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KAZAKHSTAN: Promoting the "progressiveness" of the harsh new Religion Law

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

State Secretary Kanat Saudabaev ordered the devotion of considerable resources to promoting what he claimed to be "the significance and the progressiveness" of Kazakhstan's highly restrictive new Religion Law at a closed meeting of senior state officials on 27 October. He ordered not only the "observance of the demands" of the Law, but "their positive acceptance by subjects of religious activity [i.e. religious communities]", according to documents from the meeting seen by Forum 18 News Service. Forum 18 notes that members of a variety of religious communities are increasingly afraid to voice criticism of the new Law publicly. One media company was threatened with closure if it gave the new Law negative coverage. Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna was ordered to hand further money to the government-backed Fund for Support of Islamic Culture and Education. "I wouldn't call it support for one faith," a Samruk-Kazyna official told Forum 18. And Baptist parents have been threatened with fines or imprisonment for refusing to send their children to compulsory Self-Recognition lessons in schools.

At a closed 27 October meeting of about 20 of Kazakhstan's most senior officials, State Secretary Kanat Saudabaev ordered the devotion of considerable resources to promoting what he claimed to be "the significance and the progressiveness" of the controversial new Religion Law which came into force in October. He ordered not only the "observance of the demands" of the Law, but "their positive acceptance by subjects of religious activity [i.e. religious communities]", according to documents from the meeting seen by Forum 18 News Service. Members of a wide range of religious communities have privately told Forum 18 of their deep concerns over the new laws, but are now too afraid to criticise them publicly.

After the adoption of the new laws, one media company was threatened that if it gave negative coverage of them, the authorities would close the company down, sources close to the case told Forum 18. They asked that the media company not be identified.

The harsh new Religion Law – and an associated Amending Law changing other laws relating to freedom of religion or belief – were signed by President Nursultan Nazarbaev on 11 October, were officially published on 15 October, and came into force ten days later (see F18News 13 October 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1624).

Human rights defenders and believers of a very wide range of faiths have expressed their concern to Forum 18 over the new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. These include the requirement that all religious activity must have state approval before it is legal and the punishments for those who conduct religious activity without such registration. Many are also concerned at the many new controls over spreading a faith, producing or importing religious literature, and building and opening places of worship. They are also concerned at enforced closures of places of worship in state institutions, including prisons and social care facilities. Also causing great concern are the widened and increased punishments for any exercise of freedom of religion or belief that the government now deems illegal (see F18News 23 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1617).

The closed 27 October meeting included many senior government ministers, and discussed among other things: Registration Regulations, financial controls, missionary activities and strengthening state agencies to enforce the laws (see F18News 7 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1644); imposing complete state control of all permitted Islamic religious activity (see F18News 29 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1640); and draft Censorship Regulations which break the country's human rights commitments (see F18News 24 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1639).

Individuals continue to be detained for several days, fined and deported to punish them for their religious activity. The administrative trial of a Council of Churches Baptist, Ivan Yantsen, in Karaganda [Qaraghandy] Region resumes on 21 December, Baptists told Forum 18 on 19 December. Prosecutors are seeking to have him fined for meeting for worship without state registration (see F18News 13 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1646).

Waiting, waiting

Members of a variety of religious faiths have expressed concern about the way the new laws will operate. Many told Forum 18 they

have tried to find out from officials how their communities will have to reapply for registration within the one year period prescribed by the law. "There's only silence," many religious believers told Forum 18 separately.

Many fear months might go by before the re-registration regulations are published and that they will fail to regain the compulsory re-registration because they will not have time to complete what they fear will be excessive or even obstructive bureaucracy. Exacerbating the fear is the ban on unregistered religious activity.

Threats to parents

Meanwhile, parents have been threatened for keeping their children away from the compulsory once-weekly Self-Recognition lessons in schools. The subject - promoted by President Nazarbaev's wife Sara and using her textbook "Philosophy of Love" - was introduced nationally in the 2010-11 academic year and consists of one lesson per week in each of the eleven years of general education. The 2010 syllabus approved by the Education Ministry appears vague, with lessons on "general human values", "basic personal qualities" and "the components of social experience".

Sara Nazarbaeva is quoted by the Education Ministry website as stating that the course "helps people to find themselves". Officials claim that this "new discipline" is "directed to spiritual and moral development of a man, self-perfection and harmonious development of people".

Parents who belong to congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches believe that the subject promotes "Eastern religions and the occult", as they complained to Forum 18. "We've done serious analysis of this subject, looking at the textbooks and methodology, and we cannot accept it," one Baptist told Forum 18 from Karaganda Region.

Members of a variety of other religious communities told Forum 18 that they consider the subject to be harmless, and say it depends on how each teacher approaches it.

Trouble for Baptist parents appears to have begun in Astrakhanka in Akmolá Region. On 18 November, several members of their congregation were summoned by the Deputy Akim Miram Kozhakhmet. Parents were threatened that if they refused to send their children to the classes they would be fined. "They spoke to us very harshly," local Baptists complained to Forum 18. Joining Kozhakhmet in his threats were officials working on education, children, the Sanitary-epidemiological Service and the police.

Kozhakhmet of the local Akimat rejected any criticism of the threats. "Whether Christian or Muslim, all children must go to these lessons," he insisted to Forum 18 from Astrakhanka on 23 November. "This is just about the children, not about religious freedom. The law is the same for all."

Baptists note that attitudes to their children who refuse to attend such classes vary from place to place. In some places threats are widespread. In some instances in Karaganda Region, officials have even threatened to imprison parents who refuse to send their children to the lessons. However, in other places schools appear indifferent if children fail to attend.

Continuing concern over religious studies textbook

Concern continues over an official textbook for the compulsory Religious Studies course for all children in the 9th class (aged about 14). "Introduction to Religious Studies" - introduced into schools in January 2010 – aroused concern from members of many religious communities, including Ahmadi Muslims, Protestant Christians, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses. The book – echoing the views of many state officials - is hostile to "non-traditional" religious communities, which it tries to equate with "terrorist", "destructive", and "extremist" movements, and sharing one's beliefs.

The textbook's lead author, Garifolla Esim, a professor who is also a member of Kazakhstan's upper house of parliament, the Senate, defended it to Forum 18 in June 2010 (see F18News 18 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1458).

Artur Artemyev, an Almaty-based religious studies professor and long-standing critic of the textbook, says that it is still being used across the country, despite claims by the Education Ministry that it had been withdrawn. "It has been given out to all children in Almaty," he told Forum 18 on 19 December, "and I heard just yesterday that it was given out to all children in Oskemen [Ust-Kamenogorsk]." He repeated his early call for the book to be withdrawn from schools.

A member of a religious community in East Kazakhstan Region shared Artemyev's concern not only about Esim's textbook but another used locally that similarly "waves the stick" against certain religious communities. "They want to show children that 'sects and movements' are dangerous, while 'traditional confessions' are good," the individual insisted to Forum 18 on 19 December. "But information in such lessons must be about the teachings of such faiths, and the children themselves will draw conclusions for themselves."

"Forming a positive public view"

The 27 October meeting in the capital Astana set out detailed instructions to many state agencies as to how to implement the controversial new laws (see F18News 7 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1644).

The government's Agency of Religious Affairs (ARA), together with the Foreign Ministry, was instructed at the 27 October meeting to hold presentations on the Law and Regulations enacting it to religious representatives, the diplomatic corps and the media by the end of 2011.

They were also instructed by the end of the year "to organise a series of publications and articles in the media directed at forming a positive public view of the provisions of the new Law" as well as "to secure permanent control of the media coverage of the priority directions of state policy in the religious sphere in the context of realisation of provisions of the new law".

Similarly, Saudabaev instructed the Foreign Ministry, including through its embassies abroad, together with the ARA to "hold a series of measures to explain the significance and progressiveness" of the new Religion Law "for a foreign audience".

The Secretariat of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, with the ARA's and the Culture Ministry's help, is to prepare a "complex of measures in support of the Law" by the end of June 2012 "with the involvement of ethno-cultural associations". These "ethno-cultural associations" are state-backed organisations for Kazakhstan's ethnic minorities, such as Germans, Uyghurs, Koreans and Dungans.

"Plan of Informational/Educational Work in the Religious Sphere"

The Culture Ministry and the ARA are to "organise explanatory work in support of" the new Religion Law "with the involvement of NGOs and the creative intelligentsia".

The ARA and the Communications Ministry are – "with the aim of increasing informational/ideological work to strengthen stability in the religious sphere" – to ensure that state-owned television and radio channels (including Khabar, Medeniet and El Arna) launch specific religious programming presenting the state's viewpoint.

They are also to create "alternative Muslim websites" to present the government's view. Similarly, "pro-state Muslim NGOs" are to be created (see F18News 29 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1640).

Saudabaev ordered that all the measures should be incorporated into the General Republican Plan of Informational/Educational Work in the Religious Sphere. Forum 18 has been unable to get a copy of the Plan.

A Security Council meeting – possibly an apparently unpublicised July 2010 meeting – also ordered the creation of Centres to rehabilitate "victims of religious extremism" and Centres for help to "those who suffered from the activities of destructive religious movements". That meeting "on questions of strengthening stability in the religious sphere" was followed by an internal document of the ruling Nur Otan Party attacking so-called "non-traditional" religions (see F18News 7 December 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1644).

Forum 18 notes that many so-called "anti-sect centres" have been established in recent years and, according to government websites, many receive financial support from the state (see F18News 5 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1250). Many have also been involved in the campaign in favour of the new Religion Law and other harsh restrictions on religious activity (see F18News 6 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1568). Members of religious minorities have suggested a direct link between the campaigns of such "anti-sect centres" and encouraging intolerance of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 20 September 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1614).

Supporting one faith?

Documents from the October 2011 meeting note that in fulfilment of President Nazarbaev's instructions to increase "stability in the religious sphere" (presumably a reference to the July 2010 Security Council decisions), the Fund for Support of Islamic Culture and Education was ordered to fund a daily broadcast Iman aynasi on Kazakhstan television channel.

The Fund for Support of Islamic Culture and Education was set up on President Nazarbaev's initiative in 2009. The chair of its Board has, since it was established, been state religious affairs official Ardak Doszhan (currently one of the ARA's two deputy chairs). One of the three tasks the Fund identifies on its website as the purpose of films it sponsors is: "Propaganda of the state's policy for security stability and inter-confessional concord in the Republic of Kazakhstan."

Kairat Lama Sharif, the ARA Chair, praised the Fund on his personal blog as making "a great contribution to the correct understanding of the traditional Islamic religion and its spread among the population". He did not define what constituted "traditional" Islam. Among its publications, the Fund has published Lama Sharif's book on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca which, according to its website, is given to all Kazakh haj pilgrims.

The documents from the 27 October meeting note that an agreement was reached in 2010 for the transfer to the Fund for Support of Islamic Culture of 577,000,000 Tenge (22.5 million Norwegian Kroner, 2.9 million Euros or 3.9 million US Dollars) from Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna. The meeting ordered the Prime Minister's Office and the ARA to agree with Samruk-Kazyna by 25 December on "additional financial support" for it in 2012.

The documents noted that among other activities by the Fund for Support of Islamic Culture, it had financed five "tours by agitational/propaganda groups" around the country. Officials from the ARA and Muslim Board imams took part. The meeting noted that further finance for such activity was necessary in 2012.

No members of other faiths were required to take part in such "agitational" work and the imams appear not to have been given any choice as to whether they would or should take part. The 27 October meeting also discussed plans which would have the effect of bringing all Islamic religious activity under state control. At no point do the documents seen by Forum 18 indicate that state officials recognise that the Muslim Board is an independent organisation or that it could be in a position to object to the orders state officials plan to give it (see F18News 29 November 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1640).

Yuri Cherkasov, head of Samruk-Kazyna's press service, admitted that the 2010 contribution to the Fund of 577,000,000 Tenge was "fairly large". But he rejected suggestions that some of Kazakhstan's citizens might regard it as inappropriate for the state's money invested in the country's sovereign wealth fund to be given to one faith. "I wouldn't call it support for one faith," he told Forum 18 from Astana on 7 December. "But in any case, Islam is the country's traditional faith – along with Russian Orthodoxy - and is supported by the majority of the population."

Cherkasov also noted that Samruk-Kazyna had financially supported the building of mosques, including the new Khazret Sultan Central Mosque in Astana which was begun in October 2010 and is due for completion in 2012. (Despite the funding from Samruk-Kazyna, President Nazarbaev declared on a visit to the mosque on 7 December that the building had been funded not by the state but by donations from individuals.)

However, Cherkasov was unable to say if Samruk-Kazyna had supported the activity of any other faith.

Cherkasov insisted that any other questions should be sent in writing. As of the end of the day in Kazakhstan on 19 December, Forum 18 had not received answers as to whether funds were given to the Fund for Support of Islamic Culture in 2011 and how far plans have reached for a 2012 contribution.

What is state-backed "moderate Islam"?

In June, soon after his appointment as ARA Chair, Lama Sharif claimed in a press conference that: "each citizen of Kazakhstan has a right to freedom of conscience and choice, and we have made our own choice. Our choice is objective and based on the principle of 'one nation – one religion', and it is exactly this principle that makes us one nation. In this context, we will prepare a concept on the 'Development of moderate Islam in Kazakhstan'."

The "concept" does not appear to have been published. However, this principle appears to entail adopting Hanafi Islam as the one acceptable form of the faith and the Muslim Board – under firm state control - as its only proponent (see F18News 28 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1599). (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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