

30 May 2025

KYRGYZSTAN: Court bans True and Free Adventist Church as "extremist"

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

Only four people were apparently present - Judge Ayke Musayeva, her secretary, the prosecutor who brought the suit and an NSC secret police officer – when Alamudun District Court banned the True and Free Adventist Church as "extremist" on 19 March. Church members found out two days later, when the ban was already in force. Their lawyer is preparing a Supreme Court challenge. The ban was based on NSC-commissioned "expert analyses" of books seized in raids which did not meet "the basic standards of scientific analysis", says religious studies scholar Indira Aslanova.

Akmat Alagushev, defence lawyer for the True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kyrgyzstan, is preparing to lodge a challenge to the Supreme Court in Bishkek. He is seeking to overturn a court decision banning the community as "extremist". The ban was handed down in a 19 March hearing apparently attended by only four people: Judge Ayke Musayeva, her secretary, the prosecutor who brought the suit and an officer of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police. Church members only learned of the hearing two days later, when the ban had already entered into force.

The regime has already banned Ahmadi Muslims as "extremist" and they cannot meet for worship. The Justice Department in Bishkek de-registered an organisation of the Falun Gong spiritual movement in 2018. The NSC secret police sought to ban Jehovah's Witnesses, while an NSC-led attempt to ban many of their publications as "extremist" failed in court in 2021. An NSC-led criminal case opened against unspecified members of the Jehovah's Witness centre in 2019 appears never to have been closed (see below).

Asked what constituted "extremism" in the actions or teachings of True and Free Adventist Church members, Judge Musayeva asked Forum 18: "Haven't you read our conclusions in the court decision?" Told that Forum 18 has read the court decision, and does not see elements of extremism in the actions or teachings of the Church as reflected in the decision, the Judge responded: "They exalt their religion above others. They incite religious hatred when they criticise Islam or other religions" (see below).

The case to ban the True and Free Adventist Church was initiated by the NSC secret police, which also brought a criminal case on incitement charges against the Church's 65-year-old leader, Pavel Shreider. His trial at Bishkek's Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court is due to resume on 5 June. He faces up to 7 years' imprisonment if convicted (see below).

The banning decision drew on four "expert analyses" of True and Free Adventist literature seized in raids, commissioned by the NSC secret police (see below).

Muratbek Japarov, Deputy Prosecutor of Alamudun District who represented the prosecution case in court, told Forum 18 he "studied the expert opinion and video materials and the witnesses' statements, and decided to support the NSC investigation and charges against the Church". Told that Forum 18 could find no parts of the analyses that show that the Church called for the denial of others' human rights, he responded: "I am only one representative of the authorities. You need to talk to the NSC and the Court" (see below).

Medina Tokonova, one of the two Justice Ministry experts who prepared the four analyses, insisted she correctly evaluated the teachings of the True and Free Adventist Church as "extremist". She refused to answer any other questions. "You need to ask the NSC for permission for me to answer your questions," she told Forum 18 (see below).

Indira Aslanova, Senior Expert of the Centre for Religious Studies, an independent organisation in Bishkek, describes accusing the True and Free Adventists of "extremism" as "absurd". The Justice Ministry "expert analyses" do not meet "the basic standards of scientific analysis", she added. "Appropriate methods are not implemented, scientific principles are violated, and the conclusions lack sufficient analytical and factual grounding. The opinion is declarative in nature and requires substantial revision to be recognised as scientifically valid" (see below).

A Russian religious studies expert Oksana Kuropatkina, commissioned by the Church's lawyer, expressed similar concerns. The analyses were "written carelessly, with a crude violation of the rules of scientific writing", she found. "The experts did not cite any

calls for violence or discrimination against other Christians or Muslims. It is obvious that we are talking specifically about inter-religious and inter-faith polemics" (see below).

Ahmadi Muslims banned since 2011, Falun Gong also banned

Officials banned Ahmadi Muslims as allegedly "extremist". They have not been able to publicly meet for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961) since July 2011 after the NSC secret police told the then State Commission for Religious Affairs (now the National Agency for Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations) that they are a "dangerous movement and against traditional Islam".

"We do not meet publicly or privately for worship together," Ahmadi Muslims, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 May 2025. "We stopped our common worship ever since we were banned. Our believers have been threatened several times in the past by local police in various localities of the consequences if we meet for worship."

An association of the Falun Gong spiritual movement was registered in July 2004, but - under Chinese pressure - was liquidated as "extremist" in February 2005. In January 2018 the Chui-Bishkek Justice Department in the capital Bishkek registered a Falun Gong association. However, in March 2018, less than eight weeks later, the Justice Department issued a decree cancelling the registration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2700).

Attempt to ban Jehovah's Witnesses fails, but criminal case active?

The NSC secret police opened a criminal case (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2700) in December 2019 against so far unspecified representatives of the Jehovah's Witness national centre in Bishkek on charges of inciting hatred.

In July 2021, Kamchybek Tashiyev, the head of the NSC secret police, wrote to the then General Prosecutor Kurmankul Zulushev making various allegations against Jehovah's Witnesses. Tashiyev asked the General Prosecutor "in order to forestall negative consequences from the illegal activity" of Jehovah's Witnesses as well as "to prevent damage to national security" not only to ban items of their literature but to consider a ban on the entire organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2700).

In November 2021, the then Deputy General Prosecutor Kumarbek Toktakunov sent a suit to Bishkek's Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court asking for it to ban 13 Jehovah's Witness books and 6 videos as "extremist". The court dismissed the suit (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2706) the following month on technical grounds.

"As of today we are not aware of whether or not the General Prosecutor's Office has closed the criminal case," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 20 May 2025.

Forum 18 asked the General Prosecutor's Office in Bishkek in writing on 20 May if the criminal case against members of the Jehovah's Witness Centre in the capital is still open. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Bishkek of 30 May.

Criminal trial of True and Free Adventist pastor continues

The True and Free Reform Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kyrgyzstan is part of a reform movement within Adventism that emerged during the Soviet period. (It is separate from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its headquarters in the United States.) One of its leaders, prisoner of conscience Vladimir Shelkov, died in a Soviet labour camp (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Shelkov) in 1980.

The Church – which is led by Pastor Pavel Shreider - chooses not to seek state registration. Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state registration is illegal and punishable (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2961).

Officers of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Pavel Davidovich Shreider (born 10 January 1960), at his home in Bishkek on 13 November 2024. He has been held in pre-trial detention since then.

The criminal trial of Pastor Shreider began at Bishkek's Birinchi May (Pervomaisky) District Court (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) under Judge Ubaydulla Satimkulov with a preliminary hearing on 17 April. The first substantive hearing was on 16 May.

The trial continued on 29 May. Defence lawyer Alagushev told Forum 18 that the Court heard the testimony of church member Igor Tsoy and questioned him. (The NSC secret police arrested and tortured Tsoy (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978) during its investigation.) The trial is due to resume on 5 June.

Pastor Shreider is on trial under Criminal Code Article 330, Part 2, Point 3 ("Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or regional enmity" when "committed by a group of individuals"). He rejects all the charges.

Forum 18 asked the General Prosecutor's Office in Bishkek in writing on 20 May why prosecutors had brought a criminal case against Pastor Shreider. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Bishkek of 30 May.

Court bans True and Free Adventist Church as "extremist"

Judge Ayke Musayeva of Chuy Region's Alamudun District Court on 19 March recognised Kyrgyzstan's True and Free Adventist Church as an "extremist" religious organisation. The civil case had been brought by Chuy Region Prosecutor's Office with the close involvement of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police (whose representative Alinur Tursunov was present in court).

The decision, seen by Forum 18, says that the hearing was open, but it appears that only four people were present (the Judge, her secretary, the prosecutor and the NSC secret police officer).

No Church members were present. The decision claims that Pastor Shreider was notified about the hearing "in the appropriate manner" but did not appear. It makes no mention that he had been under arrest in Bishkek since November 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978). Also invited but failing to attend were representatives of the Interior Ministry.

Defence lawyer Akmat Alagushev denies that Shreider received any notification of the hearing. "He was in police custody then and received no notification." He then asked, "How could he appear before the Court unless the authorities themselves told him personally and brought him there?"

The decision banned the Church's activity and use of its attributes and/or symbols, as well as its printed and electronic religious materials (books and other literature). The decision came into force the same day.

With the same decision, the Court ordered implementation of the court decision to be handed to the NSC secret police and the Interior Ministry (which controls the police).

Church members say they found out about the ban on their Church only on 21 March. On 28 March, the NSC secret police announced the ban and the raids and criminal case (without identifying Pastor Pavel Shreider) on its Instagram page.

The decision notes that a cassational appeal can be lodged to the Supreme Court. Parties have three months to lodge such an appeal. Alagushev is preparing to lodge the cassation appeal in the second week of June. "We have until 19 June and I want to prepare our defence well," he told Forum 18.

As of 30 May, the True and Free Adventist Church does not appear on the list of banned "destructive, extremist and terrorist organisations" on the website of the National Agency for Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations. The General Prosecutor's Office does not appear to have updated its list of banned "extremist and terrorist organisations" since September 2024, when it excluded the Taliban.

Judge and Prosecutor cannot corroborate their "extremism" claims

Forum 18 asked the General Prosecutor's Office in Bishkek in writing on 20 May why the Church was banned as an extremist organisation. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Bishkek of 30 May.

Alinur Tursunov, the NSC secret police officer who attended the 19 March hearing, refused to talk to Forum 18 on 30 May.

Muratbek Japarov, Deputy Prosecutor of Alamudun District of Chuy Region, represented the prosecution case in court on behalf of the state. He at first adamantly supported the NSC secret police operation and charges brought against the True and Free Adventist Church. "I studied the expert opinion and video materials and the witnesses' statements, and decided to support the NSC investigation and charges against the Church," he told Forum 18 on 20 May.

Forum 18 told Japarov it has seen the video film that the NSC secret police used in the case materials, where new young converts to the Church give testimonies, and the passages selected for state "expert analysis" from the books the Church used for teaching their members. It noted that these do not appear to call for the denial of people's human rights. It asked therefore why the authorities decided to ban the Church and punish its leader. Prosecutor Japarov repeated his previous answer: "I only supported the NSC secret police charges."

When Forum 18 asked whether a person's comparison or praise of their own country, their head of state or football team as the best, or their claim that the other side is worse than theirs or that the other "distorted the truth", constitute extremism or hatred towards others, Prosecutor Japarov replied: "I am only one representative of the authorities. You need to talk to the NSC and the Court." He declined to talk further.

Judge Ayke Musayeva was equally dismissive. Asked on 20 May what constituted "extremism" in the actions or teachings of True and Free Adventist Church members, the Judge asked Forum 18: "Haven't you read our conclusions in the court decision?"

Told that Forum 18 has read the court decision, and does not see elements of extremism in the actions or teachings of the Church as reflected in the decision, Judge Musayeva responded: "They exalt their religion above others. They incite religious hatred when they criticise Islam or other religions."

Told that the only critical statement about Islam in the passages subjected to state "expert analysis" that Forum 18 has seen is where the author of a book claims that Islam has "distorted the truth" by calling Jesus "only a prophet". Forum 18 noted that major Christian denominations describe Jesus as the "Son of God" or "God himself", and asked what is "extremist" in this. Judge Musayeva did not answer.

Asked what is extremist in the fact that True and Free Adventists call on Muslims to receive Jesus as their saviour, which was another focal point of the state "expert analysis", Judge Musayeva responded: "You need to talk about those issues to the experts."

When Forum 18 asked why she based her decision on an "expert analysis" that she cannot properly assess, Judge Musayeva avoided answering. "The Church can appeal against my decision if they are unhappy." She then declined to talk to Forum 18.

One of "experts" cannot corroborate their "extremism" claims

Medina Tokonova and Almaz Kulmatov, two experts of the Justice Ministry, gave their opinions on the texts selected from the books and literature confiscated by the NSC secret police from Church members. Forum 18 has learned that Kulmatov later left his job at the Justice Ministry.

Expert Tokonova was adamant that she correctly evaluated the teachings of the True and Free Adventist Church as extremist. Asked the same questions addressed to Prosecutor Japarov and Judge Musayeva, she refused to answer. "You need to ask the NSC for permission for me to answer your questions," she responded on 20 May. She then declined to talk.

The Officer who answered the phone of the NSC secret police headquarters in Bishkek on 15 May (who did not give his name) wrote down Forum 18's questions as to why the NSC secret police opened a criminal case and arrested Pastor Shreider and why it initiated the process of banning of the True and Free Reform Adventist Church as an extremist organisation. The Officer refused to answer the questions or to put Forum 18 through to any officials.

Claims of "extremism" against the Church and its teachings in case files

Judge Ayke Musayeva's decision indicates that the suit against the True and Free Adventist Church was brought because:

- the church is "not registered in Kyrgyzstan";
- its books were used "without asking the state for permission";
- its pastor Pavel Shreider "instilled a negative attitude toward other religions through the books he used in the church";
- it "exalts itself above other religions";
- its leaders "misinterpret the ancient scripture [Bible and Koran]";
- it "prohibits the use of animal products, alcoholic beverages, the purchase of real estate without the permission of the head of the church";
- = it orders members to "pay ten per cent of their income as offerings";
- it requires "permission from the pastor for marriage" before members decide to marry.

In addition to the books, a video of a ceremony where new young converts give testimonies and promise to follow the moral principles of the Church and listen to the advice of older people in the Church - that has been used against Pastor Shreider in the criminal trial against him - was used in this case as well.

Church members, who asked not to give their names for fear of state reprisals, gave their comments to Forum 18 in mid-May on the authorities' accusations.

"It is true that we are a Church that out of our conviction does not seek registration," Church members told Forum 18. "It is true that we did not ask the State for permission before using the books by Adventist authors in our church. It is true that we have said that

Christ is the Son of God and not just a prophet as Islam says. It is true there are passages in those books that Islam distorts the Christian truth about the Son of God. It is true that one of the Church principles is to pay ten per cent of our income to support our Church. It is true that the Church recommends that young couples get marriage counselling before getting married. And it is true that we do not believe that Church members should drink alcohol."

The Church members added: "But we have not said anything insulting Islam, Muslims or other world-views. Church leaders are not judges in the lives of the believers and do not order us to do this or that. They only recommend giving offerings to the Church, getting marriage counselling or other principles as based on our morals. And these cannot be evaluated as extremism. All churches could be declared as extremist then by this standard."

Books chosen by NSC secret police for "expert analysis"

Of the thousands of Russian-language books and other materials the NSC secret police seized from Church members in raids in November 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2978), it chose a smaller number to send for "expert analysis".

The books the NSC secret police selected included "The Private History of Babylon", "The Samaritans", "Fundamentals of Church Order for Children", "The Good Confession", "The Landing strip" and "Angel of the abyss".

The Justice Ministry produced its "expert analyses" (seen by Forum 18) on 30 August 2024, 11 November 2024, 4 December 2024 and 30 January 2025.

"The Private History of Babylon" includes a passage speaking of the True and Free Adventist Church's duty "to enlighten and save all sincere souls, both in Sodom-Egypt and in the great spiritual Babylon, including in the Islamic religion".

The state experts find the spiritual comparison of the modern world and Islamic world to Sodom and Babylon as well as the need for representatives of the modern world and Islam for spiritual salvation and belief in the Christian dogmas as offensive and incitement of religious hatred.

Another passage declares: "With all our humane, loyal attitude towards Muslims as people, who are also redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and can be saved by accepting the message of the eternal Gospel, we nevertheless do not share their false, anti-biblical teaching and the religious practice corresponding to this teaching". The experts again, without giving an exact evaluation of each statement, find this passage as inciting religious hatred.

"Expert analyses" "written carelessly, with a crude violation of the rules of scientific writing"

Indira Aslanova, Senior Expert of the Centre for Religious Studies, an independent organisation in Bishkek, says the Justice Ministry "expert analyses" do "not meet the basic standards of scientific analysis", she told Forum 18 on 26 May. "Appropriate methods are not implemented, scientific principles are violated, and the conclusions lack sufficient analytical and factual grounding. The opinion is declarative in nature and requires substantial revision to be recognised as scientifically valid."

Aslanova commented that "exclusivity of their religion, particularly those of monotheistic religions, is a well-known characteristic". She described accusing the True and Free Adventists of "extremism" for this as "absurd".

Akmat Alagushev, the lawyer in both the criminal case against Pastor Shreider and the civil case against the Church, commissioned a review of the Justice Ministry "expert analyses" from Oksana Kuropatkina, a lecturer at the Institute of the History of Religion and Spiritual Culture at the Russian State Humanitarian University in Moscow. After studying the analyses between 4 and 15 May, Kuropatkina gave her opinion in writing.

The four "expert analyses" produced by the Justice Ministry experts Toktonova and Kulmatov are "written carelessly, with a crude violation of the rules of scientific writing", Kuropatkina found. "No religious studies methods were employed, which immediately casts doubt on the quality of the religious studies expertise. The experts used no scientific literature on religious studies. It is unclear what the experts relied on when writing the expert analyses."

Kuropatkina noted: "The experts allow themselves to make value judgments regarding religious practices and attitudes [of the True and Free Adventist Church], which is unacceptable for religious studies as a neutral field. It is obvious that the experts do not understand the specifics of the perception and interpretation of sacred texts, as well as the peculiarities of the use of biblical terms."

Kuropatkina also noted: "Questioning of other religious confessions' beliefs for their claims of truth is a normal religious dispute." She added: "The experts did not cite any calls for violence or discrimination against other Christians or Muslims. It is obvious that we are talking specifically about inter-religious and inter-faith polemics."

Kuropatkina concluded: "The Reform Adventists do not reject the state but oppose its intrusion into human freedom of conscience. Reform Adventists rarely register, but this happens mainly not because the state does 'not recognise' them, but because of their

fundamental distancing from the state." (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&country=30>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2711)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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