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UZBEKISTAN: Why can't Jewish community re-establish rabbinate?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Begzot Kadyrov of the government's committee for religious affairs told Forum 18 News Service that while his committee supports the Jewish community's desire to re-establish the rabbinate abolished when the restrictive religion law was adopted in 1998, the justice ministry did not deem it "necessary". Without such a central organisation, the Jewish community cannot set up educational institutions. Asked by Forum 18 to comment on this continued denial of recognition of a rabbinate, chief rabbi Abe Dovid Gurevich explained that the community had to close down its yeshivas, the theological schools that train rabbis, while rabbis are in very short supply. "The closure of the yeshivas is a major issue for us." He believes the refusal to allow the reestablishment of the rabbinate harms Uzbekistan's international image.

While the Catholic and Lutheran Churches are able to maintain central administrative bodies despite not having registered communities in eight of Uzbekistan's regions as required by the restrictive religion law, the Jewish community has been unable to re-establish the rabbinate abolished when the law was adopted in 1998. The chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs, Begzot Kadyrov, told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Tashkent on 15 July that the committee supported the Jewish community's request to set up a rabbinate, but that the justice ministry did not judge it necessary to establish one. Approached by Forum 18 at its own initiative later the same day to comment on the continuing official refusal to recognise such a body, chief rabbi Abe Dovid Gurevich explained that a rabbinate is a "crucial factor" in Judaism. "Without such an organisation, Jews cannot live their religious lives to the full."

Under the 1998 religion law, religious communities without a registered central administration are highly restricted in which activities they can engage in. They cannot organise religious education as only central administrations can set up such establishments. Such restrictions contradict Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, which specify that religious communities have the right to organise themselves as they choose without state restriction.

Kadyrov explained that after the religion law was adopted in 1998, the Catholic and Lutheran Churches had appealed to Uzbek president Islam Karimov to be allowed to keep their central administrative organisations as an exception and their request was granted. "The Jewish community did not make such a request. It seems to me that this issue can only now be resolved at a presidential level," he told Forum 18.

Asked by Forum 18 how the denial of a rabbinate affected the Jewish community, Gurevich pointed out that in the wake of the 1998 religion law, the Jews had to close down their yeshivas, the theological schools that train rabbis. "The closure of the yeshivas is a major issue for us," he told Forum 18. "We are experiencing a serious lack of personnel, and rabbis from abroad refuse to come here on the grounds that we do not even have a religious educational establishment."

Gurevich admitted that synagogues function only in three regions of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand – fewer than the eight required in the law - but believes that the refusal to allow a rabbinate to be re-established harms the country's image around the world. "It is instructive that rabbinates have been set up even in the Arab states (with the sole exception of Syria). I am trying to convince the world community that Jews in Uzbekistan have no serious problems, but the lack of a rabbinate is a persuasive argument for my opponents who try to present this country as a place where devout Jews are oppressed."

At the state committee, Kadyrov said that the authorities view Gurevich, chief rabbi for Central Asia and envoy of the worldwide Lubavich movement, as merely an ordinary rabbi. "He brought us a certain document in Hebrew, but no-one here reads the language. Therefore we simply have no real confirmation that Gurevich is the chief rabbi of Uzbekistan."

Gurevich disagrees. "I have letters from the chief rabbi of Israel and from the head of the worldwide Lubavich movement stating that I have been appointed chief rabbi of Central Asia," he told Forum 18 in response to Kadyrov's assertions. "The Committee for Religious Affairs was given an English translation of these documents. Unfortunately, the problem with the regional self-awareness of Jews from different regions exists in Israel too. It seems to me that highly-placed Uzbek officials are deliberately trying to exaggerate these regional issues among Uzbek Jews so as to weaken our religious unity. I hope this policy does not have the backing

of the president of Uzbekistan."

Gurevich also complained that the lack of central organisations for the Jewish community is leading to serious confusion at government level. He said that when the committee for religious affairs set up a council for confessional affairs in April bringing together clergy from various religions, the government gave permission for Jews to be represented on this council by the community leader at one of Bukhara's synagogues, Boris Shimanev.

"For Jews here, the head of a synagogue community tends to be a secular representative," Gurevich told Forum 18. "However, it is quite ridiculous for Jews to be represented at the committee for religious affairs by a former commercial employee rather than a member of the clergy. It also creates a poor impression of Uzbekistan in the eyes of the international community."

But Shimanev, congregation leader at the Tero Sephardi synagogue, did not agree that his appointment to the council for confessional affairs was a mistake. "Given that there is no rabbinate in Uzbekistan, then today Gurevich is, at least formally, just one of Uzbekistan's rabbis and an envoy of the Lubavich movement," he told Forum 18 on 15 July in Tashkent. "The Sephardi Jews of Bukhara have been living in Uzbekistan for 100 years and I do not understand why I cannot represent the interests of Uzbek Jews at the council for religious affairs."

Shimanev also pointed to differences between members of the different Jewish traditions in Uzbekistan. "Unfortunately there is a certain lack of understanding between the Sephardi Jews and the Ashkenazi Jew Abe Dovid Gurevich, a US citizen who came to our country 12 years ago as an envoy of the Lubavich movement. However, I agree with Gurevich that these problems would be much easier to resolve if there was a rabbinate in Uzbekistan."

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=105

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

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