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KYRGYZSTAN: Mob goes unpunished as intolerance of religious freedom rises

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Intolerance of religious freedom – notably that of Christians – is growing among people in south Kyrgyzstan, Forum 18 News Service has found. Two months after a July mob attack on his home in a southern village, in which religious literature including Bibles were burnt, Protestant pastor Zulumbek Sarygulov has told Forum 18 he still fears for the lives of himself and his family. The police chief – three of whose officers witnessed the attack and took no action – denies a hospital report that Sarygulov suffered two broken fingers and was beaten up, as does Shamsybek Zakirov of the state Religious Affairs Committee. Zakirov and the local imam state that Pastor Sarygulov should leave his home and close the church "so as not to provoke the situation". Religion Law amendments are being drafted by a parliamentary deputy, Kamchybek Tashiev, who is hostile to religious freedom. Among proposed new restrictions will be an article punishing those who "offend the feelings of citizens who belong to another religion".

Two months after an angry mob attacked him in his home in the village of Karakulja, in southern Kyrgyzstan, Protestant pastor Zulumbek Sarygulov says he is still afraid for his life and those of his relatives. "People from the mosque have already come back to my house since the beating and told me they will kill me if I do not leave the village," Sarygulov told Forum 18 News Service on 20 September in Karakulja, 30 kilometres (20 miles) north of Uzgen in Osh region.

In comments echoed by other Protestants in recent months, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Baptist Union, Aleksandr Shumilin, complained to Forum 18 on 11 September in the capital Bishkek that such pressure on Protestants – including attacks by lynch mobs - has become far more frequent in Kyrgyzstan over the past year. They complain that such attacks go unpunished.

Several Protestants in recent months attributed the change in attitude to Kyrgyzstan's new leadership that took power in the wake of the ousting of the former president, Askar Akaev, in March 2005 after street protests in Bishkek.

The imam at Karakuldja's mosque, Muratbek Zhumabayev, confirmed Pastor Sarygulov's account. "The believers are very unhappy that Sarygulov has opened a church in our village," he told Forum 18 on 20 September. "Our village is purely Kyrgyz and we do not need any of these Christian churches." He said that young Muslims are "very aggressive" towards Sarygulov and claimed it will be very difficult for him to restrain them. "If Sarygulov does not leave the village, something irretrievable could happen," Zhumabayev declared.

The head of police in Karakulja, Abdyshtur Turdykulov, insisted to Forum 18 on 20 September that the police have the situation "under complete control". He said that a criminal case was launched following the attack on Sarygulov's house and an investigation is underway. However, despite the fact that Sarygulov has a medical report detailing his injuries from the city hospital in Osh, the largest city in the region, Turdykulov denies that the pastor was beaten. "It is true that a crowd of Muslim believers burst into Sarygulov's house and burnt Christian literature," he told Forum 18. "But we have no evidence that anyone beat him."

Shamsybek Zakirov, an adviser to the head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, dismissed the medical report even more forcefully. "The medical report on Sarygulov's beating is not evidence," he told Forum 18 in Osh on 21 September. "Anything could have happened to Sarygulov on his way to Osh."

A mob of about 80 Muslims burst into Sarygulov's home on 28 July. They beat the pastor until he lost consciousness, broke two of his fingers and threw him out of the house. Then the mob opened the shed where he kept religious literature, including dozens of Bibles, and burnt all of it in the courtyard. The attackers then wrote in Kyrgyz "House for sale" on the pastor's house. Remarkably, three police officers were watching the actions of the unruly crowd - but took no action.

Zakirov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee maintained that Pastor Sarygulov should leave the village of Karakulja and close the church "so as not to provoke the situation", adding: "Incidentally, Sarygulov is not a local man and was specifically sent to the village as a missionary."

Shumilin of the Baptist Union told Forum 18 that while the attack in Karakulja is exceptional, Baptists are facing threats and insults

in many other parts of southern Kyrgyzstan, such as Tashkumur, 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the regional centre of Jalal-Abad, Karakul, 130 kilometres (80 miles) from Jalal-Abad, and Tereksu, 150 kilometres (90 miles) from Jalal-Abad. In all these towns, Muslims have told the Baptists to close their churches and leave town, threatening to burn down the churches if they do not do as they are told.

In northern and central Kyrgyzstan the situation for Protestants is generally better, Shumilin thinks, but even here threats and force against them have occurred. In August local people attacked Protestant missionaries from Bishkek who came to preach in a village near At-bashi in Naryn region of central Kyrgyzstan. Shumilin also stated that on some occasions officers of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the ordinary police have even filmed Christian worship services in Bishkek.

What some Protestants describe as "persecution" of Christians by Muslims is being deliberately fostered, they think, by officials from the government's Religious Affairs Committee. One Protestant who preferred not to be identified claimed to Forum 18 that Committee officials are telling Protestants frankly: "Stop preaching among the Kyrgyz people so that you won't have any problems." However, Protestants maintain that they cannot stop preaching, because it is one of the foundations of their faith.

Members of other Christian churches have also felt the effects of the state's harsher policy. Janybek Zhakipov, pastor of the Jalal-Abad Protestant Church of Jesus Christ told Forum 18 that he had come under great pressure from the authorities, involving numerous ordinary police and NSS secret police inspections. Religious Affairs Committee officials showed Zhakipov a letter signed by 500 Muslims in Jalal-Abad demanding the church's closure because its members were preaching to Muslims. They stated that the church may lose its registered status. Zhakipov added that sister congregations in other local towns face similar pressure (see F18News 12 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=810).

Perhaps surprisingly among other religious minorities, the Jehovah's Witnesses say they have not felt the effects of the authorities' new policy. "So far, at least, we have had no problems in Kyrgyzstan," Fyodor Zhitnikov, who oversees Jehovah's Witness congregations across Central Asia from neighbouring Kazakhstan, told Forum 18 on 25 September.

The question of Muslim anger at conversions from Islam to Christianity and to other faiths has for some time been an issue in southern Kyrgyzstan (see F18News 7 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222). In the worst case so far, Saktinbai Usmanov, an ethnic Kyrgyz convert to Protestant Christianity, was murdered in December 2005 in Zhety-Oguz village in Zhety-Oguz region on the southern bank of Lake Isyk-kul [Lake Ysyk-Köl] (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729). In neighbouring Tajikistan a Baptist Pastor Sergei Bessarab was murdered in January 2004 (see F18News 27 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=330). In May 2005, a regional court sentenced 12 people found guilty of his murder to 25 years' imprisonment.

Religious affairs official Zakirov strongly denied that the Kyrgyz government's policy towards religious minorities has changed since President Akaev was deposed. "The problems with religious minorities surfaced when Akaev was still in power," Zakirov told Forum 18. "However, they have reached a crisis point and we have to take harsher measures."

Zakirov thinks the harsher policy towards religious minorities is linked primarily to the recent rapid strengthening of the position of Islamic radicals in southern Kyrgyzstan. "A whole range of radical Islamic organisations has appeared here, and more of them emerge every day. The Islamists are coming over here from the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. The law enforcement agencies in Jalal-Abad have had to enter into a real battle with Islamic fanatics who have set up a base in a private home."

He added that the funeral in August of local imam Muhammadrafik Kamalov "very nearly sparked an anti-government protest". "In this complex situation, if we show indulgence to the spread of Christianity, we will simply be accused of anti-Islamic policies."

Kamalov, the imam of one of the largest mosques in the south of Kyrgyzstan, was killed by the NSS secret police on 6 August on the outskirts of Osh. The circumstances of the imam's death remain unclear (see F18News 24 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=835).

At least two factors underlay the intolerant attitude of Muslims towards Muslims who have converted to Christianity: Islamic law's requirement that Muslims who reject their faith have to be punished; and the possibility that those who have converted to Christianity are seen in Central Asia as having lost their national identity (see F18News 17 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=729).

The Religious Affairs Committee's adviser Zakirov says that he and his colleagues are caught "between two fires". "At virtually every meeting with local people in the south of the country we are asked to stop Protestant churches from carrying out propaganda among Muslims." He repeated his earlier comment to Forum 18 that he has several times been called "an enemy of Islam" for registering a Protestant church (see F18News 12 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=810).

Zakirov claims the main problem is that Protestants actively engage in sharing their beliefs. "For example, there are no problems here with the Orthodox, because they do not recruit supporters from the Muslim population. The local people are very well-disposed to the Orthodox and there have even been cases where they have helped build their churches."

Protestants do have the right to preach, both under international standards to which the government has agreed and under Kyrgyz law, Zakirov agreed. "But unfortunately, we have to work with the actual local situation. For example, Karakulja is a purely Kyrgyz village. When we tried to explain to the local people that Sarygulov has the right to preach under international law, they told us 'we have our own laws handed down by our ancestors and we care nothing for international standards'. When we ask the Protestants to stop preaching to Muslims we are primarily concerned for their safety – because it could simply end up in a kangaroo court. This is not Europe, and the actions of Protestants today could destabilise the situation in the south of the country." Zakirov also reasoned along these lines when discussing the problem with Forum 18 in July this year.

Zakirov confirmed that amendments will be made to the Religion Law restricting missionary activity (see F18News 12 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=810). "I hope that the new draft Law will be as close as possible to international standards. However, we need to take account of the complex reality, not just international standards," he insisted to Forum 18.

A wide-ranging Extremism Law, which leaves open the possibility of it being applied to peaceful religious activity and communities, was adopted in 2005 (see F18News 19 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=673).

Forum 18 has established that the new Religion Law is currently being drafted by a member of the Kyrgyz parliament, Kamchybek Tashiev. Despite some 20 attempts over several days in mid-September, Forum 18 was unable to reach him by telephone to find out what changes to the law he would like to see and why. However, it is likely that Tashiev intends the draft law to be harsher and to restrict religious believers' rights.

Interestingly, on 6 June the newsletter published by the Jalal-Abad organisation Justice carried a detailed response from Tashiev to a letter addressed to him by the Jalal-Abad resident who accused Christians of turning her husband into a "zombie". This accusation – and particularly the publicity given to it by Justice - sparked intense pressure against the Protestant Church of Jesus Christ (see F18News 12 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=810).

"It is true that the public in the city of Jalal-Abad are unhappy with the religious activity of this church and its aggressive evangelism among the population," Tashiev wrote. "In response to this, the state has now sent a second official warning to this church notifying it of the launch of procedures to withdraw its registration certificate."

Arguing that the current Religion Law is "imperfect", Tashiev said he is "spearheading" an amended Religion Law. "The initiative to amend the Law has been prompted by numerous appeals from citizens, who have come into conflict with the activity of these religious communities. For occasions when people offend the feelings of citizens who belong to another religion, I have added a third article stating that such actions will be punished by law."

In 2001 a group of ethnic Uzbeks from south Kyrgyzstan set up a kangaroo court, which tried to convict fellow Uzbeks who had converted to Christianity. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have both seen cases where Muslim converts to Christianity have been the victims of kangaroo courts, with official connivance (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=557). Officials have sought to blame Christian evangelism for these religious freedom violations.

At present in Central Asia, only Uzbekistan bans evangelism or proselytism (see F18News 10 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777). However, Tajikistan has also drafted a law banning evangelism or proselytism, consideration of which appears to have been postponed until after presidential elections due in November 2006 (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=795). (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

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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