

9 November 2007

TAJIKISTAN: Why were the activities of three religious organisations stopped?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Tajikistan's Culture Ministry has not been able to tell Forum 18 News Service why the charters of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Ehyo Protestant Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre now need changing and their activities have been stopped. "Nothing changed in the laws. I don't understand why they were registered in the first place," Saidbeg Mahmadulloyev of the Culture Ministry told Forum 18. The Jehovah's Witnesses' charter was registered in 1994 and re-registered in 1997; Ehyo Protestant Church's charter was registered in 2001; and the Abundant Life Christian Centre's charter was registered in 2003. No official objections had previously been made to the charters. The Culture Ministry document banning Jehovah's Witnesses only refers to their sharing of beliefs publicly, yet Mahmadulloyev also told Forum 18 that refusal to do military service or accept blood transfusions were also reasons. However, the Deputy Chief of the Tajik General Staff, Major-General Akbarjon Kayumov, has apparently disagreed with this. The reasons for the suspension of Ehyo Church and Abundant Life are also unclear.

Tajikistan's Culture Ministry has banned or suspended three religious organisations and is trying to force them to change their charters, Forum 18 News Service has found. All three organisations – Jehovah's Witnesses, Ehyo Protestant Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre – have been active in Tajikistan for some years. However, Saidbeg Mahmadulloyev, Head of the Information and Analytical Section of the Religious Affairs Department at the Ministry of Culture, was unable to say why the three organisations' charters had not needed to be changed in the past. "Nothing changed in the laws. I don't understand why they were registered in the first place," he told Forum 18 from the capital Dushanbe on 9 November.

Jehovah's Witnesses were banned on 11 October (see F18News 18 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1036), the same date that Ehyo Protestant Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre were "suspended" for three months. Pressed on whether the Culture Ministry's wish for all three charters to be changed related to the proposed new Religion Law, Mahmadulloyev would not comment on this. All three organisations are forbidden to carry out any religious activities, and are appealing against the decision.

The planned new Religion Law put limits on the numbers of places of worship in the country, as well as banning "missionary activity" (see F18News 2 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=985). Mahmadulloyev stated that one of the reasons the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned was that "they are aggressive in their propagation of their religion. They are a totalitarian sect." Asked by Forum 18 why he described Jehovah's Witnesses as "totalitarian", Mahmadulloyev said that they "claim that their religion is the only true religion."

Mahmadulloyev told Forum 18 in Dushanbe on 7 November that Jehovah's Witnesses booklets in Tajik distorted the meaning of some verses of the Koran. "We have concluded from all this that Jehovah's Witnesses are hostile to Muslims of Tajikistan," he told Forum 18. Gregory Olds, a Jehovah's Witness lawyer who is visiting the community in Tajikistan, declined to comment on this allegation to Forum 18 on 9 November.

Mahmadulloyev of the Culture Ministry also said that the refusal of Jehovah's Witnesses to do military service or accept blood transfusions were also reasons for the ban. Tajikistan does not have any alternative service possibility for those who object to military service on conscientious grounds. Neither refusing blood transfusions nor conscientious objection is mentioned in the Jehovah's Witnesses charter, and this objection is not.

However, the Deputy Chief of the Tajik General Staff, Major-General Akbarjon Kayumov, has apparently contradicted Mahmadulloyev. In answer to a direct question about the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses, General Kayumov told the "Vecherny Dushanbe" newspaper on 8 November that "we do not have cases of conscription dodging because of this particular reason. We have not received any information from local Military Commissariats of any such cases."

Olds, the Jehovah's Witness lawyer, told Forum 18 in Dushanbe on 30 October that "we still don't understand the real reasons why we were banned." The Jehovah's Witnesses in Dushanbe were first registered in 1994 and re-registered on 15 January 1997, in neither case with any objections being raised to their charter. "We were qualified then, so what's changed now?" Olds asked. The

Culture Ministry document banning the Jehovah's Witnesses dated 11 October, which Forum 18 has seen, gave the Witnesses' sharing of their beliefs as the reason for the ban.

Following a reference to a three month suspension in September 2002, the document states that the Jehovah's Witness community broke Tajik law, as they "carried out its activity in violation of Republic of Tajikistan legislation by distributing in public places and at the homes of citizens, i.e. among members and followers of other religions, propagandistic books on their religion, which has become a cause of discontent on the part of the people." The document orders law-enforcement agencies to be informed "in order for the given decision to be fulfilled," and appoints Deputy Culture Minister Muradullo Davlatov "to oversee the execution of the given decision."

When Ehyo Protestant Church registered its charter with the then Religious Affairs Committee in 2001, no objections were raised to it. Similarly, when the Abundant Life Christian Centre registered its charter in 2003, no objections were raised to the charter.

Asked what would become of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mahmadulloyev said that "the decision was a joint decision at the Ministry of Culture and the Prosecutor General. That means it is final, and we can do nothing to change it," he continued. "Now it can only be raised at the level of the President." Mahmadulloyev did not foresee any chance of the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses being lifted. "Tajikistan is not the first country to ban them and it will probably not be the last one. Tajikistan is the 26th country to ban Jehovah's Witnesses", he claimed.

Subhon Koshonov, Presidential Advisor on Religious Issues, told Forum 18 on 9 November that he had received a letter from the Jehovah's Witnesses on 8 November, and that he was working with lawyers on the issue. However, Koshonov added that "we will also study the experience other countries on the question of conscientious objectors to serving in the Armed Forces."

Mahmadulloyev of the Culture Ministry denied that Ehyo and Abundant Life would be the next organisations to be banned. "They are not in imminent danger of being banned. However, they committed some violations, which they need to correct."

Shaukat Dusmatov, the chair of the Abundant Life Christian Centre, a religious education and humanitarian organisation, told Forum 18 on 7 November that they had received on 17 October a letter from the Culture Ministry suspending their activity. The letter had followed Abundant Life writing to the local hakim (administration) on 29 August, asking for permission to run a bookshop on Abundant Life's premises. The hakim gave verbal permission for this, but the Culture Ministry's letter denied permission for the bookshop. The hakim later stated that it could not give permission without the approval of the Culture Ministry.

The Culture Ministry also claimed that there were "minor violations" in Abundant Life's Charter. The Ministry stated in their letter that, even though their charter specifies that they carry out humanitarian work, preparing and distributing food violated the charter.

Abundant Life suspect that the Culture Ministry does not wish to state what its real objections may be. So Dusmatov and Alexandr Werwai, President of the Baptist Union of Tajikistan, met the Culture Minister, Mirzoshorukh Asrori, on 30 October. The Minister promised Dusmatov and Werwai that a committee from the Ministry would be sent to correct the "possible violations" in Abundant Life's charter. Asrori also promised that the local hakim would then to give Abundant Life permission to use their current building for a bookshop.

A member of Ehyo Protestant Church, who wished to remain anonymous, told Forum 18 on 7 November that the Culture Ministry had made similar claims against Ehyo to those made against Abundant Life. No previous complaints had been made by any official about Ehyo's activities or charter.

Religious minorities have expressed "deep anxiety," as they fear that the draft Religion Law will make it almost impossible for any non-Muslim religious communities to gain legal status. The government is currently refusing to accept new legal status applications (see F18News 2 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=984).

Pressure on religious communities of all faiths in Tajikistan has been increasing in recent years. Unapproved mosques were demolished or closed down in Dushanbe during the summer, while Christian churches and the city's synagogue are under threat amid redevelopment plans (see F18News 10 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31&results=50>

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

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.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at

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

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