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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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KYRGYZSTAN: Breakdown of functioning government affects Protestants

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Amid the breakdown of functioning government, some Protestants have complained to Forum 18 News Service of pressure against them. The head of a Protestant rehabilitation centre in a village near the capital Bishkek, Akhmed Saipov, told Forum 18 that local Muslims attacked his institution and demanded that it be closed. Saipov told Forum 18 that he has "no confidence" that police will protect the centre "if we are subjected to a pogrom again," but the police officer leading the investigation, Colonel Amangeldy Ishaliev, assured Forum 18 that "the police will protect the centre from hooligans if it is subjected to attacks again." Also, former junior Education Minister Gaisha Ibragimova's was allegedly forced to resign by "Islamic radicals" because she is a Protestant. However, members of a range of Protestant churches in Kyrgyzstan told Forum 18, in mid-June, that they had not heard of other incidents of pressure against religious minorities elsewhere in the country.

Amid Kyrgyzstan's continuing absence of functioning government institutions in the wake of the ousting of President Askar Akaev last March, some Protestants have complained to Forum 18 News Service that the authorities are no longer in a position to protect them from radical local Muslims. The head of a Protestant rehabilitation centre in a village near the capital Bishkek, Akhmed Saipov, reports that at the end of April local Muslims attacked his institution demanding that it be closed. "In spite of our understanding with the police, I still have no confidence that they will protect us if we are subjected to a pogrom again," Saipov told Forum 18 in Bishkek on 17 June.

But the police officer who headed the investigation into the centre and the attacks pledged that the police are ready to step in again if required. "The police will protect the centre from hooligans if it is subjected to attacks again," Colonel Amangeldy Ishaliev told Forum 18 on 20 June from Bishkek.

The rehabilitation centre in the village of Tuz in Kant district, 25 kilometres (15 miles) east of Bishkek, tries to help ex-prisoners, drug addicts, prostitutes and homeless people return to normal life. Saipov reported that during the April attack on his centre, several people had their possessions stolen. "We complained about the Muslims' actions to the country's internal affairs ministry, but for some reason they started investigating our work rather than protecting us from the hooligans," Saipov complained to Forum 18. "But once the police had looked into our work, they concluded that effectively we are doing their work."

Colonel Ishaliev told Forum 18 that after the Protestants made their written complaint, the police "had to make a full investigation and therefore had to investigate the work of the rehabilitation centre". But, he added, the police concluded that the Protestants' work is "useful". However, so far no charges have been laid against any attackers.

The attack on the rehabilitation centre is not the only case where Protestants have stated that they have come under pressure since the ousting of the Akaev regime. Cholpon Ismailova, press officer for the Kyrgyz presidential candidate Gaisha Ibragimova, claimed to Forum 18 that "under pressure from Islamic radicals" Ibragimova had to stand down from her position as State Secretary in the Education Ministry (a position similar to that of Deputy Minister) at the end of April. Ibragimova was also involved in disputes because of a controversial health education book introduced by the ministry and allegations, which she denies, of close links with former President Akaev's family. "The Islamic radicals didn't like the fact that Ibragimova is a Protestant," Ismailova told Forum 18 from Bishkek on 20 June.

The deputy head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee Natalya Shadrova said she had heard nothing about Ibragimova being dismissed or about the attack on the Protestant centre. Nevertheless, speaking to Forum 18 on 20 June, she categorically insisted that neither of these incidents had anything to do with the authorities' religious policy.

Shadrova's view appears plausible. Since the change of government in March, no functioning authorities have yet been established and anarchy and chaos remain widespread. Supporters of candidates who failed to get into parliament have blockaded the Supreme Court building, while on 17 June supporters of a presidential candidate who had failed to be approved to run seized the presidential administration building for several hours. Property has often changed hands with violence.

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The pressure experienced by the Protestants seems to be a consequence of the weakness of the new regime, which is not in a position to protect the rights of citizens including religious minorities. But some observers suggest that such pressure is not as intense as it could be. This view is supported by the experience of members of a range of other Protestant denominations in Kyrgyzstan, who told Forum 18 in mid-June that they had not heard of other such incidents against religious minorities elsewhere in the country.

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan 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

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