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KYRGYZSTAN: Will the government or won't the government target Ahmadis?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

State officials have told local Ahmadis and Forum 18 News Service that a government resolution against "religious extremism", which specifically mentioned the Ahmadis, will not lead to a crackdown on their activity, saying that "if the Ahmadiyya community was included in the list of extremist groups, then that was done purely by mistake." Few in Kyrgyzstan have seen the text, and many are inclined to downplay the significance of it for the Ahmadiyya community. It is believed that the resolution was part of the Kyrgyz reaction to the terrorist attacks in neighbouring Uzbekistan.

State religious affairs officials have assured the local Ahmadi Muslim community and Forum 18 News Service that an April government resolution prescribing measures against "religious extremism", which specifically mentioned the Ahmadis, will not lead to a crackdown on their activity. "There won't be any problems for the Ahmadiyya community," Janbek Botoyev, chief specialist at the government's religious affairs commission, told Forum 18 on 12 May. "The resolution was not drawn up by us, and if the Ahmadiyya community was included in the list of extremist groups, then that was done purely by mistake." One Ahmadi leader downplayed the resolution to Forum 18, claiming (wrongly) that his community was not mentioned in it.

The 5 April resolution instructed the National Security Service "to draw up measures to restrict and prevent the activities of missionaries who propagate religious fundamentalism and extremism and reactionary and Shiite ideas". Some viewed the measure as Kyrgyzstan's response to the terrorist bombings in neighbouring Uzbekistan in March and April.

The Ahmadiyya community was founded in nineteenth-century India by Mirza Gulam Ahmad Kadiani and is regarded as non-Islamic by many Muslims. Ahmadi doctrine was brought to Kyrgyzstan at the beginning of the 1990s by preachers from Pakistan and is believed to have several hundred adherents in the country.

The secretary-general of Kyrgyzstan's Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Taalaybek Osmonov, protested against the government resolution, the AKIpress news agency web site reported on 4 May. "Our inclusion in the government resolution is a game someone is playing. I'm at a loss if this was done by the Kyrgyz State Commission for Religious Affairs."

Osmonov pointed out that the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community had been registered in 2002, and had all the necessary documents. "The National Security Service screened us and did not have any questions either." He added that the leaders of the State Commission had visited Ahmadi communities in Britain and Germany at their invitation.

He denied his organisation is politicised. "We work within the Kyrgyz Republic's laws." He speculated that the governments of Saudi Arabia – where the movement is banned – and Pakistan – where it has been declared non-Muslim – might be behind the move. "I don't rule out that one of these countries is putting pressure on the Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims urging them to influence us somehow. We are now the only organisation that does not obey the Spiritual Administration of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims."

Osmonov added that his organisation has "nothing against" the Spiritual Administration, stressing that the differences between the two organisations are theological.

However, the head of the Ahmadiyya community in Kyrgyzstan Zahur Ahmad described Osmonov's comments as "too hasty and emotional". "We telephoned the state commission for religious affairs and were assured that no-one had any intention of interfering with our activities," he told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 11 May. He claimed that the Ahmadiyya community is not even mentioned in the resolution, accusing local journalists of including his community in the list of extremist organisations "out of ignorance". At the same time, Zahur Ahmad added that he had still not managed to read the resolution himself and so was not absolutely sure that it did not refer to his community.

Forum 18 has established that the resolution does indeed refer to the Ahmadiyya community, but remarkably only a few people in Kyrgyzstan have seen the text. As far as Forum 18 has been able to establish, the resolution has not been seen at the Bishkek office

of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or even at the religious affairs commission – the state's main religious policy agency. Botoyev of the commission was unable to say whether the resolution identified the Ahmadiyya community as an "extremist" organisation. "The head of the commission, Omurzak Mamayusupov, and his deputy are currently on a work trip, and so no-one in our organisation can help familiarise you with the resolution," he told Forum 18.

Azimjon Askarov of the Jalal-abad human rights organisation Justice said he had heard of the government's resolution to prevent religious extremism. "But here in the south, no-one has seen it with their own eyes and, at least so far, I have not noticed any changes in state policy towards believers," he told Forum 18 from Bozor-Kyrgan, a town in southern Kyrgyzstan 30 kilometres (20 miles) west of the regional centre Jalal-Abad. "It seems to me that the authorities decided to react somehow to the recent terrorist acts in Uzbekistan, and this resolution has most likely been drawn up as a preventative measure." The Jalal-Abad region is seen as one of the centres of the banned strongly anti-western and anti-semitic international Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

Also in the south, Sadykjan Kamaluddin, the head of the International Islamic Centre of Kyrgyzstan and the country's former chief mufti, concurs with Askarov. "I have not seen any major changes in the authorities' policy towards believers," he told Forum 18 on 12 May from Osh. "The authorities are still battling against Hizb-ut-Tahrir. But this was the case even before this resolution was issued."

Apart from the state authorities, the Muslim Spiritual Administration has also responded to the recent terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan, taking steps to ensure that what it regards as "radical and extremist Islamic sects" are not able to propagate their version of Islam. Chief mufti Murataly Jumanov told Kyrgyz radio on 14 April that only those who had written permission from the muftiate would be able to propagate Islam.

However, this resolution has no legal force. Unlike in neighbouring Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's religion law does not ban people without specialist religious education from teaching religion. Nor does the code of administrative offences prescribe punishment for teaching Islam privately. "The muftiate's decision is more of a recommendation, and does not have legal force," Kamaluddin told Forum 18. He instead likened the ruling to a fatwa, a legal judgment by a spiritual authority based on Shariah law.

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222

A printer-friendly map of Kyrgyzstan is available at

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

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY