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KYRGYZSTAN: Wide-ranging extremism law not seen as threat

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Kyrgyzstan has recently adopted an extremism law with a wide-ranging definition of extremism, which leaves open the possibility of it being applied to peaceful religious communities. However, most religious communities Forum 18 News Service spoke to – such as Catholics, Presbyterians and Jehovah's Witnesses - had mainly not read the law, and did not see it as a current threat. The former mufti of Kyrgyzstan commented to Forum 18 that "the very fact that the authorities are linking religion with extremism is worrying for educated Muslims. But most believers don't even know that a new law has been adopted. Theoretically the law could pose a danger to believers, but so far at least I have not seen any changes in state religious policy." Kanybek Malabayev, of the Kyrgyz government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 that "we will apply this law only to the Hizb ut-Tahrir party, whose leaflets contain openly anti-Semitic sentiments."

Kyrgyzstan has adopted a law "On combating extremist activity," which was signed by the new president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, on 17 August and which came into force on official publication on 19 August. It was the first law to be signed by President Bakiev. Under the new law one form of "extremism" is "to assert the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their attitude to religion or their social, racial, national, religious or linguistic group".

This wide-ranging definition of extremism, not linked with any crimes or other acts against others, leaves open the possibility of it being applied to the self-understanding of peaceful religious communities. But religious communities Forum 18 News Service spoke to had mainly not read the law, and did not see it as a current threat.

"Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities are not stirring up national or religious hatred and therefore the law on combating religious extremism cannot be applied to them. The law on combating extremist activity does not apply only to religious believers. For the time being, at least, we will apply this law only to the Hizb ut-Tahrir party whose leaflets contain openly anti-Semitic sentiments," Kanybek Malabayev, a leading specialist at the Kyrgyz government's Religious Affairs Committee, told Forum 18 on 18 October. An outline of Hizb ut-Tahrir's policy can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170

Father Aleksandr Kan of the Catholic Church told Forum 18 on 18 October in the capital, Bishkek, that "I didn't even know that a new law had been adopted. We have no problems with the authorities." Fr Kan's view was echoed by Kuban Abylkasymov, pastor of the Protestant Presbyterian church in Karakol, the central town in the eastern Isyk-Kul region, speaking to Forum 18 on 19 October. "We have heard about the new law, but have not read it. So far at least this law has not had any effect on our relations with the authorities," he said. Anatoli Melnik is a member of the Council of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, which governs its fellow believers throughout Central Asia. He told Forum 18 from Almaty on 17 October that "so far at least we do not have any problems with the Kyrgyz authorities."

Vasili Kuzin, senior pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ, commented to Forum 18 on 17 October in Bishkek that "in Kyrgyzstan laws don't have any meaning, only verbal orders. So we have not read the law. Every so often the authorities carry out random checks on our daughter churches in the provinces, but I don't think this has anything to do with the adoption of a new law or with the events in Andijan."

Sadykjan Kamalludin, head of the Islamic Centre and former mufti of Kyrgyzstan commented that "the very fact that the authorities are linking religion with extremism is worrying for educated Muslims. But most believers don't even know that a new law has been adopted. Theoretically the law could pose a danger to believers, but so far at least I have not seen any changes in state religious policy," he told Forum 18 in Osh on 6 October.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's centre in Bishkek made no comment on the law to Forum 18.

So far, no actual punishment for extremism has been prescribed. However, the Kyrgyz parliament is working on a draft law "On introducing amendments to the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic" which will complement this new law. Under the draft law, terms such as "extremism" and "separatism" will be inserted into the Criminal Code. Engagement in extremist or separatist activity is proposed to be punishable by a prison term of between five and 20 years.

Following the country-wide demonstrations which led to the removal of former President Askar Akaev earlier this year, most religious minorities also noted no change in policy towards them (see F18News 23 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=592).

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222.

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=Kyrgyz>.

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