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MONGOLIA: Religious freedom survey, December 2003

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In its survey analysis of the religious freedom situation in Mongolia, Forum 18 News Service notes the, in regional terms, unusually high degree of religious freedom. Possibly key to this is the fact that Mongolia has only one paid official dealing solely with religious issues, instead of an extensive state bureaucracy. However, Protestants told Forum 18 of incidents in which unregistered churches were threatened or fined, as well as a widespread tendency by state authorities to demand random "fines" or "donations", but this appears to be the action of individual local council members. There is rising social concern about the activity of Christians in the country, particularly due to a belief that they advocate suicide. However, Forum 18 found that there appears to be in general less fear of new religious influences in Mongolia than is found in surrounding countries.

Most unusually among states which were in the Soviet political orbit, Mongolia is pursuing religious freedom principles. Although Christianity takes the same place in Mongolian society as unfamiliar new religious movements do elsewhere in the former Eastern bloc, Forum 18 has found that, for the most part, Christians are able to worship and witness there conspicuously without impediment. While foreign religious workers are unable to operate openly in China, and have faced a steady increase in restrictions in similarly neighbouring Russia (such as a reduction from a year to three months in the period for which religious visas are granted), they enjoy open access to Mongolia. Evidence of this is the estimated 120 registered and unregistered Protestant churches in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar (population approximately 800,000), most of which were founded by western and South Korean missionaries over the past 13 years.

Protestant representatives report few obstructions to their social ministry in state institutions such as prisons, childrens' homes or hospitals once local officials are familiar with their work. While Christian literature in Mongolian – commonly printed in Japan – might sometimes be detained by customs officers for a time (as was a consignment of 10,000 Bibles in 1997), it has never been confiscated. There appears to be no provision for organised worship within the armed forces or exemption from military service for clergy, but one military colonel pointed out that this is only for one year and easy to evade.

The Catholic Church Mission in Mongolia – analogous official titles for which would be unthinkable in both Russia and China – is able to maintain a significant presence, especially considering the country's relatively small population (2,680,000). Filipino Bishop Wenceslao Padillo presides over an imposing new yurt-shaped cathedral and a several-storey Catholic centre in Ulaanbaatar, as well as educational institutions and social projects both in and outside the capital. (See F18News 8 December [part 1] http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=205).

The majority Buddhist community reports no restrictions on its activity other than the ability to invite from India a Tibetan refugee whom both they and the present Dalai Lama acknowledge as the reincarnation of Mongolia's pre-revolutionary Buddhist king. (See F18News 27 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=197). Despite disapproval from the Chinese political authorities, however, the Buddhists have received formal visits by the Dalai Lama himself as recently as November 2002, whereas Russia has repeatedly denied the Tibetan spiritual leader even a transit visa in the past few years. Unable to travel to either China or Russia due to political considerations, Pope John Paul II holds an open invitation to Mongolia. (See F18News 1 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=199). A key reason for this is that the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) does not regard Mongolia as part of its canonical territory.

Forum 18 was unable to locate a representative for Mongolia's 90,000-strong Kazakh Muslim community, who live in the area surrounding the far western city of Ulgiy (?lgiy). An academic source, however, mentioned that they have managed to build over ten mosques there since 1990. The organiser of a recent international shamans' conference, this same source also maintained that approximately only 20 of Mongolia's many shamans are genuine, but reported no restrictions on their largely rural activity, which was strictly outlawed during the socialist period.

Particularly unusual in the former socialist bloc – and possibly key to the country's relatively high degree of religious freedom – Mongolia has only one paid official dealing solely with religious issues, rather than an extensive official bureaucracy, such as the Soviet-era Council for Religious Affairs. Mongolia's presidential adviser heads an informal body consisting of 13 members, including representatives of the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Khural (parliament), academia, two ordinary citizens and the head of the Buddhist community, who is the only religious figure. While this committee meets monthly to discuss

religious issues, however, it is the Mongolian president who is responsible for defining state policy towards religious organisations. Significantly, the presidential adviser chose a member of a new Protestant church to act as interpreter when discussing the details of this policy in an interview with Forum 18.

Mongolia's 1993 Law on Religion has clearly restrictive provisions – state control on the absolute number of Buddhist monasteries and monks, a ban on the organised introduction of foreign religions from outside Mongolia and state preference for Buddhism. But these are reportedly not enforced, and registration is not compulsory for religious organisations. (See F18News 11 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=210).

This is not to say that significant violations of religious freedom never occur in Mongolia, however. Protestant representatives told Forum 18 of several recent incidents in which unregistered churches were threatened or fined - apparently because they did not have registration - as well as a widespread tendency by state authorities to demand random "fines" or "donations" from churches. No regions appear to be particularly better or worse in this regard, however, since much depends upon the attitude of individual council members, who are not legally obliged to be neutral in religious matters, unlike state officials. Even if they are legally registered, Protestant pastors complain that religious organisations must pay 20 per cent tax under Mongolia's 2000 tax law, whereas commercial companies pay only ten per cent. There is also rising social concern about the activity of Christians in the country, particularly due to a belief that they advocate suicide, and this has already resulted in allegedly Buddhist-backed initiatives to toughen the 1993 religion law. None of these has succeeded so far. (See F18News 8 December [part 2] http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=206).

Protestant representatives themselves maintain, however, that existing obstructions are due to "arbitrariness" and not to ideologically based state policy. Political and cultural representatives in Ulaanbaatar explained to Forum 18 that the militant atheist drive of the 1930s – although ferocious – had little effect upon the Mongolian psyche. One Russian Buddhist in the capital similarly remarked upon the lack of "Sovietness" (sovkovost') in Mongolia compared with his homeland. Thus, the religious freedom situation in Mongolia should be seen against a general background of the its society's non-aggressive, outward-looking attitude. Possibly because Buddhist-influenced Mongolian culture appears not to be dependent upon the identity of individual citizens (who could have been strongly influenced by other cultures in previous lives according to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation), there appears to be much less fear than in Russia, for instance, that it could be undermined by an influx of alien religious influences. While there is certainly a degree of concern by some, Christianity may be dismissed by others as a new fashion discarded by Mongolian youth once they reach their mid-twenties. One non-religious young composer commented to Forum 18 that Christianity was "all very well" but that, if a close family member were to die, he would go to a Buddhist monk "and not some Christian church."

A printer-friendly map of Mongolia is available at

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

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