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AZERBAIJAN: Religious NGOs still banned from registering

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

The Justice Ministry has again denied registration to a religious NGO, the Azerbaijan Centre for Religion and Democracy, in its latest use of this long-standing ministry tactic to obstruct religious NGOs' activities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This is despite Deputy Justice Minister Togrul Musaev's claims that "decisive measures" had been taken to resolve the problem. Musaev has refused to tell Forum 18 when the denial of registration to religion-related NGOs will end and Fazil Mamedov, who heads the registration department at the Justice Ministry, denies that the problem exists. Eldar Zeynalov, who heads the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 that "such groups are denied registration because of their criticism of the official religious structures." The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Baku office states that protection of freedom of association is enshrined in OSCE commitments and that religious charities founded as NGOs should not be hindered from registering.

On 17 June, the Justice Ministry again denied registration as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) to the Azerbaijan Centre for Religion and Democracy (ACRD), one of a range of religion-related NGOs to be denied legal status. "This was entirely expected," Islamic scholar and opposition politician Nariman Gasimoglu, ACRD's leader, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Baku on 24 June. The denial of registration runs counter to claims by Deputy Justice Minister Togrul Musaev in April, during a meeting with the National NGO Forum, that "decisive measures" had been taken to resolve the problem of the denial of registration to NGOs. Musaev claimed the Justice Ministry had streamlining the process, sacking obstructive officials and ordering unreasonable delays to end.

Forum 18 has repeatedly asked Musaev's office, since April, about when the denial of registration to religion-related NGOs will end, but Musaev has failed to respond. This is a long-standing Justice Ministry tactic to obstruct religious NGOs' operations (see F18News 13 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=53).

The Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states that protection of freedom of association is enshrined in OSCE commitments. "If a religious charity is to be founded as an NGO, the commitment to freedom of religion should serve as an additional protection for the manifestation of both rights," Andreas Busch, human dimension officer at the OSCE Baku office, told Forum 18 on 27 June, "and by no means as a hindrance to registration."

"My opinion is that such groups are denied registration because of their criticism of the official religious structures," Eldar Zeynalov, who heads the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 June. "The impact of this denial of legal status is that they can be described in the media as 'illegal', have problems getting foreign grants and have no official stamp or letterhead. The financial obstacles are the most serious."

Azay Guliev, who heads the National NGO Forum, said he was unfamiliar with the denial of registration specifically to religion-related NGOs, but insisted he backs the Centre for Religion and Democracy's attempt to register. "I know Gasimoglu and he is an honest man," he told Forum 18 on 27 June. "His group ought to get registration. We can try to help him."

Fazil Mamedov, who heads the registration department at the Justice Ministry, denies that religion-related NGOs are barred from registering. He pointed to international humanitarian agencies run by religious communities, such as the Seventh-day Adventist organisation ADRA, as well as to the locally-organised Religious Studies Centre, led by Elchin Askerov. "These were both registered a long time ago," Mamedov told Forum 18 from Baku on 27 June. He said some Muslim-based charities had been liquidated through the courts "for various reasons", but did not name them. But he could name no other religion-related NGO that currently has registration with his department.

International humanitarian organisations founded by religious groups are strictly banned from conducting any religious activity as part of their work in Azerbaijan. Gasimoglu pointed out to Forum 18 that Askerov of the Religious Studies Centre is close to the government and suggests that for that reason his organisation was able to get official registration while others cannot. Independent academic religion researchers have been harassed by the government (see F18News 2 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=467)

Mamedov insisted that, to meet legal requirements, the ACRD's name has to reflect the character of the organisation. "This was not

given, so registration had to be refused," he told Forum 18. "There were other inconsistencies as well," he added, but declined to specify them. Gasimoglu believes such reasons are a pretext. "This untrue statement speaks for their intention to say no to the registration application," he told Forum 18. "Fazil Mamedov is the very person I had a talk with many years ago about registration when he insisted that I cooperate with the government if it needed to struggle against religious missionary organisations. I refused, telling him we were rather struggling for democracy, for reforming the religious conscience of people and helping Muslims to adapt their religiousness to the contemporary values of democracy." The group has been trying to get registration in vain since 1998.

Gasimoglu added that lack of legal status has made the group's work more difficult. "We couldn't open a bank account that would allow donors to support our projects," he told Forum 18. "We had to ask others for permission to use their bank accounts."

Death threats, unrelated to the registration problem, have been made by Muslim extremists against Gasimoglu, who is an advocate of religious freedom for all (see his personal commentary "Religious freedom, the best counter to religious extremism" http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338), but the police have been reluctant to protect him (see F18News 30 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=534) .

Among other religion-related NGOs denied registration is the Azerbaijan branch of the International Religious Liberty Association, a group working for religious freedom for all faiths with branches in many parts of the world. The Azerbaijani branch was founded in 2002, but its repeated applications for registration have been left unanswered. "There were several reasons for the denial of their application," Mamedov told Forum 18, "but the main one was their choice of leader. This has to be someone who obeys the law." IRLA's branch has been chaired by Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, who was ousted with his community by the government from the Juma mosque in Baku's Old City in (see F18News 2 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354)). "He has been involved in many dirty deeds," Mamedov alleged.

However, he refused to say whether if the IRLA branch applies again for registration without Ibrahimoglu as leader it would get registration. "If they don't engage in propaganda for any concrete religious community their application would be considered," he declared. "But we can't tell what the documentation will look like." Also denied legal status are a range of organisations that Ibrahimoglu founded.

Azerbaijan is also one of only two former Soviet republics (the other is Turkmenistan) where a Bible Society - which operates as a Christian non-profit agency in most countries of the world - has been refused official registration.

For a personal commentary, by an Azeri Protestant, on how the international community can help establish religious freedom in Azerbaijan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=482

For more background information see Forum 18's Azerbaijan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=92

A printer-friendly map of Azerbaijan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba>

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