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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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KYRGYZSTAN: New law to restrict religious freedom?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

An official of Kyrgyzstan's state Religious Affairs Committee has told Forum 18 News Service that the Religion Law could soon be amended to restrict evangelism or proselytism. "I hope that the new draft of the Law will be as close as possible to international standards," But, "we have to take local reality as our starting point," Shamsybek Zakirov told Forum 18. He expressed concern about anger from local Muslims in southern Kyrgyzstan, directed at the Religious Affairs Committee and local Protestants at Protestant evangelism. Zakirov confirmed statements made by Pentecostal Pastor Dzhanybek Zhakipov to Forum 18 that pressure by the authorities on local Protestants has increased. Government minister Adakhan Madumarov today (12 July) was reported as also indicating that the Religion Law may be tightened. The problem of intolerance of Christians and other religious minorities – leading to violent attacks and even murders – is widespread in Central Asia.

Under pressure from local Muslims, the authorities in southern Kyrgyzstan are increasing pressure on local Protestants, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

The pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ in Jalal-Abad, a regional centre in southern Kyrgyzstan, Dzhanybek Zhakipov, is certain that the authorities have recently increased pressure on his church members and himself. Zhakipov told Forum 18 on 7 July that problems began with the publication in the bulletin of a local organisation, "Justice", of an article by a divorced resident of Jalal-Abad accusing the church of "zombifying" her former husband. "After this we were literally tormented by the ordinary police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police checking up on us," Pastor Zhakipov said. "However, I managed to persuade them that unfortunately divorce has become a commonplace in Kyrgyzstan and it was nothing to do with the church."

The Church of Jesus Christ is very prominent in Kyrgyzstan, claiming around 10,000 members and is the best-attended Protestant church in the country. Around 40 per cent of the Church's members are ethnic Kyrgyz.

In June this year, officials of the state Religious Affairs Committee showed Zhakipov a letter signed by 500 Muslims from Jalal-Abad, demanding that the authorities close the church since its members are preaching among Muslims. Religious Affairs Committee officials told the pastor that they could not exclude the possibility of the church's registration being cancelled.

"We really do preach to people," Zhakipov confirmed to Forum 18. "It is our duty as Christians and it is not forbidden by Kyrgyz law."

The situation of Christians in southern Kyrgyzstan has recently worsened, Zhakipov claims. "The Religious Affairs Committee refused to register the branch of the Church of Jesus Christ in Kochkor-Ata, 70 km (43 miles) north of Jalal-Abad. And Protestants in Tash-Kumyr [Tash-Kömür], 150 km (93 miles) north-west of Jalal-Abad, are being subjected to regular persecution both by the authorities and simply by residents."

Pastor Zhapikov's view of recently increased pressure is confirmed by the counsellor of the Kyrgyzstan government's Religious Affairs Committee, Shamsybek Zakirov, who did not deny that state pressure on Protestants in southern Kyrgyzstan had increased. Zakirov, speaking to Forum 18 on 8 July in the southern Kyrgyz town of Osh, claimed that the Committee's staff are criticised by both Muslims and Protestants. He particularly noted increased pressure it is facing from local Muslims. "Practically at every meeting with people in the south we hear demands to ban Protestant churches that engage in propaganda among Muslims. I, for example, have repeatedly been called an "enemy of Islam" because I have registered Protestant churches," Zakirov told Forum 18.

Zakirov quoted a statement by the new Governor of Osh Region, Zhantoro Satybaldiev, on 28 June. Satybaldiev was surprised that "the religious situation in the south of the republic has deteriorated so much recently. In the capital Bishkek and in the Chui region of northern Kyrgyzstan, the influence of radical organisations is not felt. But here, all the non-traditional and extremist movements – from Hizb ut-Tahrir to all kind of new movements that are banned here and throughout the world – have risen to the surface. This is very dangerous."

A marked increase in the activity of Islamic radicals in southern Kyrgyzstan was also averred by the Mayor of Jalal-Abad, Duishonali Mamasaliev, speaking to Forum 18 on 7 July. An outline of Hizb ut-Tahir's aims can be found at

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http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.

According to Zakirov of the Religious Affairs Committee, the problem with Protestants is their evangelism. "We have no problems with the Orthodox, for example, because they don't make converts among Muslims. Local people are very friendly to the Orthodox and there have even been occasions when they helped them to build churches," he said.

He recognised that, according to international human rights standards Kyrgyzstan has agreed to, and under Kyrgyz law, Protestants have the right to preach. "However, unfortunately, we have to take local reality as our starting point," said Zakirov. "Thus, for example, Tash-Kumyr is a completely Kyrgyz town and the activity of local Protestants simply infuriates the Muslims. When we ask Protestants to stop preaching among Muslims we are primarily concerned about their safety – since they could simply end up being lynched. We are not Europe and the activity of Protestants today could destabilise the situation here in the south."

Zakirov claims that the Law on Religion could soon be amended to restrict evangelism or proselytism. "I hope that the new draft of the Law will be as close as possible to international standards," Zakirov told Forum 18. "However, we have to take into account not only international norms but also the reality on the ground."

The question of Muslim anger at conversions from Islam to Christianity has for some time been an issue in southern Kyrgyzstan (see F18News 7 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222).

Today (12 July), Interfax quoted the government minister State Secretary Adakhan Madumarov – who is from Osh – as apparently being in favour of reducing religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan. "Freedom in the area of religious faith should have clearly defined boundaries which you cannot cross regardless of what faith you adhere to," he said at a conference on "improving the implementation of freedom of religious faith". Mamadurov wants to "tighten up legislation in the area of the activity of religious organisations," by which he meant "not a ban but the introduction of clear and understandable legal procedures for the registration of religious organisations and their activity."

Madumarov was quoted as stating that "we need to introduce an ordered approach, so that everyone knows their rights and obligations," but that "when changing the legislation there will not be any special checking of the activity of religious organisations. They should all be registered and act on the basis of their statutes."

A wide-ranging Extremism Law, which leaves open the possibility of it being applied to peaceful religious activity and communities, was adopted in 2005 (see F18News 19 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=673).

At least two factors underlay the intolerant attitude of Muslims towards Muslims who have converted to Christianity: Islamic law's requirement that Muslims who reject their faith have to be punished; and the possibility that those who have converted to Christianity are seen in Central Asia as having lost their national identity (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729).

Both factors may have been at work in the events surrounding the December 2005 murder and refusal of burial in a village cemetery to Kyrgyz Protestant Saktinbai Usmanov (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729), and the murder of Tajik Baptist Pastor Sergei Bessarab (see F18News 14 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=229 and 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=330). In May 2005, a regional court sentenced 12 people found guilty of the murder of Pastor Bessarab to 25 years' imprisonment.

In 2001 a group of ethnic Uzbeks from south Kyrgyzstan set up a kangaroo court, which tried to convict fellow Uzbeks who had converted to Christianity. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have both seen cases where Muslim converts to Christianity have been the victims of kangaroo courts, with official connivance (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557). Officials have sought to blame Christian evangelism for these religious freedom violations.

At present in Central Asia, only Uzbekistan bans evangelism or proselytism (see F18News 10 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777). However, Tajikistan has also drafted a law banning evangelism or proselytism, consideration of which appears to have been postponed until after presidential elections due in November 2006 (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=795).

Within Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries, intolerance of Christians and other religious minorities – leading to violent attacks – is widespread (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729). (END)

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

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

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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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