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KAZAKHSTAN: "To prepare the public for a discriminatory new law"

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

Officials of Kazakhstan's Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA), the state-backed Muslim Board, "anti-sect" personnel, and local administrations have held public meetings praising the so-called "traditional religions" and attacking so-called "non-traditional religions". The ruling Nur Otan political party has also held similar meetings. ARA regional departments and local administrations across Kazakhstan have also demanded that members of religious minorities provide detailed information on their activities – sometimes on a weekly basis. Former state religious affairs officials, who wished to remain unnamed, have told Forum 18 News Service that religious communities should not be divided into categories such as "traditional" and "non-traditional". One commented that "the word 'non-traditional' gives the public a negative image". An Ahmadi Muslim, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that they thought that the campaign is to "prepare the public for a discriminatory new Law". Protestants have also suggested that this is the motivation. Tomorrow (21 September) Forum 18 understands that the first reading of two laws restricting freedom of religion or belief is due to take place in the country's Parliament.

Officials of Kazakhstan's state Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA), the state-backed Muslim Board, and local administrations held public meetings in August and September in West Kazakhstan, Karaganda [Qaraghandy] and Aktobe [Aqtöbe] regions, praising the advantages of so-called "traditional religions" and warning of the alleged dangers of so-called "non-traditional religions". The ruling Nur Otan political party has also held similar meetings in West Kazakhstan. ARA regional departments and local administrations across Kazakhstan have distributed written questionnaires or verbally demanded that members of religious minorities provide detailed information on their activity – sometimes on a weekly basis.

Tomorrow (21 September), Forum 18 has been told that the first reading of two laws restricting freedom of religion or belief is due to take place in the country's Lower House of Parliament (Majilis). Previously it was expected that this reading would take place in January 2012, and the process is taking place with "unprecedented speed" (see F18News 21 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1615).

The Preamble of one of the draft laws, a new Religion Law, singles out the Hanafi Muslim religious school of thought followed by the Muslim Board and Russian Orthodoxy as the country's two so-called "traditional religions" (see F18News 6 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1610).

When a previous similarly harsh package of measures restricting freedom of religion or belief were being considered in 2008-9, similar attempts were made to encourage intolerance of people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief (see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1352).

The practice of demanding detailed and intrusive information is also a return to past practices (see F18News 25 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1093).

ARA, Muslim Board, and regional government officials have re-started demands that independent mosques join the Muslim Board – despite the current National Security Law banning interference by the state in religious communities. One ARA official told Forum 18 that the imams of independent mosques "are not real imams" (see F18News 16 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1613).

Intrusive information demands re-start

At least two religious communities in Karaganda have received intrusive demands for information. Grace Presbyterian Church of Karaganda received an official inquiry demanding that the Church provide the regional ARA branch with detailed information on its activities between 13 and 19 August.

"In connection with the weekly monitoring of religious communities in Karaganda Region, you need to notify the Karaganda Department of the ARA of your activities," read the demand signed by branch head Serik Tlekbayev on 16 August and seen by

Forum 18. The information demanded included all weekly events – "meetings, services and the places of meetings, topics of speeches and sermons, their purpose, as well the audio-video materials and printed materials used". The demand specified that this information must be provided every week.

Franciscan Sister Alma Dá¼amova, Secretary of the Catholic Church's Karaganda Diocese, told Forum 18 on 20 September said that they also received the questionnaire from the regional ARA. However, she said that "we do not have time to write reports every week on our activities". She pointed out that there are "routine and similar activities" each week, and that the ARA knows the details of the Community. She said that she had told the ARA this, but did not want to discuss with Forum 18 what the reaction of ARA regional Director Serik Tlekbayev was.

Ahmadi Muslims, New Life Church, and another Protestant church that wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 13 September that their branches in Almaty, South Kazakhstan, and Aktobe regions also received similar detailed demands starting in August. The demand came from either ARA branches or verbally at meetings regional administrations summoned them to.

Members of these communities complained to Forum 18 that this is a severe violation of the rights of the religious organisations and discrimination against them.

"We need to know exactly what these religious organisations are doing"

Tlekbayev of the Karaganda regional ARA insisted to Forum 18 on 14 September that the demand is "not a violation". He claimed that "we need to collect such information because we need to know exactly what these religious organisations are doing". He refused to say what will happen if religious communities refuse to give such information. "Why is Forum 18 from Norway so interested in the matters of Kazakhstan?" he asked.

Kazybek Omarov, Director of the Almaty regional ARA, denied that the Almaty regional authorities are collecting such information. "These organisations have registered with us", he told Forum 18 on 14 September. "We know all we need to know about them."

The authorities in South Kazakhstan and Aktobe regions between 14 and 15 September refused to comment to Forum 18 on why they had made similar inquiries.

"There are good people and bad people everywhere"

Former state religious affairs officials in Almaty and Aktobe regions, who wished to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that religious communities should not be divided into categories such as "traditional" and "non-traditional". "The word 'non-traditional' gives the public a negative image," one commented to Forum 18 on 14 September. "There are good people and bad people everywhere, even in the so-called 'traditional' religions." An official also commented to Forum 18 that day that "I know good people in the so-called 'non-traditional' organisations who help others". The official said that the government should make reforms "not to discriminate against religious minorities but to improve the Religion Law".

Commenting on the campaign and the categorisation of religious confessions as traditional and non-traditional, Father Gennadi Subbotin of a Russian Orthodox parish in Kostanai region outside the framework of the Moscow Patriarchate told Forum 18 on 20 September that "you cannot force people to believe or not believe in a religion."

Fr Subbotin said that, a few years ago, Kostanai Regional Administration asked him to take part in a meeting where they would discuss the "non-traditional" religions and their activity. "The meeting was fruitless and not interesting for me," he said. "Some officials tried to convince me to stay but I left, and they have not asked me to further meetings."

Public attacks on "non-traditional"

However, ARA, Muslim Board, and local authorities held a series of public meetings in August and September in Karaganda, West Kazakhstan and Aktobe regions, where they "praised the advantages of the traditional religions and the dangers of the dangers of the non-traditional religious organisations," Kazakhstan's State-owned TV channels Khabar and Caspionet reported between mid-August and early September. For example, four groups of "religious experts" in West Kazakhstan region were tasked to visit all 12 Districts of the region to tell the local population of the "tragedy of people who became victims of the non-traditional religions".

Zhayik "anti-sect" Centre and its Chair Lazzat Shaghatay were also given a role in this campaign, which involved the use of video films and written materials, it was reported. Zhayik, it was claimed, "received 100 complaints from such victims, out of which it was able to help 23 persons".

Talking of their visits to districts in the Region, Talgat Nygmetov, Director of West Kazakhstan region's ARA branch, said in his interview that "we are doing everything to raise the prestige of the traditional religions". The regional ARA's Senior Specialist Bayangul Zhakiyeva said that "we encourage young people to turn to teachers and Imams of traditional Islam with their questions on

religion rather than the Internet, missionaries or preachers. Before accepting a faith, you need to collect more information about it and only then take a step towards faith".

The Oral City branch of President Nursultan Nazarbaev's ruling Nur Otan party in West Kazakhstan Region also held a meeting with representatives of religion, law enforcement bodies, leaders of youth organisations and university students, where they discussed the differences between "traditional" religions and "destructive" movements, Caspienet TV reported on 2 September. Participants were stated to have suggested that Nur Otan should initiate amendments to Kazakhstan's Religion Law, and adopted an appeal to young people in the West Kazakhstan region "to abide by the canons of traditional religions". The appeal will be distributed among all the higher educational institutions and colleges in the city, the TV channel reported.

Nur Otan is the only party with deputies in the Majilis (lower house) of the country's two chamber parliament. It has since at least September 2009 been preparing to introduce measures attacking people's freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 30 September 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1493).

"To prevent extremism"?

Similar campaigns have taken place elsewhere. To "prevent extremism", traditional Islam must be popularised among the youth, and for this purpose a group of ARA officials and "religious scholars" visited Karaganda's Districts during Ramadan, Caspienet TV reported. ARA officials were quoted as saying that since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, more than 50 types of confessions appeared, and the number of religious associations reached 4,000. "Each year the number of non-traditional religions is increasing steadily. We need to struggle against various sects with the united efforts of all Kazakhstan citizens," the officials were quoted as saying.

Regional ARA officials on 14 and 15 September refused to comment on the campaigns to Forum 18.

Why the campaign?

Asked why the authorities carried out campaign against religious minorities, Nygmetov of the West Kazakhstan ARA told Forum 18 on 14 September: "We need to warn people against the extremist religious groups." He refused to say which organisations the authorities consider "extremist". Asked why the authorities describe the country's religious minorities as "non-traditional", he replied: "Because they do not represent the country's majority, they only represent 0.01 per cent of the population."

Shaghatay of the Zhayik "anti-sect" Centre told Forum 18 on 15 September that "Hanafi Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church are the traditional religions of Kazakhstan and the rest of the religious organisations are non-traditional". She also told Forum that the New Life, Grace Presbyterian and Baptist Churches as well as Jehovah's Witnesses are "non-traditional dangerous sects". She claimed that members of the New Life Church and some Baptists asked her Centre for help. "I cannot give you the figures," was her response when asked exactly how many people from these Churches contacted her Centre. "I don't know you. Maybe you are a spy."

Explaining the alleged "dangers of non-traditional" religious communities, Shaghatay claimed – without giving any details or evidence – that "one lady who was Muslim and had good relations with her family left her family after she became a member of a Protestant Church". Asked for more details, Shaghatay replied, "Look I cannot answer you over the phone".

Shaghatay also refused to say why and who organised the campaign, referring Forum 18 to the Region's ARA branch.

"To prepare the public for a discriminatory new law"

An Ahmadi Muslim, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 20 September that they thought that the reason for the campaign is to "prepare the public for a discriminatory new law". Hanafi Islam and the Russian Orthodox faiths are singled out in the Preamble of the draft Religion Law, they pointed out (see F18News 6 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1610). "I think that this is done to gradually liquidate independent Muslim Communities after the Law is adopted," they said. "The authorities' excuse will be that we threaten state security."

Sergei Zaikin of New Life Church echoed the Ahmadi Muslim, saying that this is done to "stop our church and other religious organisations". The authorities are "smearing our names, and are preparing the public for future repressions against us", he told Forum 18 on 20 September. Zaikin said that the campaign is "anti-constitutional." He said that "any person has right to believe in any religion or not believe in any religion at all."

Commenting on the remarks of Shaghatay of the Zhayik "anti-sect" Centre, Dmitri Kan of the Grace Presbyterian Church told Forum 18 on 20 September said that "I know that these so-called anti-sect centres are sponsored by the State, and are against not only Grace and New Life Churches but also against all Protestant Churches. They smear our names because we are the largest and most active Protestant churches."

Sister DА¾amova of the Catholic Church's Karaganda Diocese told Forum 18 that Shaghatay is "wrong." She said that the Catholic

Church had existed in Kazakhstan since the 12th century, and is a "traditional" Community.

"Anti-sect" centres are strongly supported by the state, and their activities appear to have greatly increased in recent months (see eg. F18News 6 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1568).

ARA officials refuse to comment

Kairat Lama Sharif, Chair of the ARA and his Deputy Ardak Doszhan on 15 September refused to discuss with Forum 18 the reasons for the campaign and questionnaires. Lama Sharif's Assistant said that he was busy in a meeting.

"I personally have not called or summoned or talked to anyone in the religious communities for the last three months," Doszhan maintained. When Forum18 insisted asking what the purpose of the campaign against the religious minorities is, his response was: "What do you want from me?" He then put the phone down. (END)

For a personal commentary on how attacking religious freedom damages national security in Kazakhstan, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=564.

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1352.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=29>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Kazakhstan>.

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