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UZBEKISTAN: How many forced closures of religious communities?

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Uzbekistan tries hard to camouflage its religious freedom violations and one way it does this is through statistics. Comparing February 2007 figures from the state Religious Affairs Committee with October 2002 figures, Forum 18 News Service notes that a net total of six Christian churches are indicated to have lost registration, along with one Jehovah's Witness, one Hare Krishna and one Baha'i community. The figures cannot be independently verified and conceal denominational differences, with an increase in Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic communities disguising loss of legal status of Protestant churches. Religious believers inside Uzbekistan indicate that the reality may be much worse. Some Protestant churches have recently calculated that 38 of their congregations were closed down by the state between 2000 and 2006. Over 100 religious communities of various faiths are thought to have tried unsuccessfully to gain registration. The Religious Affairs Committee asserts that "there there are no restrictions on or hindrances to registration." Without state registration, all religious activity is illegal and religious believers are subjected to harsh state action.

Uzbekistan devotes much effort to trying to camouflage its attacks on religious freedom and one element in the camouflage is statistics. Forum 18 has tried unsuccessfully to get the state Religious Affairs Committee to say how many religious organisations were closed down in 2006. Begzot Kadyrov, chief specialist on non-Islamic faiths for the Committee, said that it had no information on this. This is strange, as collecting statistics on the number of religious organisations is one of the Committee's main tasks.

Attempts by Forum 18 to obtain figures of religious community closures from the Justice Ministry were likewise unsuccessful. Between 6 and 13 February, Forum 18 made numerous attempts to talk to Jalalbek Abdusatarov, head of the Religious Organisations Registration Department at the Ministry. Each time, an employee who refused to give his name said that Abdusatarov was not there and that nobody else was able to provide information. Regional Justice departments have been similarly uninformative. On 14 February, Bekmukhamad Latyrinov, head of the Religious and Social Organisations Registration Section of the Samarkand [Samarqand] Justice Department, refused to answer any questions from Forum 18 by telephone.

But, according to statistics from the Religious Affairs Committee published by the government-sponsored website press-uz.info on 15 February, 2,222 religious communities of 16 faiths currently have registration. A total of 2,042 of these are Muslim, 164 are Christian of various unspecified denominations, 8 are Jewish, 6 are Baha'i and one each are Hare Krishna and Buddhist. It remains unclear why neither the Committee nor the Justice Ministry was able to provide these figures to Forum 18 just a few days earlier.

The statistics – which cannot be verified independently – compare with the Committee's figures of a total of 2,152 registered communities in October 2002. Of these, 1,965 were Muslim, 61 Korean Protestant churches, 36 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 22 Full Gospel, 11 Seventh-day Adventist, 7 Baha'i, 6 Jewish, 5 Catholic, 4 Lutheran, 4 New Apostolic, 2 Jehovah's Witness, 2 Hare Krishna, 1 Armenian Apostolic, 1 Voice of God Protestant church, 1 Buddhist - as well as 1 Bible Society branch.

Comparing the figures, a net total of six Christian churches have lost registration in four and a half years, as well as one Jehovah's Witness, one Hare Krishna and one Baha'i community. However, these figures conceal denominational differences, with an increase in the number of Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic communities disguising the loss of legal status for Protestant churches.

Official figures should be treated with caution. For example, in 2005 the authorities falsely claimed to Forum 18 that a Catholic parish was registered in Nukus, in north-west Uzbekistan (see F18News 2 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=575)

Amongst the other statistical propaganda tools used to deny religious freedom violations has been an opinion poll conducted by a government-run "non governmental" organisation (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=891). This camouflage effort has run in tandem with an increase in the state-run mass media's encouragement of intolerance against religious minorities (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890)

Some of the religious communities, known to Forum 18, which have been closed by the authorities in the last 18 months are: the Jehovah's Witness congregation in Fergana [Farghona] (see F18News 15 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=912); the Seventh-day Adventist church and a Korean Protestant church in Samarkand (see F18News 19 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=784); as well as the Full Gospel church in Nukus (see F18News 11 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=686).

The Bethany Baptist church, in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district of Tashkent, has long been denied official registration and therefore the right to function. Two church members were deported in 2006 (see F18News 6 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=838). The congregation decided to hold a celebratory meal for church members at Easter 2006 in the church building, the first time the congregation had used its church building in two years. Congregation members prepared a traditional plov rice meal and tea but, as Protestant sources told Forum 18, within ten minutes of the event beginning the local police arrived and closed it down. The congregation has not dared to use its church building since.

Escalating pressure on congregation members typically follows such closures (see eg. F18News 26 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=719 and 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774).

Adventist sources in Uzbekistan told Forum 18 on 14 February their church in Samarkand was closed by the authorities as "we had been meeting in a building different from the address stated in our registration document. We don't intend to appeal against the decision." There are still four registered Adventist churches in Tashkent and Tashkent region.

An Uzbek Protestant pastor, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that a number of Protestant churches, of a cross-section of non-Korean denominations, had calculated recently that between them, 38 of their congregations had been closed down between 2000 and 2006 under varying official pretexts. (Christian missionaries from Korea have been quite active in Central Asia.)

Forum 18 estimates that over 100 religious communities have been trying unsuccessfully for many years to obtain registration from the Justice Ministry. But only one Christian church per year is being registered: one Protestant church in 2005, another in 2006, and the Armenian Apostolic Church in Tashkent in January 2007.

The Religious Affairs Committee continues to deny that any pressure is being exerted against religious communities and brushes aside any complaints of denial or removal of legal status from congregations. "The Committee regards assertions that 'the republican authorities have increased pressure on Protestants over the last few months' as groundless," it claimed in a 12 February statement posted by the press-uz.info agency. "The number of religious organisations in our country is growing. This shows that there are no restrictions on or hindrances to registration." On 14 February, Aziz Obidov, the Committee's Press Secretary, refused to make any further comment to Forum 18. "We have already communicated everything we think necessary and we are not going to comment further." (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

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

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