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KAZAKHSTAN: "They are not real Imams"

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

Officials of Kazakhstan's Agency for Religious Affairs (ARA), the Muslim Board, and regional government officials have re-started demands that independent legally registered mosques join the government-supported Muslim Board, Forum 18 News Service has learned. These moves come as the authorities have been pressuring allegedly "non-traditional" religious groups in a public campaign, and the Majilis is considering draft laws imposing further restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. The current National Security Law bans interference by the state in religious communities. One imam who still faces telephone demands "almost every day several times" that his mosque give up its independence, Nurmuhamed Ahmedyanov, observed that if officials at a meeting "were genuinely interested in us, and if they were good Muslims, they would not rush us or try to make us break our fast, or be so rude". Another Imam, Meyram Ibrayev, faced like his colleague with threats that their mosques will not be re-registered after – not if - the new Religion Law is adopted stated that "if in future they refuse to re-register us, I will sue them in court". Karaganda regional ARA Director Serik Tlekbayev claimed to Forum 18 that "they are not real Imams".

Kazakhstan is increasing its attempts to control and limit people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, with the authorities in Karaganda [Qaraghandy] Region demanding that legally registered independent mosques join the government-supported Muslim Board. All the mosques have refused to do this, they told Forum 18 News Service.

Also, representatives of the state Agency for Religious Affairs (ARA), the Muslim Board and local authorities in West Kazakhstan, Karaganda and Aktobe Regions have held public meetings warning of the claimed dangers of allegedly "non-traditional" or "destructive" groups. Simultaneously, the advantages of allegedly "traditional" religions have been praised. The ruling Nur-Otan political party was also involved in this campaign.

Meanwhile, ARA regional departments in Almaty, South Kazakhstan (Shymkent), Aktobe [Aqtobe] and Karaganda Regions have re-started the practice of demanding that religious communities complete intrusive questionnaires. In some cases, demands have been made for reports and information on a weekly basis (see F18News 20 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1614).

The latest pressure comes as the government has sent a package of laws restricting freedom of religion or belief, violating the country's human rights commitments, to Parliament (see F18News 6 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1610).

The parliament website gives 19 January 2012 as the deadline for a "conclusion" (presumably from the Majilis' Legislative and Judicial-Legal Reform Committee to which the two draft Laws have been assigned), before the package goes to the full Majilis. But the package could be passed into law more quickly than this. Other repressive laws - such as draft laws on broadcasting and on national security – are also being considered.

Article 19, Part 2 of the current National Security Law, dating from 1998, bans interference by religious communities in the affairs of the state - and interference by the state in religious communities.

Despite this commitment, Kazakhstan has previously pressured independent Muslim communities to join the Muslim Board (see F18News 14 October 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1498). The state campaign has also seen pressure on mosques which have traditionally catered to worshippers of one ethnic background (see F18News 4 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1506).

Anti-independent mosque campaign re-starts

Independent mosques in Karaganda Region are being pressured to join the Muslim Board, their imams have told Forum 18. The mosques were also warned that if they did not join the Muslim Board now, they will not be re-registered after – not if - the new Religion Law is adopted. A leading member of one of the mosques being pressured decided not to speak publicly about the situation, for fear of state reprisals.

Forum 18 was told that Kairat Nurkenov (Assistant to the Deputy Head of the Regional Administration), Serik Tlekbayev (Director of the ARA's regional Department), Rashid Alpysbayev (Muslim Board Chief Imam of Karaganda Region), Asem Zhunuzbekova (Deputy Head of the region's Abai District), and Toleutay Yestekbayev (Chief of Abai District Administration's Internal Policy Department) on 16 August summoned Imam Nurmuhammed Ahmedyanov and Imam Meyram Ibrayev to a meeting. The meeting fell in the middle of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The Imams, who both lead independent mosques, were presented with demands that they obtain licences from the Muslim Board in Almaty by 1 September.

These demands were claimed to be based on a written note – which the Imams were not shown – from national ARA Chair Kairat Lama Sharif.

Imam Ahmedyanov, of Abai town Mosque, told Forum 18 on 14 September that Imam Alpysbayev and Tlekbayev of the ARA "promised that I would have no problems in future if I signed an agreement to join the Muslim Board, and that all the needs of the mosque would be taken care of." Imam Ibrayev also received such promises. However, Imam Ahmedyanov "understood that we would lose all our independence as soon as we signed the agreement".

"If they were good Muslims.."

The Imam noted that the Muslim Board, ARA and local government officials were "very rude all the time, would not wait until the end of the holy month of Ramadan, and wanted to force us to break our fast by sending us to Almaty in the middle of August". Imam Ahmedyanov complained that "if they were genuinely interested in us, and if they were good Muslims, they would not rush us or try to make us break our fast, or be so rude". At a further meeting on 18 August the Imams refused to sign an agreement to join the Muslim Board.

Imam Ibrayev, of Topar mosque in Abai District, told Forum 18 on 15 September that the "only reason I went to the Muslim Board was to receive a new licence, if it was possible". He explained that when he was asked to sign an agreement to join the Muslim Board, "I immediately refused". He stressed that such pressure "is illegal". The Imam stated that "if in future they refuse to re-register us, I will sue them in court".

Pressure continues

Regional ARA Director Tlekbayev denied that he pressured the Imams to join the Muslim Board. "Let them be independent, for God's sake," he told Forum 18 on 14 September. Asked what measures the ARA would take if they did not join the Board, he replied: "Why do you think we will take measures against them?"

Imam Ahmedyanov complained that Tlekbayev, Muslim Board Imam Alpysbayev and Abai District officials keep pressuring him. "I have no peace. They keep calling my phones almost every day several times," he said. "They forced me to break my fast before it is time to do so, and even now when I am again fasting trying to make up for the lost time of the fast during Ramadan, they give me no peace."

Tlekbayev of the ARA denied to Forum 18 that the authorities are pressuring Imam Ahmedyanov. "What kind of Imam is this?" Tlekbayev objected. "He is lying to you. He cannot even talk normally with anyone." Referring to independent imams, Tlekbayev exclaimed, "How can you believe these Imams? They are not real Imams."

National ARA officials refuse to comment

ARA officials in the capital Astana refused to talk to Forum 18 on 15 September about the pressure on the imams. The assistant (who refused to give her name) of ARA Chair Lama Sharif said that he was busy in a meeting, and that she could not answer questions. She then referred Forum 18 to Deputy Chair Ardak Doszhan.

Doszhan brushed off Forum 18's questions, insisting that he personally has "not called or summoned or talked to anyone in the religious communities for the last three months".

Doszhan has long been involved in repressing freedom of religion or belief, and was Chair of the ARA's predecessor the Religious Affairs Committee when it was successively under the Justice Ministry and then the Culture Ministry.

The ARA

The ARA itself was established in May to replace the Culture Ministry's Committee of Religious Affairs (see F18News 28 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1599).

The ARA's functions were set out in a government Decree, signed on 1 August by Prime Minister Karim Masimov. These functions include: proposing government policy on religion as well as freedom of religion or belief; and also conducting "comprehensive and objective study, systematisation and analysis of processes underway in the country in the sphere of realisation of the rights of

citizens to freedom of confession and the activity of religious associations, small religious groups and missionaries".

Among the ARA's specific tasks are: drafting proposed new laws and regulations in the area of freedom of religion or belief and also religion (as it has already done); carrying out "religious study expert analyses with the participation of representatives of religious organisations, social associations, state organs, religious studies scholars, lawyers and other specialists"; examining "questions touching on" violations of the Religion Law; and proposing to the security agencies "banning the activity of physical and juridical persons, including religious associations, violating Kazakhstan's laws".

As well as the central body in Astana, the Decree states that the ARA has local branches (departments) in all Kazakhstan's 14 Regions, as well as in the cities of Astana and Almaty. The total establishment of its central and regional staff is set at 146 officials. Also under ARA's jurisdiction are two bodies, the International Centre of Cultures and Religions (with a decreed establishment of 30, down from the current 50), and the Scientific-Research and Analytical Centre on Religious Issues (also with a staff of 30). (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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