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KYRGYZSTAN: "Don't meet for worship"

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

Unregistered communities of Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Ahmadiya Muslims in many parts of Kyrgyzstan have been ordered by the authorities to stop meeting for worship, Forum 18 News Service has found. In some cases, communities have been told that state registration in the capital Bishkek does not allow religious activity elsewhere. One Protestant church in the north-west told Forum 18 that they had been unsuccessfully trying for two years to register, but that they "would not be registered unless they had 200 signatures. How can we collect 200 signatures if we are not allowed to function normally?" Asked what would happen to religious communities who have fewer than 200 members, and so cannot be registered, an official of the State Agency for Religious Affairs told Forum 18 that "there is a Law, and we will deal with them accordingly." An employee of the State Agency recently told a person known to Forum 18, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, that after the July presidential elections there would be "a massive campaign against religious groups meeting illegally."

Kyrgyzstan is continuing a crackdown on people exercising their freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. Communities of Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Ahmadiya Muslims have all been ordered by the authorities to stop meeting for worship, in some cases the orders having been originally issued in 2007.

Since the entry into force of Kyrgyzstan's new Religion Law in January 2009, officials of the Prosecutor's Office, Police, National Security Service secret police, local Executive Authorities and the State Agency for Religious Affairs have checked up on or raided many religious communities. One such community was the Jehovah's Witnesses in Maili-Suu, whose members were told that "they have no rights to distribute or to keep any religious literature at their homes" (see F18News 28 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1302)

An employee of the State Agency for Religious Affairs recently told a person known to Forum 18, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, that after the July presidential elections there would be "a massive campaign against religious groups meeting illegally." President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who has been in power since 2005, was officially announced as having won these elections. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers noted that electoral fraud and intimidation of the opposition "contributed to an atmosphere of distrust and undermined public confidence in holding genuinely democratic elections."

Crackdown on unregistered worship outside Bishkek

One of the many controversial aspects of the Religion Law is the ban on unregistered religious activity (see F18News 27 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1301). The authorities in the north-western city of Talas in April told the leader of the Protestant Church of Jesus Christ to stop meeting for worship in his private flat, a church member wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 12 August.

The Church was registered in the capital Bishkek, and its members in Talas met in a rented cinema for worship until January. In that month, the authorities claimed that registration in Bishkek did not cover public worship in Talas and stopped the Church using the cinema. When the worship meetings were moved to the leader's flat, police summoned the leader for questioning in March and April.

"Our church in Talas has tried to register with the regional Justice Department for two years without success," the church member told Forum 18. "The last time they tried, they were told they would not be registered unless they had 200 signatures. How can we collect 200 signatures if we are not allowed to function normally?"

As a Baha'i pointed out to Forum 18, as well as the very high threshold of 200 founders, many people are reluctant to sign registration applications as they distrust the authorities (see F18News 6 November 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1215).

At the Talas regional Justice Department, the Secretary (she did not give her name) of Department Head M. Karmyshakov said neither he nor anyone else was available to talk. "Most of the responsible officials are either out of office for a few days, or on holiday," she told Forum 18 on 13 August.

In the central Naryn Region, Prosecutor T. Kasymbekov of Kochkor District in March issued a warning letter to Bakhyt Mukashev, Pastor of El-Shaddai Protestant Church, to stop meetings for worship in his private home. A church member who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 13 August that Pastor Mukashev and his wife were then summoned to the Prosecutor's office and questioned. Other state agencies summoned some church members for questioning and compelled them to write statements on their activities. They were then warned not to meet in Mukashev's home.

The Church showed the authorities a certificate that they were a branch of the registered El-Shaddai Protestant Church in Bishkek. But as in Talas, the authorities in Kochkor claimed that registration in Bishkek does not apply elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan.

Forum 18 attempted on 13 August to reach officials at Kochkor District Prosecutor's Office to discuss the case. The Naryn Regional Prosecutor's Office assured Forum 18 that officials in Kochkor would answer calls, but no official in Kochkor answered their telephone that day.

Crackdown on unregistered worship in Bishkek

Synarkul Muraliyeva (Chandra Mukkhi) of Bishkek's unregistered Hare Krishna community also complained that they are not able to meet publicly. In 2008 "a few of us [Hare Krishna devotees] were taken to the National Security Service (NSS) secret police headquarters in Bishkek," she told Forum 18 in Bishkek on 7 August. "An NSS lieutenant colonel compelled us to sign a paper saying that we would not meet publicly for worship." Muraliyeva said the NSS secret police told the devotees that "they acted on complaints from neighbours" of their community building, where they used to hold worship meetings. She also told Forum 18 that a former official of the State Agency for Religious Affairs told her in 2007 that "someone from higher up" had stated: "Do not even dare to register them!"

When asked why the Hare Krishna community in Bishkek, the only in the country, has not so far been registered, Kumar Dushenbayev of the State Agency responded on 6 August in Bishkek that "they have an internal problem they cannot solve." He added that "we met them a year ago and told them to correct certain things in their charter. But they did not come back."

Muraliyeva agreed that the Community has an internal property problem, but insisted that "our main problem is that we have been refused registration and cannot meet publicly," she emphasized.

Other religious communities Forum 18 knows of throughout Kyrgyzstan face the same problems of being unable to worship publicly. A Protestant church leader from Bishkek, for example, told Forum 18 on 13 August that his church too is also in an "illegal" situation. "There are very many home churches like ours," he continued. He predicted that "some groups will either go underground trying to hide", and others will "unite with other groups, despite confessional differences, to gain legal status."

Crackdown on "foreign mission"

The Ahmadiya Muslim Community has been registered in Bishkek as a "foreign mission". This "creates certain problems", a member of the community who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 12 August. "As a foreign mission it is harder to register communities outside Bishkek," he emphasised. Also, because of the new Law, "it will be difficult to get missionary visas" for leaders from Pakistan, the community member added. "The members of our community are predominantly Kyrgyz," he noted. "Between 150 and 180 local people attend our Friday prayers in Bishkek."

Elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan - in Osh in the south-west, Karakol in the north-east, and Issyk-Kul [Ysyk-Kol] in the centre - Ahmadiya Muslims were in 2007 "asked to stop meeting publicly for worship by the State Agency for Religious Affairs in Bishkek," the community member told Forum 18. "Our activity in those regions was not registered, but we rented places and met freely. We were told we could not continue as a foreign mission without official registration." The community member said the Ahmadiyas then tried to register as local communities, but were told by local authorities to wait as a Religion Law was being introduced. "We submitted documents then, and are still waiting," he said.

Asked why Ahmadiya communities cannot register as local communities, Dushenbayev of the State Agency told Forum 18 that "we will register them if they submit documents in compliance with the Law."

"There is a Law, and we will deal with them accordingly"

Asked by Forum 18 what would happen to religious communities who have fewer than 200 members, and so cannot be registered, Dushenbayev of the State Agency asked: "Why should religious communities such as the Presbyterians try to open a branch in every corner of the country? Why can't they come together in one place, where they would not have a problem gathering 200 people?" When Forum 18 repeated the question, he said that "we will not fight with them. There is a Law, and we will deal with them accordingly."

Asked whether he thought the Law placed many restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Kyrgyzstan, Dushenbayev said the

question "should be asked of the Parliament, which adopted it." However, he quickly added that "the Law is at the moment being worked on" by a group of experts. Regulations to implement the law "were not in place yet," Dushenbayev said, "and another group is working them out." Without giving an exact date, Dushenbayev told Forum 18 that both groups "should finalise their work in the autumn."

Officials have previously claimed to Forum 18 that only after three controversial elements of the Law – on restrictions on sharing faith, distributing literature and on the high threshold of 200 adult citizen members required – have been resolved will regulations enacting the Law be produced (see F18News 27 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1301). (END)

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

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kyrgyzstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=30>.

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

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