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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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AZERBAIJAN: Is religious censorship getting worse?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Baptists, Muslims, Adventists, Hare Krishna devotees, Baha'i and human rights activists have all noticed the problems caused by the censorship of religious literature in Azerbaijan, the head of the Baptist Union telling Forum 18 News Service that censorship is "getting worse". "We even have to ask for permission for one book sent to us through the post," Ilya Zenchenko told Forum 18. "Formally, censorship was abolished in Azerbaijan by presidential decree in August 1998, but it still exists," Eldar Zeynalov, of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, pointed out, telling Forum 18 that "If Rafik Aliev [chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations] had existed in Mecca at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, he wouldn't have allowed him to produce any books as his views would have been regarded as heresy." Zeynalov also noted that prisoners are sometimes banned from seeing religious literature.

Censorship of religious literature is "getting worse", the head of Azerbaijan's Baptist Union has told Forum 18 News Service. Ilya Zenchenko said that although the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations – which is in charge of the compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature published in Azerbaijan or imported into the country – has authorised a shipment of literature from Russia, it is getting more difficult to get permission for each consignment. "We even have to ask for permission for one book sent to us through the post," he stated on 6 April. Other faiths, including the Hare Krishna and Baha'i communities, echoed the Baptists' concerns, but said the situation is neither getting better nor worse.

"Formally, censorship was abolished in Azerbaijan by presidential decree in August 1998, but it still exists," Eldar Zeynalov, director of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 April. "Such prior compulsory censorship should be abolished."

He insists that Rafik Aliyev, the chairman of the State Committee, should have no censorship role. "If Rafik Aliyev had existed in Mecca at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, he wouldn't have allowed him to produce any books as his views would have been regarded as heresy." Zeynalov believes the National Security Ministry should have responsibility for checking religious/political literature to check that it is not "harmful", but only after publication, not before.

Zeynalov particularly objects to the State Committee's insistence that religious communities can only obtain quantities of literature in line with their numbers of members.

Also condemning the censorship is Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, imam of Baku's Juma Mosque and a leading member of the Devamm and International Religious Liberty Association branch in Baku. "Unfortunately this censorship still exists," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 April. "The State Committee often uses the term 'harmful literature', but this term is never defined. I was accused of this at my trial. This is a hangover from Soviet thinking." He cited numerous cases where religious books had been taken from people returning to Azerbaijan from abroad. Ibrahimoglu is currently fighting a suspended jail sentence, apparently imposed for his human rights work (see F18News 5 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=294).

Forum 18 was unable immediately to reach Jeyhun Mamedov, head of the "expertise" department at the State Committee, who is in charge of censoring all religious literature, to find out why this system of religious censorship still exists.

Pastor Zenchenko recounted his Church's long battle to get hold of 50,000 copies of the New Testament in Azeri, printed in Russia seven years ago. Rafik Aliyev wrote to him on 25 December 2003 giving permission for only 2,000 copies. "This was a very bad Christmas present," Zenchenko told Forum 18. Dissatisfied with the response, he wrote to Aliyev in January asking again to import the full quantity and asking why, if the New Testament is not banned in Azerbaijan, he was limiting the number the Church could receive. On 20 March the State Committee finally gave permission to import 10,000 copies. "They still need to get through customs, so we are not there yet," he declared. "We have been trying for seven years to get them. We still want to import the rest."

Zenchenko also complained about the customs service's confiscation of parcels of 25 Russian-language Christian books, sent to ten Baptist pastors in Azerbaijan from St Petersburg. "This was supposed to be a home library for each pastor," Zenchenko explained. He said although the parcels were sent in January, the customs only notified the recipients on 20 March that the parcels had been seized, pending permission to release them from the State Committee.

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"There is total censorship of religious literature," Zenchenko complained. "All communities have this problem." He said a letter is required from the State Committee before printing companies will publish anything or the customs service will release imported books or books sent by post. "The customs service have told me they have received a letter from Rafik Aliyev banning the import of religious literature without their permission, but I have never seen this letter."

Zenchenko wrote to Aliyev on 23 March to complain about the State Committee's censorship which, he argued, violated the provision of the religion law guaranteeing everyone the right to "freely confess and spread their convictions". He objected particularly to the State Committee's insistence that the Baptists "distribute the Scriptures only among members of their communities". "This not only does not accord with the laws of democratic Azerbaijan, but contradicts the logic and intention of these Books."

Also detailing many cases of obstruction of religious literature was Pastor Yahya Zavrichko, the head of Azerbaijan's Adventist Church.

"We have not been able to import or produce any new books for the past year and a half, since the State Committee finally allowed us to get part of the large shipment they had seized in 1996," Babek Allahverdiev of the Hare Krishna community told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 April. "They told us that as we had got 9,000 books, that was enough for several years." Allahverdiev said the community has still not been able to get the other 25,000 books and booklets from the shipment. "We've been told they're still in the warehouse, but we don't know. Some may have been destroyed." He said the 'expertise' department of the State Committee had particular objected to one of the booklets and this had been banned.

Allahverdiev explained that each title the Hare Krishna community wished to import needed specific permission from the State Committee. They have to give a letter declaring that the title is not "harmful" to the state which the community must then hand to the customs before they will release the shipment. "We can't just go and get them," Allahverdiev noted.

He complained also that if a community member was coming back into the country from abroad, anything more than a handful of books will be seized. "If you have, say, thirty copies of ten different titles, you will be stopped," he complained.

Allahverdiev believed this system of control was wrong. "Of course it's censorship. What is 'expertise' of religious books but censorship?" he told Forum 18. "We want free access to religious literature as exists in all democratic countries."

Ramazan Askarov, secretary of Baku's Baha'i community, was more restrained, declining to discuss whether the existence of compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature is good or bad. "This question has nuances," he told Forum 18 from Baku on 6 April.

"Whenever we apply for permission to the expertise department they give it," he declared, "though sometimes they decrease the number we ask for. I don't know why." He said this year they had been given permission to print two books in Baku in Azeri in small quantities. "One was a prayer book and we were given permission for 1,000 copies." He said they had also received permission to import shipments of 100 or 200 copies of individual books from Russia.

"Under the law we only have to inform the State Committee," Askarov noted, "though they say this is permission. If they don't give permission we would have problems at customs." He said community members can receive religious books sent by post without problems. "We can get 10 or 20 books without difficulty, without even going to the State Committee."

Zeynalov points to another problem: the difficulty some prisoners face getting hold of religious literature, although formally there is no restriction on the type of literature prisoners can have as part of their ten permitted books. "I have seen cases where books on the sunna or the hadiths have been barred to prisoners, even though the books are not banned," he told Forum 18. But he stressed this often happens as a way of targeting specific prisoners for punishment, rather than a blanket ban on religious literature in prisons.

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at

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

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