

7 January 2004

KYRGYZSTAN: Religious freedom survey, January 2004

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

In its survey analysis of religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, Forum 18 News Service notes that both registered and unregistered religious communities appear to function freely, despite a 1996 presidential decree requiring religious communities to register. A dispute in 2003 about headscarves worn by Muslim schoolgirls seems to be over, however the closure of six mosques has not been overturned and the official who ordered the closure has not been punished. A Pentecostal Church which faced a massive tax bill and obstruction in registering affiliated congregations hopes that, due to international concern attributed to Forum 18's reporting, a solution will be found. However, due to Muslim anger at conversions from Islam to Christianity, Forum 18 has been told by some that an official campaign against Christian proselytism may soon be launched.

Kyrgyzstan's religion law contains no provisions that discriminate against believers. For example, the law does not make registration of a religious community compulsory. The law provides for two forms of registration - formal registration with the government's committee for religious affairs, and registration as a juridical person, which takes place at the regional department of justice.

"It is true that there is nothing about a requirement for either registration in the law on religious associations," the chairman of the government's committee for religious affairs, Omurzak Mamayusupov, told Forum 18 News Service in the capital Bishkek on 17 December 2003. But, he pointed out, President Askar Akaev issued a decree in 1996 declaring that formal registration was obligatory. "This decree does not in itself infringe the rights of believers. We simply want to know which religious communities are operating in the country. We do not apply any repressive measures against believers, but simply advise them about the requirement to register."

Despite this requirement to register, almost no members of any unregistered religious communities contacted by Forum 18 reported any serious problems related to functioning without registration.

The 1996 decree also required believers travelling abroad for religious education to register in advance at the committee for religious affairs. The committee's website (www.religion.gov.kg) contains the Russian-language text of the extensive questionnaire that applicants are supposed to complete, with full personal details and names and addresses of close relatives as well as the place, duration and subject of the religious education. It also includes questions on where applicants have worked for the previous five years and a statement on their attitude to military obligations.

"This is simply technical registration we need to compile statistics," the committee's deputy head, Natalya Shadrova, insisted to Forum 18 on 6 January 2004. "Many believers don't do it and go abroad for religious education without any problem. We can't force them to register and we're not able to take any punitive measures against those that refuse to do so."

Ambassador Markus Muller, head of the Bishkek mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), said he did not believe believers in general face any significant problems. "This may be connected simply with the fact that the country's population is not very religious," he told Forum 18 on 15 December 2003 in Bishkek. "For example, in the past Islam was brought to Kyrgyzstan by visiting Tatar preachers. At least, there have been no complaints to our organisation from believers, including those whose religious associations are not registered." Nor was Muller aware of any instances where members of unregistered religious communities had been fined for holding religious meetings (a common practice in other Central Asian states).

"Unlike other Central Asian republics we simply have no need to register our organisation in Kyrgyzstan," Anatoli Melnik, a member of the ruling council of Jehovah's Witnesses of Kazakhstan (which oversees all the Central Asian republics), told Forum 18 on 14 December 2003 from the Kazakh city of Almaty. In the other Central Asian republics the Jehovah's Witnesses are the religious minority most often subjected to persecution.

The head of the Catholic Church in Kyrgyzstan, Father Aleksandr Kan, also had no complaints about the authorities. "In principle, we could register 40 small parishes around the country besides our cathedral in Bishkek," he told Forum 18 on 12 December 2003 in Bishkek. "But we simply see no need, because no-one is making us do it."

Muslims hardly ever face any problems, with the exception of members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an international Islamic organisation that

aims to unite Muslims worldwide under a single caliphate. "The authorities repress Hizb-ut-Tahrir members not for their religious convictions but for their political activity," the former mufti of Kyrgyzstan and head of the international centre for Islamic co-operation, Saijan Kamuliddin, told Forum 18 on 6 December 2003 in the southern city of Osh. "If a person simply believes in God and does not get involved in politics, he will not have problems with the authorities."

In general, Kamuliddin's view coincides with that of the kazi (head of the regional Muslim spiritual administration) of Jalal-Abad region, Dilmurat haji Orozov. He noted that sometimes believers' rights are nevertheless violated, but in his view this is not state policy, but is at the initiative of local officials. Orozov cited as examples the pressure on Muslim schoolchildren in the southern towns of Bazar-Kurgan (Jalal-Abad region) and Karasu (Osh region) and the closure of a number of mosques in the Suzak district of southern Kyrgyzstan, west of Jalal-Abad.

Last April teachers in Bazar-Kurgan's schools told children not to perform daily prayers, even at home. In several schools in Karasu, teachers forbade pupils from attending lessons wearing the hijab, a headscarf traditionally worn by Muslim women (see F18News 12 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=52). However, after several weeks the pressure on devout Muslim schoolchildren ceased.

The conflict in Karadarya rural district near Suzak, 30 kilometres (20 miles) west of Jalal-Abad, continues to this day. Six mosques were closed down and ordered destroyed last year by Asan Erinbayev, the head of the local administration. He justified the destruction of the mosques, claiming to Forum 18 in October that they had been built illegally on state-owned land.

However, Orozov challenged Erinbayev's claim. He insisted that at the start of the 1990s, when land from collective farms was redistributed, the sites were handed over so that mosques could be built. "Before Erinbayev, all the heads of the district believed the mosques were functioning legally," Orozov told Forum 18. He said all the mosques were registered at the government's committee for religious affairs. Local Muslims, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 that it is now very difficult for elderly believers to reach the three remaining functioning mosques (see F18News 21 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=167).

"We have read reports about this case in Forum 18 News Service and International Crisis Group publications," parliamentary deputy and head of the parliamentary committee for religious issues Alisher Sobirov told Forum 18 on 12 December in Bishkek. "We simply have to react to this. If some local official is displaying arbitrariness, he will be punished." He said he had learnt that Asan Erinbayev took the decision to close the mosques not unilaterally, but with his brother Baimat, who is a deputy of the Jalal-Abad regional assembly. "Problems like this cannot be resolved in an instant, but we are now getting to grips with this matter."

Only one incident of conflict between the authorities and a religious community in the country has been recorded. Banned from registering in several towns and with its churches closed down or threatened, the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ faced a tax demand of more than 100,000 US dollars (675,340 Norwegian Kroner, or 79,000 Euros), even though religious groups are tax-exempt. The authorities threatened to seize their church building in Bishkek if the tax was not paid, and to close down the church.

Last summer nearly all the Church's members signed an open letter to President Akaev vowing to seek asylum abroad if pressure on the Church was not ended. The Church's senior pastor, Vasili Kuzin, described the open letter as "a last resort". "We have no other way of attracting international attention to our unfortunate situation," he told Forum 18. Members of the Church complained that the massive tax bill violated Kyrgyzstan's constitution and the country's religion law (see F18News 22 August 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=125).

Late last year Kuzin left Kyrgyzstan for the United States on a lengthy trip on church business. Church sources said his journey was partly prompted by fears among church members for the pastor's safety. "All the main leaders of the political opposition are in prison. And given that our dispute with the authorities has come into the open, we feared for the safety of Vasili Kuzin," a church member who asked not to be identified told Forum 18.

However, it seems that in December 2003 the authorities and the Church of Jesus Christ reached a compromise. "After reports about our Church's problems had become known to the international community, and particularly thanks to the articles in Forum 18 News Service, the authorities immediately registered our affiliates in Karakol and Osh," church member Alina Shvidko told Forum 18 in Bishkek on 15 December.

At the same time, she stressed that currently fewer than 10 of the Church's 30 affiliates have been registered, although the church had tried to register all of them. "We want to register all our affiliates," Shvidko insisted. "Firstly, because we are law-abiding citizens. Secondly, although the authorities cannot openly forbid us from meeting as an unregistered church, this gives them an opportunity to exert indirect pressure on us. Officials refuse to talk to us as members of a religious organisation."

Shvidko did not discuss with Forum 18 the tax inspectorate's attempt to demand the large sum of money they claim the Church's central office still owes, but she sounded optimistic. "There are people in Kyrgyzstan who want to observe the law. Therefore we very much hope this problem will be resolved successfully in the very near future."

The Church of Jesus Christ claims around 10,000 members and is the best-attended Protestant church in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, around 40 per cent of the Church's members are ethnic Kyrgyz. Shvidko argues that these two factors provided reasons for the authorities to exert pressure on the Church. "Ten thousand well-organised people represent a significant force," she told Forum 18. "And so the authorities are beginning to look on us as a political faction (a part of the electorate united in its views), although in fact we don't get involved in politics. They are also very concerned that former Muslims are actively coming over to our church."

A member of the OSCE centre in Bishkek, who preferred not to be identified, agreed indirectly with this view. According to the diplomat, the authorities might soon launch a campaign against proselytism, because they fear that the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and other faiths could lead to social tension and even destabilise the situation.

There have already been several instances of local people having been beaten and turned out of their villages after converting from Islam. In 2001 in Jalal-Abad region a crowd of several hundred people even tried to set up a kangaroo court to judge some Muslims who had adopted Christianity.

The question of proselytism is particularly acute in southern Kyrgyzstan. Around 30 per cent of the local population are ethnic Uzbeks, who are generally much more devout than the Kyrgyz. "Protestant missionaries are actively working in southern Kyrgyzstan, which arouses great displeasure among the local population," Abdumalik Sharipov, a member of the Jalal-Abad human rights organisation Justice, told Forum 18 on 5 December. "Muslims are particularly angered that the authorities are persecuting Hizb-ut-Tahrir members, but do not interfere in the work of Protestant preachers. There are rumours circulating among Muslims that the authorities are deliberately following an anti-Islamic policy and are trying to turn Muslims towards Christianity."

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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