

2 November 2011

UZBEKISTAN: Did authorities block Russian Patriarch's visit?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18

A planned visit by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill – expected to have begun today (2 November) – appears to have been obstructed by the Uzbek authorities, Forum 18 News Service notes. Some believe the Uzbek authorities were unhappy over the Moscow Patriarchate's decision in July to change its structures in Central Asia and appoint a new bishop to Tashkent without consulting with or gaining the approval of the Uzbek authorities. The Orthodox Diocese, now part of the Central Asian Metropolitan Region, has not yet been able to re-register under its new structure. However, an Orthodox priest in Uzbekistan has told Forum 18 that the Patriarch's visit will take place between 23 and 25 November. Meanwhile, fines and prosecutions of Protestants continue.

A visit to Uzbekistan by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill now appears uncertain, Forum 18 News Service notes. The visit, to mark the 140th anniversary of the establishment of Tashkent Diocese in 1871, was thought by some to be due to begin today (2 November) and to have been cancelled due to the Orthodox Church reorganising its structures and changing bishops without state approval. However, an Orthodox priest in Uzbekistan has told Forum 18 that the Patriarch's visit will take place between 23 and 25 November.

Meanwhile, Sergei Kozin and Pavel Nenno, who belong to an officially registered Baptist Church in the region around the capital Tashkent, are now being prosecuted three months after a July police raid on a group of Baptists on holiday.

Also, another Protestant, Azamat Rajapov, has been fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary to punish him for his religious activity. His fellow-believers think that he may be being repeatedly targeted by the authorities.

An invitation, personnel moves, and a restructuring

The long-serving head of the Russian Orthodox Church's Tashkent Diocese, Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim), announced in April 2011 that it was expected that Patriarch Kirill would visit the Tashkent Diocese in the autumn, the website of the Foundation of the Apostle Andrew the First-Called announced at the time. The reason was to attend the Tashkent Diocese's anniversary celebrations, and local media gave the visit date as 2-3 November.

On 30 June, Father Afanasy Koryugin told a press conference in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek that the Patriarch was planning to visit Tashkent in early November, though an onward visit to Bishkek was then in question, News-Asia reported the same day.

On 27 July the Orthodox Church's Holy Synod established independent dioceses for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, leaving the Tashkent Diocese only with direct jurisdiction over parishes in Uzbekistan. However, Tashkent became the centre for the new Central Asian Metropolitan Region the Holy Synod established the same day. The Archbishop of Tashkent also became the head of this Region.

Also on 27 July, the Holy Synod transferred Metropolitan Vladimir from Tashkent Diocese to the diocese of Omsk in Russia. He was subsequently removed as head of the Tashkent Orthodox Theological Seminary in early October. Appointed to head the Tashkent Diocese on 27 July to replace Metropolitan Vladimir was Moldovan-born Archbishop (now Metropolitan) Vikenty (Morar), who served as a bishop in Moldova from 1990 and in Russia from 1995. He appears not to have previously served in Uzbekistan.

Official displeasure at independent decisions

On 12 October the uzmetronom press agency, which is thought to have strong ties to the authorities, claimed that the Uzbek Foreign Ministry was unhappy about the bishops being moved and structures being reorganised without consultation with or approval from the authorities. The agency claimed that this led to the government not re-registering the new structure of the Metropolitan Region and the refusal to allow Patriarch Kirill to visit.

The article by the agency's editor Sergei Yezhkov - entitled "Render to God the things that are God's, but they forgot about Caesar" - accuses the Patriarch of "ignoring ordinary etiquette and diplomatic politeness", which the author claims "automatically complicated" the move of Metropolitan Vikenty to Tashkent. Vikenty, the article states, is "trying unsuccessfully to gain legal status

for the new administrative structure of the Church", so that "in fact the Metropolitan Region exists, but legally it is still a Diocese".

The article concludes that "it is doubtful whether Patriarch Kirill realised that his political short-sightedness and conceited dignity would at best spoil the 140th anniversary celebration of the Russian Orthodox Church's presence in Central Asia, and at worst make it strictly a small-scale [event]".

Previous reorganisation and criticism of authorities

This is not the first change to the Moscow Patriarchate's structures in Central Asia in recent years. In October 2007 the Tashkent and Central Asian Diocese (covering Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) lost its jurisdiction over parishes in Turkmenistan, after pressure from former Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov. The parishes were then placed under the authority of the Patriarch (see F18News 19 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1037).

Patriarch Kirill has previously spoken of the difficulties the Church faces in Uzbekistan, including that stated that "there is a ban on missionary activity, it is impossible to organise Orthodox secondary schools, and there are difficulties with registering new parishes" (see F18News 9 February 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1538).

In January 2005, the Uzbek authorities even banned the relics of two saints, recognised by the Russian Orthodox Church, from entering the country (see F18News 15 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=510).

"Decisions are always made independently by our Church"

Roman Ovcharenko, Vice-Rector of Tashkent's Russian Orthodox Theological Seminary told Forum 18 on 1 November that the new structures had not yet been re-registered by the state. "It does not happen in one day," he noted when asked why the Religious Affairs Committee had not done this. "The process will take some time."

Father Vsevolod Chaplin of the Moscow Patriarchate told Forum 18 on 31 October: "Cadre and organisational decisions are always made independently by our Church, and without regard to the country in which the Church functions". For example, "the authorities of the Russian Federation are informed of decisions after they are made. But we are at the same time always ready to engage in a constructive dialogue with the authorities of any country on any question regarding the life and activity of our Church."

Will Patriarch Kirill be able to visit Uzbekistan?

Ovcharenko of the Theological Seminary told Forum 18 that the patriarchal visit "was not planned between 2 and 3 November, contrary to the announcements in news agencies". He stated that "in fact it is planned to be between 23 and 25 November". However, he did not know whether the planned visit will take place. "The Patriarch would like to visit but we still do not know whether it will happen." Asked who will make the decision on patriarchal involvement in the anniversary celebration, he said that this will be decided by Metropolitan Vikenty of Tashkent Diocese. "The Church here may decide to make the celebration either local or international."

Father Chaplin of the Patriarchate told Forum 18 that a visit will also depend on Uzbekistan's "readiness to hospitably receive His Holiness Patriarch Kirill". The timing of the visit depends "on the level of such readiness".

No official comment

An official (who refused to give her name) of the Presidential Administration's Department for Nationalities and Religions on 1 November refused to comment on whether or not Uzbekistan had blocked the visit. She referred Forum 18 to the Foreign Ministry.

A Foreign Ministry Press Service official (who would not give his name) on 1 November took down Forum 18's questions, and asked Forum 18 to call back in 20 minutes. He said that Adylbek Kaybergenov, Head of the Press Service, was out of the office. Subsequent calls to the Press Service on 1 and 2 November went unanswered.

A Religious Affairs Committee official (who also would not give his name) said that Chair Artyk Yusupov along with other officials were on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca. He referred Forum 18 to Committee official Sobitjon Nasimov. However, he did not want to comment on the visit of the Patriarch, or fines and raids on Protestants. He said that he "does not know" whether Uzbekistan will allow Patriarch Kirill to visit. "Only Chairman Yusupov could tell you this, but he is on the haj pilgrimage and will return only at the end of November," Nasimov told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 1 November

Summer holiday prosecuted illegally

Meanwhile, Tashkent Region's Yangiyul District Police have brought administrative cases against Sergei Kozin and Pavel Nenno, two members of the officially registered Baptist Church of the same region's Sergeli District. Captain Murat Yusupov of Yangiyul District Police Criminal Investigation Department in late October handed to the District Criminal Court an administrative case

against Kozin and Nenno.

On 17 October police raided Kozin's home, Captain Yusupov arresting him and taking him to Yangiyul Police Station. Yusupov demanded that Kozin write a statement, sign several police reports, and tell police where Nenno was. Kozin refused to do this, so Yusupov then announced that the administrative case opened on 29 July against Kozin and Nenno would be handed to Yangiyul District Criminal Court.

The case was opened on 29 July by Yangiyul Police under the Code of Administrative Offences' Articles 240, Part 1 ("Holding unregistered religious meetings") and 241 ("Teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately"). This followed a raid that day on a group of Baptists spending their summer holiday together in the village of Niyazbash in Tashkent Region.

Six officers – five in police uniforms – at 13.00 "filmed everybody and even took photographs of children" while the Baptists were part of a holiday group. Police confiscated three Russian-language Bibles and four songbooks, later returning the Bibles but not the songbooks.

Nenno has previously been jailed for 15 days for feeding neglected children from poor families (see F18News 15 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1283).

However other Baptists who wished to remain unnamed, for fear of state reprisals, complained to Forum 18 on 25 October that Captain Yusupov has violated the Administrative Code in handing the cases to court. They point out that Administrative Code Article 36 states that penalties cannot be given more than two months after an alleged administrative violation.

"Secret operational data"

Captain Yusupov told Forum 18 on 1 November that he had referred the case to court "approximately a week ago". Asked why he had violated the Administrative Code, he said that he would only explain this to the accused Kozin and their lawyers at the police station.

Yusupov refused to explain why police raided the Baptists during their summer holiday. "I cannot give you my secret operational data." When Forum 18 asked what law the Baptists broke, Yusupov said that he "does not have time", and put the phone down.

Fined again

Azamat Rajapov, a Protestant who lives in Chirchik, has been fined once more to punish him for his religious activity. Protestants, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 19 October that they think "the authorities are specifically targeting Rajapov".

On 3 October Judge Abdurahmon Tohirov of Tashkent Region's Chirchik Criminal Court fined Rajapov 50 times the minimum monthly wage, or 2,860,000 Soms (9,040 Norwegian Kroner, 1,165 Euros, or 1,600 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate). This was for allegedly breaking Administrative Code Article 240 ("Violation of the Religion Law"). Judge Tohirov also ordered the confiscation of five Christian books and 33 DVD disks taken from Rajapov.

From 1 August 2011, the official minimum monthly wage has been 57,200 Soms (180 Norwegian Kroner, 23 Euros, or 32 US Dollars at the inflated official exchange rate).

Mirvosit Usmonov, Chair of Chirchik Court, did not want to comment to Forum 18 on why such a large fine was imposed on Rajapov. "If Rajapov and his lawyer make an appeal, we will see what we can do," he told Forum 18 on 31 October.

Previous punishments

Rajapov has repeatedly been punished for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief. To take some examples, he was in 2007 repeatedly questioned by police (see F18News 4 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1029) and fined 50 times the then minimum monthly wage (see F18News 30 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1055); and in 2010 he was jailed for 15 days as well as being personally attacked in the state-run media (see F18News 29 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1438). He was also forced to leave his home in Termez after police pressure (see F18News 4 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1455).

Judge Usmonov refused to say whether Rajapov was specifically being targeted by the authorities. Asked to comment on why Rajapov was being repeatedly prosecuted, the judge replied: "I cannot comment on this". (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all as the best antidote to Islamic religious

extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>.

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 Uzbekistan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Uzbekistan>.

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