conversation in a cafe with a friend who urges him to return to his faith, he is hit by a car. A battle ensues for his soul.

The show has already been performed in Moscow, Kazan and Ufa in Russia. The organisers had arranged the first Central Asian performance at Astana's State Concert Hall on the evening of 13 May. The second was arranged for the evening of 15 May in Almaty's Palace of the Republic. Tickets had already been sold through commercial ticket agencies. At least 500 Tenge from the sale of each ticket was to have been given to charitable projects.

As well as Imam Alyautdinov, the performances were due to involve Russian actor Marat Basharov and about 50 local performers in each city.

The tour is due to continue with a performance in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek on 18 May.

Religious Affairs Committee warning

However, the Religious Affairs Committee warned Alyautdinov's colleagues in the Muslim Spiritual Administration in Moscow – apparently in March - that importing any religious materials into the country could be done only by a registered Kazakh religious community and only after gaining the compulsory state permission. It also warned that any show with a religious theme could be organised and staged only by a registered Kazakh religious organisation.

On 6 May the organising committee had to post a message on its Facebook page "that with great regret the sale of tickets in Kazakhstan has been halted for reasons independent of us". It said that money people had spent on the tickets would be returned.

"How much the organising committee have toiled," Imam Alyautdinov noted on his Facebook page. "So much expense of effort,

time and money. But all is God's will. Everything will be for the best."

The organisers expressed the hope that the Kazakh Muslim Board – the only Muslim organisation the authorities have allowed to gain state registration - and the Religious Affairs Committee "would show wisdom" and allow performances to go ahead in future. "Remembering the words of the Almighty that after every difficulty comes relief, we hope that this autumn we will be able to perform in front of a Kazakh audience," they added.

"Its content (script etc.) must undergo prior expert analysis"

The announcement sparked a wave of regret and criticism of the ban on social media. On the evening of 6 May, Religious Affairs Committee Chair Shoikin even posted a defence of his Committee's decision on the Facebook page of someone who had criticised the ban.

"As the organisers of the event are citizens of another country," Shoikin wrote, "they needed to get an invitation from a Kazakh religious organisation, i.e. the Muslim Board, get a missionary visa and to undergo appropriate registration as missionaries at the Religious Affairs Departments of Astana and Almaty. In addition, as this show is of a religious nature, its content (script etc.) must undergo prior expert analysis by the Religious Affairs Committee. But this was not done."

Shoikin added that more than two months earlier his Committee had told the organisers that they needed an invitation from the Muslim Board. "According to information from the Muslim Board, they did not give them such an invitation." He complained that the organisers had gone ahead unilaterally and arranged venues and ticket sales.

Cancelled at last minute

An official of Astana's State Concert Hall said that the organisers had told them several days before the planned show that it had been cancelled. "They gave no reason," the official, who did not give a name, told Forum 18 on 16 May. The official declined to say how many tickets had been sold and whether the organisers would still have to pay for renting the venue even though the state had banned the performance from going ahead. "This is commercially confidential," the official insisted.

"Religious propaganda"

On 13 May, the date when the Astana performance had been due to take place, Religious Affairs Committee Deputy Chair Bakhytzhan Kulekeyev wrote to Ildar Alyautdinov of the Muslim Spiritual Board in Moscow (Shamil Alyautdinov's brother) to repeat the earlier warning that the shows need permission because they include "religious propaganda". The letter – seen by Forum 18 – points out that this permission had not been given.

Kulekeyev warned that to avoid prosecution under Code of Administrative Offences Article 490, Part 3 for illegal "missionary activity", "we recommend you to refrain from performances of the show planned for 13 May in Astana and 15 May in Almaty".

Individuals are frequently fined under Administrative Code Article 490, Part 3 for talking about their faith with others. Russian citizen Yuri Toporov is among many Jehovah's Witnesses who have complained to the United Nations Human Rights Committee about such punishments. He was fined and deported for addressing a Jehovah's Witness meeting for worship where several non-Jehovah's Witnesses had chosen to be present (see F18News 13 May 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2177).

Earlier ban on Imam

Alyautdinov, Imam of Moscow's Memorial Mosque and a prolific author on Islamic themes, was barred from visiting Kazakhstan to present his new books and hold seminars from early 2013. A scheduled presentation of his book "The Holy Koran. Meanings" in an Astana bookshop in February 2013 had to be abruptly cancelled two days before it was due to take place. Organisers had to offer refunds to those who had bought tickets.

The then Agency of Religious Affairs made clear that any public appearances to promote his books without personal registration as a "missionary" would be illegal. In May 2013 the Muslim Board wrote that the Board "does not consider it necessary in the current year to invite Imam of the Moscow mosque Alyautdinov to Kazakhstan" (see F18News 23 January 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1919).

However, Imam Alyautdinov was subsequently able to travel to Kazakhstan to promote his books and hold seminars.

How far does religious censorship extend?

The official of the "Expert" Analysis Department of the Religious Affairs Committee refused to explain to Forum 18 what artistic shows and performances on religious themes require state permission. Forum 18 asked about religious musicals, such as Jesus Christ

Superstar, as well as films with religious themes, such as the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, the 2014 film *Noah* and the 2015 film *Muhammad: the Messenger of God*.

However, despite repeated questions the official refused to say whether such musicals and films require the Committee's approval if those staging or showing them do not want to face punishment.

The films *The Passion of the Christ* and *Noah* have both been shown in commercial cinemas, Forum 18 notes. However, it cannot find that *Muhammad: the Messenger of God* has been shown commercially. (END)

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>.

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1939.

For a personal commentary from 2005 on how attacking religious freedom damages national security in Kazakhstan, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=564.

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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