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KAZAKHSTAN: Mosques resist pressure to join state-recognised central organisation

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Ethnic Uzbek Imams leading mosques in southern Kazakhstan have resisted state pressure to come under the 'Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan', Forum 18 News Service has found. Pressure followed a 2002 attempt to change the law on religious associations, which the Constitutional Council ruled contradicted the constitution. Kazakh officials have frequently privately told Forum 18 that the region is the country's "hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism". However, Kyrgyzstan is the only state in Central Asia where Hizb-ut-Tahrir (which seeks to unite Muslims worldwide under the rule of a Caliphate) is not officially banned, and most Hizb-ut-Tahrir members in South Kazakhstan region are ethnic Kazakhs. Commenting on this ethnic difference, a local NGO told Forum 18 that "Uzbeks in Kazakhstan live much better than they do in Uzbekistan," so they "are not interested in seeking open confrontation with the authorities."

Mosques in South Kazakhstan region have successfully fought off state pressure to submit to the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan, Forum 18 News Service has discovered on a visit to the region in late January. Many imams of ethnic Uzbek mosques object to what they regard as the "Kazakhification" of the local Muslim community, which has traditionally been dominated by the local Uzbek minority. Of the 514 mosques registered in the region, 110 are recorded as being independent organisations which do not accept the authority of the Spiritual Administration, the head of the department for work with public organisations at the South Kazakhstan regional administration, Marzhan Khalimbetova, told Forum 18 on 22 January in the regional capital Shymkent.

"We try to persuade the imams of such mosques to come within the structure of the Spiritual Administration," she reported, "but in fact we are powerless to do anything as by law the mosques have the right to register as independent organisations." Khalimbetova admitted that the majority of such mosques were situated in ethnic Uzbek villages.

Attempts by the authorities to persuade imams of unregistered mosques to submit to the authority of the Spiritual Administration clearly reflect the impact of legislative developments in 2002. That year, parliament attempted to change the law on religious associations with the aim of significantly restricting the rights of believers. According to the new law adopted by parliament, registration of Islamic associations could take place only at the recommendation of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims. However, under pressure from international and local human rights organisations, the Constitutional Council ruled on 4 April 2002 that the new law contradicted the constitution.

Today, Khalimbetova reported, only a "negligible percentage" of mosques in the region have not registered. "In 1992 in Kazakhstan it was announced that public organisations could register free of charge, and we took advantage of this and persuaded the majority of religious associations to register." She said that those mosques not registered today tend to be in remote villages. "The main reason for the refusal by these mosques to register is financial," she told Forum 18. "The registration fee is 17,000 tenge (844 Norwegian kroner, 96 Euros or 122 US dollars) and that is quite a lot of money for residents in remote villages."

Khalimbetova believes that registration of religious associations is required by law (although in fact Kazakh laws do not require registration), and therefore the authorities are trying to persuade imams to register their mosques. At the same time, she insisted that the authorities are not taking any repressive measures against imams of unregistered mosques.

Vladimir Zharinov, the chief specialist at the department for work with public organisations at the South Kazakhstan regional administration, confirmed Khalimbetova's claim. "Just before parliament adopted the new law on religion, it is true that pressure was put on the imams of unregistered mosques," he told Forum 18 from Shymkent on 5 February, "but once the new law had been turned down by the Constitutional Council no-one touched the believers any more."

South Kazakhstan region, which borders Uzbekistan, is a distinct region of Kazakhstan. Speaking privately to Forum 18, Kazakh officials have frequently emphasised that this region is the main "hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism" in the country. That the authorities should hold this view is understandable. The region is home to a dense population of around 300,000 ethnic Uzbeks (approximately 18 per cent of the region's population). Kazakhs, who were nomads until not long ago, are not generally regarded as

very devout. Islam is practised among the Kazakhs on a superficial, everyday level and is closely interwoven with pagan rituals. Ethnic Uzbeks form the majority of devout Muslims in Kazakhstan.

In a paper entitled "The religious factor in the political life of Kazakhstan (1991-6)", presented in 2002 at a round table discussion at the International Eurasian Institution of Economic and Political Research, the researchers Vitali Ponomarev and Saltanat Jukeyeva noted that in 1989 the majority of Kazakhstan's imams and mosques were from non-Kazakh nationalities (Uzbeks, Tatars, Uighurs, Balkars, Chechens and Dungans).

As Ponomarev and Jukeyeva note, until the formation in 1990 of the independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, for almost 40 years - since Stalin's era - Muslim communities in Kazakhstan had been under the jurisdiction of the single Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan which had its headquarters in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. The Administration's staff was made up almost exclusively of Uzbek clergy and all correspondence was conducted in Uzbek. This clearly contributed to the leading role played by ethnic Uzbeks in the religious life of Kazakhstan.

After the formation of the independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan, the deliberate displacement of ethnic Uzbeks from their positions as imams at mosques began. As Ponomarev and Jukeyeva report, at the end of 1992 the ethnic Uzbek Shukurolla Mukhamejanov was ousted from his job as chief imam of Shymkent region, and in May 1994 he was ordered to retire. Many believers, especially ethnic Uzbeks who were in the majority locally, were unhappy about the Spiritual Administration's actions. Mosque-goers picketed Shymkent's main mosque for a month, refusing access to leaders of the Spiritual Administration. After intervention by the police, many believers gave up attending this mosque.

During its January visit to South Kazakhstan region, Forum 18 established that virtually all the imams at mosques in the region today are ethnic Kazakhs. For example, the imams both of the main mosque in the town of Shymkent and of the region are Kazakhs. The only remaining ethnic Uzbek imams are in settlements where almost all the residents are ethnic Uzbeks. Naturally, this does not please the local Uzbeks. Many Uzbeks in Shymkent who preferred not to be named complained to Forum 18 that they had to go to Uzbek villages for Friday prayers because in their opinion Uzbeks have a much more profound theological education than Kazakhs. This "Kazakhification" of mosques has led to the refusal by many imams of ethnic Uzbek mosques to be subject to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan.

This unwillingness on the part of ethnic Uzbek imams to be subject to the Spiritual Administration is virtually the only example of resistance by ethnic Uzbek Muslims to the Kazakh government. While the international Islamic organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which calls on Muslims worldwide to unite under a single caliphate, is relatively active in South Kazakhstan region, ethnic Uzbeks seem to play little part in it.

The most significant action by Shymkent members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in recent times took place in November 2003, when several dozen people took part in a meeting in support of Muslim prisoners in Uzbekistan (similar demonstrations took place simultaneously in Pavlodar in northern Kazakhstan and Khudjand in Tajikistan).

"The problem is that Kazakhstan is the only republic in Central Asia where Hizb-ut-Tahrir is not officially banned," an official at the National Security Service (the former KGB), who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 in Shymkent. "That makes it quite hard for us to combat it. We arrest people who distribute Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaflets, but after questioning them we have to let them go." The official added that almost all Hizb-ut-Tahrir members in South Kazakhstan region are ethnic Kazakhs.

This is in marked contrast with the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan (where ethnic Uzbeks make up around 30 per cent of the population), where almost all local Hizb-ut-Tahrir members are ethnic Uzbeks. The fact that virtually all Kyrgyz members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir are ethnic Uzbeks may be explained by the significantly higher level of religious activity among Uzbeks compared to the Kyrgyz.

Following this logic, one might predict that the majority of Kazakh members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir would be ethnic Uzbeks. "Uzbeks in Kazakhstan live much better than they do in Uzbekistan," Igor Savin, the director of local non-governmental organisation Dialogue, told Forum 18 on 24 January in Shymkent. "Therefore our Uzbeks are not interested in seeking open confrontation with the authorities."

For background on Kazakhstan see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at

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

For background on Kyrgyzstan see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=222

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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