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TAJIKISTAN: Religious affairs chief defends repressive draft law

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Muradulo Davlatov, head of the Tajik government's religious affairs committee, has rejected criticism by a wide range of the country's religious communities that the current draft of the religion law would substantially restrict their rights. He denied to Forum 18 News Service that requiring religious communities to register before they can function violates religious freedom rights, claiming (wrongly) that Russia requires such registration. Religious communities have criticised not only the compulsory registration, but high numbers required for any community to register, state control over religious education within religious communities, a ban on teaching religion to children under 7, a limit on the number of mosques and a ban on foreigners leading religious communities. Davlatov said it is "too early" to discuss such specific provisions, insisting that "it is possible" that the draft will be modified in the light of comments from religious communities. He had no timetable for when the draft will get final government approval and when it will go to parliament.

The head of the Tajik government's religious affairs committee, Muradulo Davlatov, strongly denied that the current draft religion law - which has been heavily criticised by a wide range of religious leaders - would substantially limit the rights of religious believers. "I don't think that the requirement for a religious community to be registered is an infringement of believers' rights," he told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Dushanbe on 28 March. "We are simply following Russia's experience and that of our Central Asian neighbours."

Forum 18 notes that Russia does not in fact require religious communities to register before they can function, although some other Central Asian states do – in defiance of international human rights commitments.

Davlatov told Forum 18 it is "too early" to discuss other specific provisions in the draft. "This is just a working draft that our committee drew up in January. The draft law is now actively under discussion with members of various religious communities, and it is possible that in the end it will undergo radical revisions in line with believers' demands."

If passed in its current form, the law would be the most repressive of all the Central Asian religion laws. Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness leaders have all told Forum 18 of their deep concerns over many aspects of the draft. Among the violations of international human rights standards that the law proposes are: a ban on unregistered religious activity; the highest threshold in the CIS for numbers of citizens to register a religious community; restricting the numbers of mosques; banning evangelism or proselytism; banning the teaching of religion to all children under 7; state control over who can teach religion within religious communities and their education; state control of organising Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca; and a ban on foreigners – such as Catholic priests – leading religious communities (see F18News 22 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=749).

Davlatov strongly denied that the Tajik authorities had decided to step up their policy against religious believers following the violent crushing by the Uzbek authorities of an uprising in Andijan in May 2005 and the March 2005 uprising in Kyrgyzstan which saw the overthrow of President Askar Akaev, or that the new draft law was simply an extension of the authorities' new policy. "That is pure speculation," he told Forum 18. "We were planning to draft a new religion law well before the events in Andijan or the Kyrgyz revolution."

Davlatov insisted that the current religion law contains many contradictions and inaccuracies. "The law on religion and religious organisations was adopted in 1994, and since then there have been many changes in Tajikistan," he told Forum 18. "It is therefore perfectly understandable that the new law should require substantial amendments."

According to Davlatov, once the religious affairs committee has heard the responses from religious communities, a revised version of the draft law will be submitted to the government. "After that, various ministries will offer new amendments to the draft law. Only after this revision process will the draft law finally be sent for consideration by Tajikistan's parliament."

Davlatov was unable to tell Forum 18 when the draft law would be sent to parliament. "That depends on how long we need to consult with believers. At present I can't even give a rough idea of how long that will take. Neither do I know how long the draft law will be debated in parliament."

The proposed tight new restrictions on religious activity come at a time of growing government control over civil society, with a new clampdown on non-governmental organisations, especially those with foreign connections. Sources have also told Forum 18 that at least three Christian missionaries working in northern Tajikistan have had difficulty in extending their visas.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190

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

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