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KAZAKHSTAN: Ruling party's "ideological preparation" for harsh new Religion Law?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Human rights defender Ninel Fokina told Forum 18 News Service she believes an internal document from the ruling Nur Otan party attacking "non-traditional" faiths and calling for laws on religion to be harshened is "ideological preparation" for senior officials in the run-up to a new attempt to change the Religion Law. The section of the July document on religion - seen by Forum 18 - attacks groups including the Tabligh Jamaat Islamic movement, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Protestant New Life Church and Grace Protestant Church. It adds that such groups are financed by "the special services of Western countries". The report claims that tens of thousands of people in Kazakhstan are members of such groups "and need help". However, an official of Nur Otan's Institute of Parliamentarianism - which produced the report - insisted to Forum 18 that it was halted before being issued and the section on religion represented only the views of one party researcher who has since been sacked. Forum 18 has been unable to verify his claims.

An internal document from late July from Kazakhstan's ruling Nur Otan party attacking "non-traditional" faiths and calling for laws on religion to be harshened has aroused concern among human rights defenders and some religious communities, Forum 18 News Service has found. "This document was designed for the ideological preparation of senior party figures for the next attempt to make the Religion Law harsher," Ninel Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee told Forum 18 on 29 September.

The document - which also calls for Centres for Support for the Victims of Totalitarian Sects to be used against such communities - matches what is already known about current official activity against religious minority communities and plans to reintroduce restrictive amendments to the Religion Law in 2011.

"The Nur Otan Party should devote special attention to the activity of non-traditional religious movements of destructive character," the report declares in its recommendations. "The destructive impact of such movements is very great. This has today become problem No. 1."

Those singled out for attack include the Tabligh Jamaat Islamic movement, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Protestant New Life Church and Grace Protestant Church. The report claims that tens of thousands of people in Kazakhstan are members of such groups "and need help".

Grace Church is attacked for aiming for "the planned evangelisation of the population of Kazakhstan, with the focus on people of native ethnicity [ethnic Kazakhs]".

However, an official of Nur Otan's Institute of Parliamentarianism in the capital Astana - which produced the report - insisted to Forum 18 that it was halted before being issued and the section on religion represented only the views of one party researcher who has since been sacked. Forum 18 has been unable to verify his claims.

The Nur Otan (Light of the Fatherland) party, led by the country's veteran president Nursultan Nazarbaev, dominates Kazakhstan and its government. It is the only party to have representation in the two-chamber Parliament.

"Destructive influence of totalitarian sects" a threat?

The Russian-language party document - "Analytical Survey of the Political Situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 16-31 July 2010" - is marked as being "for official use". Seen by Forum 18, the material on religion constitutes section 1.1 of the document immediately following the short introduction. "The destructive influence of totalitarian sects as a threat to social-political stability and the country's national security," the section is headed. The report places the issue as the most important of the "socially significant problems" facing the government and civil society, ahead even of a hunger strike over poor housing conditions which began in Astana on 16 July.

The report complains that "destructive pseudo-religious organisations" attract new followers through "the use of powerful

information resources and the deployment of neuro-linguistic programming and the technology of the manipulation of consciousness". It accuses such groups of exploiting people's poverty and says they are "especially dangerous" because they attract people between the ages of 14 and 29.

The report fears that such groups could undermine social stability "as it is well-known that such pseudo-religious organisations receive financial and organisational support from the special services of Western countries". It says the organisations' use of educational and charitable work "makes more difficult the work of the relevant state agencies to uncover for society their true aims and the consequences of their activity".

The report maintains that "representatives of traditional religious associations, leading state agencies and civil society institutions" must work together systematically to "resolve this problem".

Twice the report claims that Kazakhstan's current laws on religion are inadequate. In the recommendations, it says "it is necessary to propose in the strategic plan measures to amend legislation, directed at the halting of these negative phenomena and to conduct a widescale explanatory work among the population". It proposes using Centres for Support for the Victims of Totalitarian Sects for this explanatory work.

Report's views already being implemented

Officials and ruling party politicians have long tried to make harsher the 1992 Religion Law. In the latest attempt, revisions to it and a number of other laws were approved by the government and Parliament in 2008, despite strong criticism from human rights defenders, religious communities and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). They were rejected by the Constitutional Council in February 2009 as violating the Constitution (see F18News 12 February 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1255>).

However, human rights defenders have long predicted their return. The National Human Rights Action Plan - published in September 2009 - indicated that a draft Law would be introduced in 2011. A member of the Senate, the upper house of Parliament, Garifolla Esim told Forum 18 in June 2010 that the draft Law is being worked on "and when it gets signed into force it will not allow the aggressive propaganda by those groups" (see F18News 18 June 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458>).

The authorities are already using Centres for Support for the Victims of Totalitarian Sects - which appear to receive much of their funding from the state - to criticise religious communities.

Yulia Denisenko, head of the Association of Centres for Work with Victims of Destructive Religious Movements and founder of an association in Kostanai [Qostanay], refused to discuss the Nur Otan report with Forum 18 or what ties, if any, she and her Association have with the party. "You distorted my words when we spoke before, so I am not going to talk to you," she told Forum 18 on 27 September.

She refused to say in what way her words had been distorted when she spoke to Forum 18 in February 2009. She admitted then that the bulk of the centres' funding comes from the government (see F18News 5 February 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1250>).

Jehovah's Witnesses, Tabligh Jamaat and the New Life and Grace Protestant churches have long faced harassment from state officials and attacks in the media. Drug rehabilitation centres run by religious believers have also been targeted by the state. Protestant Christian Sergei Mironov was convicted under the Criminal Code in February 2010 after the authorities closed down the centre he ran in East Kazakhstan Region (see F18News 1 April 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1428>).

Report "a very bad symptom"

One individual, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 from Kazakhstan that the July Analytical Survey appeared to repeat "propaganda" against religious communities that is widely heard from sections of the government. The individual expressed concern that the call for the laws on religion to be made even more restrictive confirmed information already available that the government and ruling party politicians intend to do so in 2011.

Members of some religious communities singled out for attack in the internal document told Forum 18 they had not seen it, declined to comment on it and asked not to receive copies of it from Forum 18. "We prefer to stay away from politics," one told Forum 18.

Artur Artemyev, an Almaty-based religious studies professor, told Forum 18 he had not seen the Nur Otan document. However, read extensive extracts by Forum 18, he said he responded "highly negatively" to the sentiments it expresses. "It sounds as though it has been written by an uneducated person who knows nothing of religion," he declared on 29 September. "It attacks both registered and unregistered faiths. I believe that if the state has registered communities like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians, it should secure normal conditions for them to operate, not attack them."

Professor Artemyev said the Institute of Parliamentarianism is not a well-known body in society, "but is influential in the higher reaches of the party". "I believe that its production of this report is a very bad symptom - it means hysteria about and intolerance of some religious organisations is significant in the party." He believes it will influence senior party and government officials as they work on further measures on controlling religion. "They'll keep referring to this document."

Fokina of the Almaty Helsinki Committee added that the document reveals the existence of two parallel policies on religion in the ruling party. "In the open, the party claims there is the Constitution and the law, and all religious communities are equal," she told Forum 18. "In reality, behind closed doors the policy is that 'traditional faiths' have rights, while other faiths are dangerous and need to be controlled."

Did Party withdraw report?

Asylbek Kubash, Director of the Department of Strategic Development at Nur Otan's headquarters in Astana, said he could not recall if he had read the Analytical Survey for the second half of July. He declined to discuss it, referring Forum 18 to the party's Institute of Parliamentarianism. "You'll have to go to them," he told Forum 18 on 27 September. "We deal only with analysis. And we don't give information by telephone."

Serik Zhusupov, Head of the Information and Analysis Department of the Institute of Parliamentarianism, was the only party official Forum 18 could find who acknowledged having read the Analytical Survey. However, he claimed that issue of the Analytical Survey was blocked by the Institute's Deputy Director, Amankul Serikbaev, and the researcher who wrote it had been sacked. "That was only a draft text," he insisted to Forum 18 from Astana on 27 September. "It was not a publication of the party and does not represent the view of the party."

Asked to supply Forum 18 with the issue of the Analytical Survey for the second half of July which he claims Serikbaev had approved instead, he refused. "We don't have the right to send out documents which are for internal use."

Asked how members of religious communities attacked in the Survey would feel when reading the accusations, Zhusupov acknowledged that "of course they would be offended".

He said he believed social problems - such as concerns over living accommodation - were more important than the activity of religious communities. Asked about the role of the often state-backed Centres for Support for the Victims of Totalitarian Sects, Zhusupov said he had not studied the issue.

Fokina told Forum 18 that Bolat Baikadamov, head of the Institute of Parliamentarianism, had also assured her that the Survey was blocked before it could be issued. She said she did not know whether to believe him. She added that Baikadamov had appeared afraid after Forum 18 questioned Institute staff about the Survey.

State religion officials laugh at or decline to discuss report

Ardak Doszhan, the chair of the Religious Affairs Committee in the Culture Ministry, insisted that he knew nothing about the Nur Otan report. "This is the first I have heard of it," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 27 September. "I've never seen it." Read extensive extracts by Forum 18, he listened in silence but declined to comment. He repeatedly refused to say if he is a member of Nur Otan or if he shares the views expressed in the section of the report. All he would comment is that "no draft Religion Law is being discussed".

A local state religious affairs official away from the capital said they were not aware of the Nur Otan report. Read extensive extracts from its section on religion, the official snorted in apparent derision. "Where did you get this?" the official asked Forum 18. "This is juridically illiterate. There's no such juridical term 'destructive sect'."

Party members' role in religious intolerance

Members of the Nur Otan Party often play a role in activity against religious communities the party does not like.

President Nazarbaev told a Nur Otan party council meeting in January 2008 that "it is necessary to suppress the activity of illegal religious movements in Kazakhstan." Nazarbaev also claimed that "tens of thousands of different missionary organisations work in Kazakhstan. We don't know their purposes and intentions, and we should not allow such unchecked activity." He added the comment, Kazinform stated, that "We are a secular state, religion is separate from the state, but this does not mean that Kazakhstan should become the dumping ground for religious movements of all kinds." Nur Otan should strengthen its position on the religious question "given the growth of influence of religions, above all of Islam and Christianity, on the life of society" (see F18News 5 February 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1081>).

The Strategy of Activity for 2008-2011 of Zhas Otan, Nur Otan's youth wing, adopted in May 2008 and available on Zhas Otan's

website, expresses concern over "a fall in the spiritual and moral values of youth". One symptom, it claims, is the growth of unnamed "non-traditional religious cults and destructive organisations". It warns that students from rural areas studying in towns are particularly vulnerable.

Dana Sabi, head of the Youth Programmes and Projects Department at Zhas Otan's headquarters in Astana, told Forum 18 on 29 September that she could not comment on that point in the strategy. "Our movement is not against people choosing their religion," she claimed. "We don't fight against religious organisations."

Later in 2008, volunteers from Zhas Otan in Akmola Region were brought in to help in the "struggle" with "totalitarian religious cults" as part of a campaign led by local officials (see F18News 5 February 2009 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1250>).

In early 2010, Akmola Regional Police invited Nur Otan representatives to take part in a seminar-consultation on ways of struggling against religious extremism and the preservation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord. Local Baptists were identified at the seminar as law-breakers, but officials refused to tell Forum 18 whether other communities were similarly identified. Other participants in the seminar included officials from the National Security Committee (KNB) secret Police, the regional Prosecutor's Office, the regional Justice Department, the state-funded Centre for Assistance to Victims of Destructive Religious Movements, unnamed "traditional religions" and members of the official Assembly of People of Kazakhstan (which is chaired by President Nazarbaev). No other party was invited to attend (see F18News 31 March 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1427>).

The Education and Science Ministry's Centre on Textbooks told Forum 18 in June 2010 that unnamed members of Nur Otan had been among the specialists from various agencies - including the Religious Affairs Committee, the Law University of the KNB secret police, and the Ministry's own Scientific-Research and Analytical Centre on Religious Issues - to have approved a controversial school textbook, "Introduction to Religious Studies". No other political party was offered the opportunity to comment.

The book has been widely criticised by religious communities and human rights defenders - including Professor Artemyev - for what one local specialist called "aggressive, sometimes insulting and even offensive" language about some Kazakh religious communities (see F18News 18 June 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458>). (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>>.

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