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KAZAKHSTAN: Textbook "propagandises intolerance, so it should be banned for use in schools"

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

Human rights defenders and religious communities remain highly concerned about a school religious studies textbook which, in the words of one local specialist, contains "aggressive, sometimes insulting and even offensive" language about some Kazakh religious communities. Among those who have expressed concern to Forum 18 News Service are Ahmadi Muslims, Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees, Jehovah's Witnesses and the state Religious Affairs Committee. Human rights defenders have also expressed concern about the textbook's echoing of officials' rhetoric against freedom of religion or belief. The lead author of the textbook, Senator Garifolla Esim, claimed to Forum 18 that "I have not said anything negative about any of the officially registered religious groups". Numerous criticisms have been made of the textbook, 'Introduction to Religious Studies', one Kazakh expert bluntly stating that "the book propagandises intolerance, so it should be banned for use in schools". Senator Esim also told Forum 18 that he and fellow law-makers are working on a draft law similar to a previous draft severely restricting freedom of religion or belief.

Human rights defenders and religious communities are highly concerned about a religious studies textbook introduced earlier this year for teenage school students which, in the words of one local specialist, contains "aggressive, sometimes insulting and even offensive" language about some Kazakh religious communities. Among those telling Forum 18 News Service of their concern are Ahmadi Muslims, Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses - all of whom have state registration. Even the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee expressed some concern over the textbook to Forum 18.

However, the lead author of the textbook, Garifolla Esim, a professor who is also a member of Kazakhstan's upper house of parliament, the Senate, vigorously defends it. He downplayed any negative effects of his book on minority faiths. "I have not said anything negative about any of the officially registered religious groups," he exclaimed on 16 June to Forum 18.

The textbook matches frequent statements by Kazakh government agencies and officials opposing freedom of religion or belief. Both the book and state officials are hostile to "non-traditional" religious communities, which they try to equate with "terrorist", "destructive", and "extremist" movements, and sharing one's beliefs (see eg. F18News 31 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1427)

Textbook still in schools

The textbook - "Introduction to Religious Studies" - was introduced into schools in January 2010, and is currently the only textbook available to teach a Religious Studies course introduced for the 9th class (for children aged about 14) by the Education and Science Ministry in September 2009. Despite claims by officials that the textbook no longer has state endorsement, many have told Forum 18 that it is still used in schools.

Maryam Mukatova, Deputy Director of the Education and Science Ministry's Centre on Textbooks, told Forum 18 from Astana on 17 June that the book is used for what she called the "optional" Religious Studies course. She added that the course is compulsory, but does not at present include exams that count towards a child's annual mark. However she said that the subject will become mandatory in the next school year, which begins in September 2010.

Mukatova said that her Centre did not recommend Esim's book, with its current content, as a textbook for schoolchildren. "It had incorrect statement on certain religious movements," she explained to Forum 18. She could not explain why the book is still used for teaching in schools.

Zhanna Onlasheva, Specialist at the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee, said that the Committee has a negative opinion of Esim's book. "We have been against that book from the very beginning and still are," she told Forum 18 on 16 June from Astana. She declined to make specific comments.

Esim defends textbook

Senator Esim dismissed the criticism from representatives of minority faiths, independent legal and religious experts and even the Religious Affairs Committee. Asked why the book puts Ahmadi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Hare Krishna community and some Protestant Churches in the category of "cults", Esim responded: "Well these groups are not like the traditional religions, which have existed for centuries." He could not explain why he differentiates between "traditional" religions and "cults". "Well some of these cults have problems. They disturb people's peace with their propaganda on the streets and on the doorsteps."

Senator Esim also claimed – without making any specific allegations - that these religious organisations have other problems that the courts and law-enforcement agencies "should take care of".

Condemned 2008-9 draft Law to be recycled

Esim told Forum 18 that he and other law-makers are working on a draft law similar to the draft declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Council in 2009. This rejected Law would have severely restricted freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 12 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1255).

"The law is on the shelf now but we are working on it, and when it gets signed into force it will not allow the aggressive propaganda by those groups," Esim stressed.

Kazakh human rights defenders predicted at the time of the Constitutional Council decision that the draft Law would be reintroduced in some form (see F18News 17 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1269). The National Human Rights Action Plan - first published in September 2009 - indicated that a draft Law would be introduced in 2011 (see F18News 8 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1360).

Parliament is also working on a proposed new Administrative Code, which continues the current penalties for exercising freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 10 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1407).

Controversial textbook

Written under Senator Esim's leadership, "Introduction to Religious Studies" is described as a textbook for the 9th class at Russian-language schools. The co-authors are Aydar Abuov, Kalimash Begalinova and Esbosyn Smagulov. The book was published by Bilim publishers – which is owned by the Culture Ministry - in Almaty in early 2010. The book states that it is "Recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan" and follows the outlines of the approved school course. A parallel book was also published in Kazakh.

Esim's co-authors are employees of two government-sponsored centres. Abuov is director of the International Centre of Cultures and Religions, which opened within the Justice Ministry in December 2008. Smagulov works in its research department. Begalinova is deputy director of the Scientific-Research and Analytical Centre on Religious Issues (SACRI), which was founded within the Justice Ministry in early 2007.

In March 2010 both centres were transferred - along with the Religious Affairs Committee - from the Justice Ministry to the Culture Ministry.

The publishers' summary of the book insists that it provides "in accessible form a critical assessment of the activity of non-traditional religious cults which have spread in the religious sphere of our country in the years of independence".

In the textbook's introduction, Esim insists that by providing reliable information on different religions, his textbook "will enable pupils to correctly get orientated in various life situations and distinguish true laws of religion from false slogans".

Senator Esim claims that Islam and Russian Orthodoxy are "considered" the two "traditional religions" of Kazakhstan, without explaining who considers this to be the case or why. "At the present time the issue of extremism and terrorism, whose inspirers partially cover themselves with religious slogans, is particularly acute," he also claims. "With this aim, the chapter devoted to non-traditional religious cults [Chapter 5] gives a characterisation of 'religious' extremism and terrorism."

Textbook criticised

Critics of the textbook have pointed out several historical errors, omissions or erroneous descriptions of a number of religious doctrines - including about faiths that the government has not shown hostility to. In one of many errors, it defines religion as a belief in the existence of a God or gods without taking into account non-theist religions and beliefs. Much criticism has been directed at Chapter 5, which makes up one tenth of the book.

The textbook frequently refers to "non-traditional religions", "non-traditional religious cults", "destructive cults", "extremist and terrorist organisations", and "contemporary religious movements" - all of which are undefined and are implied to be the same phenomenon. Only in one place does the textbook declare that it does not regard all "new religious movements" as "destructive" and

a "danger to society".

Chapter 5's description of the "Specifics of new (non-traditional) religious cults" has sections outlining what are claimed to be "Common characteristics of destructive cults" and advising (in direct language not seen elsewhere in the book) "How to avoid ending up in destructive cults". The chapter's purported (and erroneous) descriptions of "Non-traditional religions and movements in Kazakhstan" include the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna movement, and is followed by descriptions of "Extremist and terrorist organisations".

Some have questioned the choice of "new religions" described, which include the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Ahmadi Muslims (both active from the 19th century) and the Hare Krishna movement (a branch of Hinduism). In Kazakhstan some of the faiths the authors insist are "new" and "non-traditional" have been present for more than half a century. The book admits that Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal Christians and Seventh-day Adventists have been present since the 1930s to 1950s.

Among the four books cited as sources for Chapter 5 is the book "Sectology", published in 2002 in the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod by the controversial Russian anti-"sect" activist, Aleksandr Dvorkin (see F18News 27 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1300). (One of the co-authors, Abuov, welcomed Dvorkin on his March 2009 visit to Kazakhstan.)

Included as an appendix in "Introduction to Religious Studies" is the course outline for the compulsory subject of Religious Studies, approved by the Acting Education and Science Minister on 14 September 2009. Of the 34 hours assigned to the course, three are devoted to "Non-traditional religious cults". The description for this reads: "Features of new (non-traditional) religious cults. Characteristics of destructive cults and their activity. Extremist and terrorist organisations."

Textbook "should be banned for use in schools"

One of the first to criticise the textbook publicly was Artur Artemyev, an Almaty-based religious studies professor, who began speaking up in the local media in April. More recently, in letters to government agencies seen by Forum 18, Ahmadi Muslims, Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses criticised many aspects of the textbook.

One local specialist told the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in May that the language used about followers of faiths other than Islam and Russian Orthodoxy is "aggressive, sometimes insulting and even offensive". Another specialist told the group they believe the book needs a fundamental revision, both in conception and content, if it is to be acceptable for use in schools. Another was even blunter, telling the Norwegian Helsinki Committee that – although the President has called for schools to promote "tolerance" – "the book propagandises intolerance, so it should be banned for use in schools".

Professor Artemyev questions why the Education and Science Ministry has not decisively rejected the book, given its criticisms. He claimed to Forum 18 on 15 June that its Deputy Minister Makhmetgari Sarybekov is even lobbying for the textbook. Artemyev too insists the book should be withdrawn.

Mukatova of the Education and Science Ministry's Centre on Textbooks told Forum 18 that the book underwent three rounds of checks by specialists on religion from the Religious Affairs Committee, the Law University of the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police, President Nursultan Nazarbaev's ruling Nur Otan political party, and the Ministry's own SACRI research centre. She declined to give the names of the specialists, saying that it was confidential.

"Each time we sent the criticisms to the authors to improve the book. After the third time we recommended the book to be used only by teachers, and not as a textbook for schoolchildren, since it still needed improvement." Mukatova could not explain why her Centre recommended the book for use even by teachers, given that it believes the book still needs improvement.

Although Kazakhstan is 2010 Chairperson-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an OSCE initiative on religious education which respects everyone's freedom of religion or belief – the 'Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools' <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154> - has not been taken up.

"Dangers of missionary activity" lessons

Staff of the Culture Ministry's Scientific-Research and Analytical Centre (SACRI) have already taken part in lessons related to the Religious Studies course. A session was held for 9th class students at School No. 56 in Astana, where one of the Centre's staff spoke on "The Danger of Missionary Activity for National Security", while another spoke on Scientology, the Centre's website noted on 14 May. A documentary film was also shown, though the website did not say what this was.

Nurlan Mansurov, the new Director of the SACRI, told Forum 18 on 17 June that at the end of the school year in May, they held similar talks on "cults and missionary activity" in some other schools – he did not specify which schools – at the request of those schools, since they had finished the religious studies course. Mansurov also did not specify which "cults" were depicted in the film shown to the schoolchildren. "I don't remember at the moment," he responded.

Asked whether he believes the officially registered religious organisations' missionary activity poses any threats to Kazakhstan's national security, Mansurov replied with a question: "Do you think these groups will always be peaceful?" Without specifying any organisation, he added that "some of these groups under the guise of religious activity sow the seeds of inter-ethnic conflicts." Mansurov told Forum 18 that the Centre's purpose for holding such talks in schools is to "warn schoolchildren about the possible dangers of missionary activity."

The freedom to share religious or non-religious beliefs – an essential part of freedom of religion or belief – is also targeted by the state-approved re-draft of the Administrative Code (see F18News 10 February 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1407).

Esim reacts to criticism

Professor Artemyev also told Forum 18 that he had received several telephone calls from Senator Esim demanding that he halt his public criticism of the textbook. Artemyev stated that Esim had threatened him but declined to specify the threats, insisting that the issue is not a personal conflict between himself and Esim but whether the textbook should be allowed in schools. He told Forum 18 his sole focus is to ensure that a balanced and neutral textbook is used in schools which will contribute to an unbiased education in religion.

Asked why he called Artemyev and demanded that he stop criticisms of his book, Esim told Forum 18: "Artemyev is a strange person, I don't even regard him as a specialist on religion but as a die-hard atheist. He has an agenda to promote cults in Kazakhstan." Without giving any evidence, he claimed that "all the public has spoken against Artemyev."

Esim also dismissed criticism from the Religious Affairs Committee, insisting this was "because the Committee wanted to publish their own book on the subject and they were a rival." The Religious Affairs Committee denied to Forum 18 that they planned their own textbook.

Senator Esim also claimed that he was ready to take criticism of the book by anybody "if it was to the point." He stated that the book is taught as an optional course in schools, but will become a mandatory textbook after it is discussed among the wider public for final improvements and official approval. (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=1352.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY