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KAZAKHSTAN: Officially-inspired intolerance of religious freedom steps up

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Kazakhstan's religious minorities have expressed deep concern to Forum 18 News Service about two official documents: the "State Programme of Patriotic Education," approved by a decree of President Nazarbayev; and a Justice Ministry booklet "How not to fall under the influence of religious sects." Yevgeny Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and the Rule of Law is "shocked" by them and told Forum 18 that they "provide the moral, or more accurately immoral, basis for officials to justify their negative attitudes towards non-traditional religions". Law professor Roman Podoprighora notes that a new development is that official intolerance "was in an official regulatory act – a Presidential Decree." He described the Justice Ministry booklet as "too intolerant and stupid for comments." Aleksandr Klyushev of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan commented that "The worst thing about this booklet is that it has been prepared by the Justice Ministry and is being freely distributed." Amongst the booklet's claims is that "transferring to other religious faiths represents treason to one's country and faith."

Religious minorities have expressed their frustration to Forum 18 News Service over their failure to persuade state officials to halt official intolerance towards them in state documents, in officials' public comments and in state-inspired hostile media coverage. Their concerns are shared by the Human Rights Ombudsperson, Bolat Baikadamov, including concern over the "State Programme of Patriotic Education of Citizens of Kazakhstan for 2006-8." This was approved by a presidential decree of President Nursultan Nazarbayev on 10 October 2006, and attacks so-called "non-traditional" and "extremist" religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees. Forum 18 has a copy of the State Programme.

"These examples of an oppressive attitude are not permissible," Ombudsperson Baikadamov told Forum 18 from the capital Astana on 12 March. "They show a lack of knowledge of international standards over the way officials should treat religious communities." In particular, Baikadamov insisted that a booklet issued in 2006 by the Justice Ministry, "How not to fall under the influence of religious sects" (which Forum 18 has the text of), attacking Baptists, Ahmadi Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses, should not be distributed.

"Of course we are shocked over these two documents," human rights activist Yevgeny Zhovtis, of the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and the Rule of Law, told Forum 18 from the country's commercial capital Almaty on 21 March. "But on the other hand it seems that such a policy of state intolerance does exist. These documents simply prove this." In spite of the fact that the Constitution and the Religion Law contain articles about the equality of all religions, he says, "such documents provide the moral, or more accurately immoral, basis for officials to justify their negative attitudes towards non-traditional religions". He believes that overall attitudes towards religious freedom for religious minorities are becoming more and more unfavourable.

Roman Podoprighora, a law professor at the Adilet Law School in Almaty, who studies the legal position of religious communities, is worried about the impact of the intolerant sentiments on the life of religious minority communities. "Of course such evaluations and opinions create many problems for religious organisations in many areas of activity," he told Forum 18 from Almaty on 21 March. "Such intolerant statements can influence whether religious communities or missionaries can register or not, which way court decisions will go on religious issues such as over unregistered organisations or missionary activity, and legislative initiatives."

Professor Podoprighora's comments are borne out by Kazakh officials openly admitting that their country's international human rights obligations "mean nothing to us" in crackdowns on unregistered religious communities (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793). Registration procedures are highly intrusive and are designed with control not legal status as their goal (see F18News 9 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=797). Fines for unregistered religious activity – and most recently a prison sentence for a Baptist - have continued to escalate (see F18News 13 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=931).

However, Amanbek Mukhashev, head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee brushed aside any criticism. "Mentioning the Ahmadis – what's wrong with that?" he asked Forum 18 from Astana on 19 March. "And the Protestants, they can't complain. Don't let your head worry about this. You don't know the religious situation here." He refused to continue any further discussion of these official documents and put the phone down.

Mukhashev has previously complained about Baptist leaders wanting to meet President Nazarbayev to discuss state harassment of their congregations (see F18News 30 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=904). He has also played a key role in moves to demolish a Hare Krishna commune, which demolition has been condemned by the OSCE's Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief (see eg. F18News 31 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=905).

The State Programme of Patriotic Education, published in 2006 http://www.government.kz/ru/doc/U060200_.htm, contains a section on how to combat what it believes to be the growing interest in "non-traditional" faiths. "Topical for the state at present without a doubt are questions of the organisation of the struggle with the activation of the activity of non-traditional religious associations and extremist organisations in Kazakhstan directed above all at attracting the youth into their ranks," the state programme declares. It blames foreign propaganda for contributing to the spread of extremism in the past decade.

"The interest of youth in associations which are non-traditional for Kazakhstan, such as the [Hare] Krishnaites and the Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as extremist organisations like the religious/political group Hizb ut-Tahrir and others is connected with the psychological influence of activist members of these associations and organisations on the consciousness of young people. For this reason it is necessary to draw up a clear mechanism to regulate the burning problems which arise in the religious sphere."

(An outline of the aims of Hizb ut-Tahrir is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

"I think this is the usual evaluation of so-called non-traditional religious organisations," Podoprigrora told Forum 18. "This is a very popular opinion, not only from the government but also from different social groups. This is the level of tolerance in Kazakh society today." However, he thinks that formally officially equating Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees with members of the Islamist political movement Hizb ut-Tahrir is a new development. "Another interesting thing is this evaluation was made in an official regulatory act – a Presidential Decree. Earlier, it was reflected as a rule in oral speeches."

Olzhas Ashimkhanov, chief specialist at the Education Ministry's Youth Policy Department, alleged that the programme – the first time a so-called "patriotic education" programme has been drawn up – "doesn't attack the Hare Krishnas and the Jehovah's Witnesses". "But there should be a mechanism for people to avoid them," he insisted to Forum 18 from Astana on 19 March.

His claims were echoed by Lavrenti Bobryshev, head of the Education Ministry's Directorate of Social Programmes. "No-one has been insulted – these are not accusations," he claimed to Forum 18 on 19 March. "These faiths have just been chosen as examples." He insisted that Kazakhstan faces a threat of extremism and said young people must be given the means to protect themselves. He maintained that the Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna faiths are "not traditional," but denied that he opposed the idea of local people choosing one or other of these faiths. "It is not a problem for me if someone chooses to be a Jehovah's Witness or Hare Krishna devotee."

Education Ministry officials told Forum 18 that, in the wake of the adoption of the State Programme of Patriotic Education at the national level, regional programmes are being devised in each region. "This will cover all age ranges, not just children," one official told Forum 18, it goes from the very youngest right up to pensioners." The official said that, in the wake of an 11 December 2006 plan to implement the national programme, about ten of the country's 16 regions have already prepared their programmes. The official denied that these regional programmes attacked the Jehovah's Witnesses or Hare Krishna devotees, but insisted there are "certain problems" with them and other religious communities. However, he refused to say what these problems are.

However, Zhovtis of the Kazakhstan International Bureau of Human Rights and Law told Forum 18 that he has found that some of the local programmes contain similar hostile remarks about religious minorities, in the same style as the national programme.

The booklet "How not to fall under the influence of religious sects," issued in 2006 by the Justice Ministry, is claimed to provide "legal help" for Kazakh citizens. The booklet – authorised for publication on 17 May 2006 – was produced in Kazakh and Russian, though the language used in both texts differs in places. Copies are distributed through public legal advice centres.

"How not to fall under the influence of religious sects" laments that today, "very many young people" have joined "religious sects," which it identifies as including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Ahmadi Muslims. The booklet equates all of these with the Hizb ut-Tahrir Islamist political movement. "Such youth can only be called illiterate on a theological level," the booklet states, "not knowing the basics of fundamental knowledge and not very bright people. With such young people, work must be conducted to return them to consciousness, and such work must be conducted by imams in mosque, academic theologians in towns and aksakals [elders] in small villages."

"Transferring to other religious faiths represents treason to one's country and faith. Because religion is our spiritual life, our today and our tomorrow." The booklet calls on the Justice Ministry, the Muslim Spiritual Board, the mass media, law enforcement agencies, local akimats (administrations), higher education institutions, schools and parents to take a series of measures "for prophylaxis of the influence of religious sects". The Muslim Board is urged to teach Islam more effectively and send young people on courses of up to three weeks, while the mass media is urged to use well-educated theologians "on themes of spiritual humanisation". Academic councils in higher educational establishments are urged to hold lectures to counter the "disturbed activity

of religious sects". Schools should hold lessons on morals and the bases of theology. Parents too are urged to bring up their children in a spirit of morality.

Once again, officials brushed aside complaints. Altbai Alibaev, head of the Committee for Legal Assistance in the Justice Ministry, which distributed the booklet, insisted that his office arranges the distribution of many booklets "only a few of which are on religious themes". He said the content of this one had been approved by the Religious Affairs Committee. "I'm not responsible for the content," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 19 March. "Whether it was right to distribute it or wrong, it was the responsibility of the Religious Affairs Committee."

Asked about his view of the content of the booklet, law professor Podoprigora was at a loss for words. "No comments," he told Forum 18. "It is too intolerant and stupid for comments."

The Jehovah's Witnesses made immediate complaints about the booklet, complaining to Eraly Tugzhanov, the head of the Religious Affairs Committee, and the Culture Minister Yermukhammet Ertisbaev, with a copy to the Human Rights Ombudsperson. "The text of the booklet carries a slanderous and discriminatory nature with regard to religious affiliation in relation to the Jehovah's Witnesses, which violates the equal constitutional rights of citizens of Kazakhstan," they complained in their 20 December 2006 letter.

In particular they complain of being branded a "sect" and being lumped together with Hizb ut-Tahrir. This is "an extremist organisation," the Witnesses state, "which is banned in Kazakhstan, with which the Jehovah's Witnesses have nothing in common". They point out that the Jehovah's Witnesses have never figured in the list of 12 banned terrorist and extremist organisations, produced by the General Prosecutor on 12 October 2006 (see F18News 24 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=859). The Jehovah's Witnesses also argue that dubbing ethnic Kazakh Jehovah's Witnesses as "traitors to their faith" and "state traitors" is not only violates individuals' constitutional rights but should lead to criminal prosecution of the authors.

The Jehovah's Witnesses noted that teachers at Secondary School Number 4, in the town of Aksu in the north-eastern Pavlodar Region, distributed the booklet to school students in October 2006. They call for the booklet to be immediately withdrawn and for the authors to be prosecuted.

Jehovah's Witness leader Fyodor Zhitnikov told Forum 18 on 12 March that in the wake of their complaints, they merely received a formal reply saying an investigation was underway and that they would receive a fuller answer once that is completed.

Also unhappy about the text is Aleksandr Klyushev, head of the Association of Religious Organisations of Kazakhstan (AROK). "The worst thing about this booklet is that it has been prepared by the Justice Ministry and is being freely distributed in national legal help centres, both in Russian and Kazakh."

Professor Podoprigora thinks that the same attitudes that imbue these official documents represent "the general opinion" regarding non-traditional organisations. "The mass media in most cases have the same opinion," he told Forum 18. "They like to tell readers terrifying stories about different sects."

Using the mass media to incite intolerance against religious minorities, such as Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees, is a normal tactic for the authorities (see F18News 2 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=793). One official in a court statement described the Hare Krishna community as a "terrorist organisation" and stated that allowing it to function will lead to a "second Chechnya in Kazakhstan." The country also uses international conferences on tolerance to provide camouflage for the repression of religious minorities (see F18News 8 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=839).

Klyushev of AROK complains that many officials do not understand that, at least in theory, Kazakhstan's political system requires that religion and the state are separate. He believes some officials want to back their own faith through laws and practice. "That's when discrimination starts."

He points to the impact of all this state-backed intolerance. "The state always says we are multi-ethnic and multi-confessional, but official comments as in this programme of patriotic education and this booklet fan popular intolerance. This forms public opinion. Look across the world – is extremism really from Hare Krishna devotees, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses? It's absurd. It's not objective."

Kazakh officials are increasingly smearing religious minorities, one official describing a state crackdown on Baptist and Pentecostal Christians to Forum 18 as "the fight against terrorism and religious groups without registration" (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=921).

At a 27 February conference in Astana on how the current Religion Law should be amended, parliamentary deputy Amangeldy Aytali – long a supporter of harshening the Law – cited the State Programme with approval as a reason to "protect," as he put it, "traditional" faiths and restrict minority faiths. Kazakhstan plans to even more severely restrict religious freedom via a new Religion

Law, and the KNB secret police are also planning separate restrictions on religious freedom via the Anti-terrorism Law (see F18News 21 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=916). (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=701

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806 and a survey of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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

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