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KYRGYZSTAN: Official claims government control of Islam

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The Kyrgyz government "controls" 300 students currently studying in Islamic colleges in Egypt and Iran through the muftiate (the official Islamic spiritual leadership), an official has told Forum 18 News Service. Samsabek Zakirov, head of the religious affairs committee for Osh region, also told Forum 18 that "in southern Kyrgyzstan practically all the mosques are registered and are therefore under government control." Zakirov is not satisfied at this level of control and also intends to ensure that travelling Muslim missionaries "only preach with permission from the muftiate," or official Islamic leadership. Kyrgyz law does not require this permission. Local people have told Forum 18 they fear that last month's uprising in Uzbekistan could destabilise the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan and believe the government may tighten its religious policy. But so far there have been "no noticeable significant changes," Sadykjan Kamaluddin, former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18.

A Kyrgyz government official has told Forum 18 News Service that the government "controls" some 300 Kyrgyz students currently studying in Islamic colleges in Egypt and Iran through the muftiate (the official Islamic spiritual leadership). "These people are under our control, so we are not worried about them," Samsabek Zakirov, head of the religious affairs committee for Osh region, told Forum 18 in Osh on 2 June. "In southern Kyrgyzstan practically all the mosques are registered and are therefore under government control, so we don't fear that extremist sermons will be preached in them."

Zakirov reported that efforts have been stepped up to bring under government control Muslim missionaries who travel through villages in the region. "The muftiate has set up a daawa [missionary] department, which issues daawaists with a special document if these people really understand Islam," he told Forum 18. "We are going to be more careful in making sure that all daawaists only preach with permission from the muftiate." Kyrgyz law does not require this sort of permission.

Zakirov particularly stressed the authorities' great concern about Muslim missionaries. "The majority of them belong to Tabligh, although they refuse to admit it" and commented that the authorities think the movement reached Kyrgyzstan directly from Pakistan.

The Tabligh or Tabligh Jama'at movement (literally, a society for spreading faith) is an Islamic missionary movement which until now has been able to operate freely in Kyrgyzstan.

In three trials last year in Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana [Farghona] valley, which also covers Kyrgyzstan, eleven members of the Tabligh movement were given jail terms. Outside Uzbekistan it has been linked with radical Islamists and in east Africa with Al-Qaeda. But Uzbek Tabligh members told Forum 18 that the Tabligh emphatically distances itself from politics and is entirely focused on religious missionary work, insisting that they had heard nothing about military training in some foreign affiliates (see F18News 3 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=468).

The Kyrgyz authorities estimate that about 300 people have gone to Pakistan to study in medrassahs through their own initiative, thus escaping government control, Zakirov said. "Tabligh members are among them." Although the Tabligh movement is not banned in Kyrgyzstan, Zakirov insists it has to register with the government. Kyrgyz law does not require this.

Local people told Forum 18 they fear potential destabilisation in southern Kyrgyzstan – which has a large ethnic Uzbek population – as a result of last month's Uzbek uprising and its suppression, and believe this could provoke a harsher religious policy. The uprising in Andijan was sparked in May by imminent verdicts in the trial of alleged members of a group known as "Akramia" (see F18News 16 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586). Sadykjan Makhmudov, head of the local human rights organisation Luchi Solomona, told Forum 18 in Osh on 2 June he believes "underground Akramia cells" exist in Osh.

Zakirov fears the aftermath of the Andijan uprising could destabilise the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan with the large numbers of Uzbek refugees joining the local ethnic Uzbek population. He told Forum 18 he believes a high proportion of members of local Islamic radical groups are ethnic Uzbeks. "The possibility that Islamic radicals fleeing from Uzbekistan may set up close contacts with radicals here can't be ruled out," he added. He thinks his region could become a focus of resistance for Uzbek anti-government forces and kidnap attempts by Uzbek forces. Such kidnappings are thought to have taken place in the past (see F18News 21 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=166).

But despite fears of a possible tightening of religious policy, "so far there has been no noticeable significant changes in the authorities' policies", Sadykjan Kamaluddin, president of the International Islamic Centre and former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, told Forum 18 from Osh on 14 June. Kamaluddin also fears kidnappings carried out by Uzbekistan.

Human rights activist Makhmudov agrees that so far the Kyrgyz authorities have not changed their religious policy. But he told Forum 18 that police have arrested three Kyrgyz citizens who were in Andijan when the Uzbek uprising started and have called in others for questioning. "It seems to me that in fact these are devout Muslims who have little to do with politics," he commented.

For background information see Forum 18's Kyrgyzstan 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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY