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Islamic veil and fundamentalism are back in Bishkek

AsiaNews (30.04.2010) / HRWF (03.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Islamic fundamentalism, already strong in southern Kyrgyzstan, might get a boost from the country's current political uncertainties, following the ouster of President Kurmanbak Bakiyev who was replaced by a caretaker government.

The rising tide of fundamentalism is causing a number of social problems. One example illustrates the situation. In March, Mars Dooronova, a well known TV presenter and producer with Osh's popular ELTR station, quit because her supervisor, the station's former deputy director, Mametibraim Janybekov, prohibited her from wearing a hijab in the office and on air.

"I got married [recently] and now that I am a married woman I have started wearing a hijab, but Mametibraim Janybekov said I can't wear a hijab on the air, and even within the building [of the TV Company]," 31-year-old Dooronova told EurasiaNet.

Janybekov offered Dooronova a compromise, saying that she could come to work in a hijab and change her clothes in the office while she was at work. She rejected the deal.

"I can't be double-faced. I can deceive people, but I cannot deceive Allah. If I could not be on the air in my hijab and even in the office, how could I work there? This is why I had to resign," said the presenter, who had worked at the station for 11 years.

Kyrgyzstan is a Muslim nation, but like in other former Soviet republic, religious practice tends to be moderate. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam got a boost throughout Central Asia, but in particular in Kyrgyzstan's Fergana Valley, where Osh is located.

Here, Muslim religious leaders have tended to promote a strict observance of Islamic law. Makhmud Aripov, the imam of the Nabijon Haji Mosque in Osh, told EurasiaNet, "Wearing a hijab secures a woman's chastity, and a lack of hijabs results in divorces. A mother wearing a hijab serves an example for her daughter, which will help secure her honour."

All this has led to a growing number of hijab-related conflicts. At present, such incidents are more common in secondary schools, involving senior female students wearing hijabs. Despite the fact that the country is 80 per cent, local Muslims were not very observant, and tolerated how others chose to interpret religious rules.

Now the debate is over a number of issues, not the least how compulsory the hijab is, especially in the south. In any event, women are the first to pay for the situation. In many offices and schools, wearing the veil has been banned.

Experts wonder about what is behind the rebirth of strict adherence to Islamic rules. They note that Muslim religious leaders justify enforcing rules on some vague reference to divine precepts but reject any social change that might have occurred in the last centuries.

The issue is when a strict adherence to a rule becomes intolerant extremism.

This danger should not be underestimated, especially in light of Kyrgyzstan's north-south divide, which emerged during the protest movement that led to the downfall of President Bakiyev.

"Restore religious freedom at least to the level we had before Bakiev"

By Mushfig Bayram,

Forum 18 (16.04.2010) / HRWF (19.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tamilla Zeynalova of the Baha'is told Forum 18 that "we want the new government to restore the religious freedoms at least to the level we had before President Bakiev." Many are uncertain what may happen, a Russian Orthodox Church priest commenting that "it is difficult to say what will take place." Commenting on Interim Government promises to change laws for the better, the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that "we hope they will keep their promise. We will wait and see."

Following ex-President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiev's departure from the country, Forum 18 News Service has found that a wide range of religious communities and civil society human rights groups want the authorities to respect freedom of religion or belief. Many are highly critical of the harsh new Religion Law brought in by Bakiev's government in 2009, and want it to be abolished or radically changed.

The Religion Law was strongly criticised by a wide range of Kyrgyz and international religious communities and human rights defenders, including the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, and members of the European Parliament. Tursunbek Akun, the country's Human Rights Ombudsperson, told Forum 18 that "this Law is not in accord with international human rights standards". The Law's harsh provisions include: a ban on children being involved in religious organisations; a ban on "aggressive action aimed at proselytism"; a ban on the distribution of religious literature, print, and audio-video religious materials; and de facto compulsory re-registration of all registered religious organisations.

Since the Law's entry into force, state actions have included banning unregistered religious activity and raids on meetings for worship. The government showed little sign of either a willingness to implement human rights commitments, or an understanding that genuine security depends on genuine respect for human rights.

"We want to establish freedom of speech and freedom of religion"

Kanybek Imanaliyev, Head of the Press Service of the Interim Government led by Roza Otunbaeva, told Forum 18 on 15 April that "We want to establish freedom of speech and freedom of religion. We will reform the Constitution, the laws as necessary and the Religion Law."

Asked whether religious communities will be able to carry on their normal religious activity while the laws are being changed, Imanaliyev said that "no one can answer that question at the moment. We need to first stabilize the situation. However I do not think

there will be any conflicts on religious grounds in the meantime. The people of Kyrgyzstan are tolerant to different religions and confessions."

He declined to speak further due to the pressure of other demands on his time, stating that "we are busy with taking care of the families of those who died [in the confrontation with government forces during demonstrations], and getting the country back to stability."

"The laws need to be amended including the Religion Law"

Kyrgyz human rights organisation Foundation for Toleration International told Forum 18 on 15 April that they have not changed their position since June 2009, when their President Raya Kadyrova asked the authorities "why citizens' rights to religious freedom should be considered as something that endangers public security." She also emphasised that the "voices and concerns of various religious groups were not heard by Kyrgyzstan's authorities."

Human rights defender Aziza Abdirasulova, of the Kylym Shamy (Candle of the Century) Centre for Human Rights Protection told Forum 18 on 15 April that "the situation not only in terms of religious freedom but of all human rights is very bad. The laws need to be amended including the Religion Law."

Alexandr Shumilin, Chair of Kyrgyzstan's Baptist Union, agreed with Abdirasulova. He told Forum 18 on 15 April that "we hope that the Religion Law will be amended. We want to be given freedom to teach children our faith. We want all the confessions to be treated equally."

Bishop Nikolaus Messmer SJ, Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Church, told Forum 18 on 15 April that "days before the confrontation and the departure of the government, we as some other members of religious communities were invited to an extraordinary Congress under President Bakiev. We had the feeling the government was about to make changes to the Religion Law."

Speaking of his hopes for the future, Bishop Messmer hoped "that the new government will make the necessary changes. We want more freedoms for missionaries and their visa issues to be resolved."

No-one from Kyrgyzstan's state-backed Muslim Board was willing or available to talk to Forum 18 on 15 April. Unofficial Muslim sources are normally unwilling to speak publicly for fear of state reprisals.

Human rights defender Abdirasulova also stated that "the departing government had recently promised that they would amend the new Religion Law, which gave more privileges to the traditional Islam in Kyrgyzstan and discriminated against different Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups."

Under a state "National Security Concept", the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) was under Bakiev preparing Regulations to apply the Religion Law, a Religious Education Law, and a Law on 'Traditional' Religions. Officials claimed to have made the text of the Regulations public, although no-one who Forum 18 spoke to – apart from officials – had seen the text. The draft Religious Education Law was strongly criticised in an OSCE / Council of Europe Venice Commission legal review http://www.legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/2864/file/139_REL_KYR%2021%20Sept%202009_en.pdf - as was the Religion Law itself in a separate legal review before it was signed into force by Bakiev. Officials claimed to have invited some named religious communities to a roundtable discussion on the Religion Law Regulations,

although the same religious communities told Forum 18 they were unaware of any invitation.

"Restore religious freedom at least to the level we had before Bakiev"

Human rights defender Abdirasulova also noted that "the authorities treated pure Muslim people who made a pilgrimage to Mecca, who were actively praying in mosques as terrorists and extremists. This needs to change."

Tamilla Zeynalova of the Baha'i Community told Forum 18 on 15 April that "we want the new government to restore the religious freedoms at least to the level we had before President Bakiev's government." She pointed to the use by officials of discriminatory language, stating that "we do not want to be called sects in a derogatory manner. We want to be treated as a world religion equal to the so-called 'traditional' religions in Kyrgyzstan."

"We want to receive official registration and changes made to the latest law to take the discriminatory elements like the compulsory threshold of 200 members for registration out," Synarkul Muraliyeva, leader of the Hare Krishna community, told Forum 18 on 15 April. "We want to be given real freedom to worship without fear. We do not cherish illusions about the new government that we will be given all freedoms at once, but we hope for the better."

Vladimir Gavrilovski of the Jehovah's Witnesses also focussed on specific issues, telling Forum 18 on 15 April that "we want our congregations in Jalalabad and Naryn to be registered." He also wanted "discriminatory provisions such as the ban on free distribution of religious literature to be taken out of the Religion Law."

Alexandr Kim of the Association of Evangelical Churches of Kyrgyzstan, which includes a range of Baptist, Lutheran and other Protestant churches, wanted constitutional change. "We hope that the new government will not make the same mistakes the old government made," he told Forum 18 on 15 April. "We want the principle of religious freedom to be explicitly and clearly prescribed in a new Constitution."

However, Kim cautioned that "we do not know what will those in power do now."

"It is difficult to say what will take place"

Bishop Messmer of the Catholic Church told Forum 18 that he "did not know what to expect now. In the centre of Bishkek everything seems to be fine and stable but we hear rumours that the situation is not very stable outside Bishkek."

Father Igor Dronov of the Russian Orthodox Church commented to Forum 18 on 15 April that "it is difficult to say what will take place." He noted that "some strange people came to the church and asked us what President Bakiev and his spouse Tatyana Bakieva had given the church as gifts, telling us to return it as it was part of the national patrimony." However, Fr Dronov continued, "fortunately we did not receive any gifts from the President."

"We hope they will keep their promise. We will wait and see"

Zeynalova of the Baha'i Community stated that "our devotees had encounters with the members of this Interim Government in the past, and they gave us positive signals that they were for religious freedoms".

"The Interim Government promised that they would change the laws for the better," Gavrilovski of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "We hope they will keep their promise," he continued. "We will wait and see."

Shumilin of the Baptist Union told Forum 18 that "it's difficult to say what exactly will take place but I think not very much will change. Kyrgyzstan is part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [along with China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan], and these countries usually differentiate between so-called 'traditional' religions and other religions, giving more privileges to 'traditional' religions." He thought that "no matter who comes into power in Kyrgyzstan, that kind of approach will remain".

Human rights defender Abdirasulova of Kylym Shamy pointed to the uncertainty many in Kyrgyzstan have about what is happening, noting that "there is dual power in the country. The Interim Government has the power but does not have responsibilities and those who left the power have not laid down their responsibilities."

Kyrgyzstan keeps a tight grip on religion

Martin Vennard

BBC (19.01.2010) / HRWF (22.01.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Bolot, a young evangelical preacher in Kyrgyzstan, says he already been arrested twice this year after setting up a new church.

He says he is the victim of a new law on religion, which critics say severely restricts religious freedoms and is forcing some groups underground.

Under the law, new religious groups have to have at least 200 members before they can register with the authorities and operate legally - previously the figure was 10.

Kyrgyzstan is just the latest Central Asian republic to have been accused of curtailing religious rights.

"In our church we don't have official registration because we have only 25 people, and we are banned from trying to convert people. We have lots of problems with the government," Bolot says.

He says the police have been several times to his church, which is based in a house in the capital, Bishkek. Bolot, which is not his real name, says he fears further such visits. "They asked me to stop the church because it's against the law. Of course, it's not comfortable but we will keep going."

There are now at least 50,000 evangelical Christians in Kyrgyzstan, Bolot says, the majority of them converts from Islam like himself - although the government disputes that figure.

He says the authorities passed the law because they want to prevent Muslims converting to Christianity.

He adds that the government also feels threatened by radical Muslim groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose goal is to bring all Muslim countries together as a single state, ruled by Islamic law.

Restrictions

Muslim extremists, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have been blamed for carrying out attacks last year in southern Kyrgyzstan and neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Dimitry - also not his real name - is a lawyer and a member of a Protestant church which unsuccessfully challenged the law. He says it prevents people from involving their children in the church.

"How can I bring my moral values to my children if I cannot involve them in our religious activity?" he asks.

Dmitry said he did not want to be identified because he was speaking on behalf of a group and not because he was afraid of being persecuted by the authorities.

He says the government wants to prevent religious groups meeting in unofficial venues by restricting where religious material can be bought and used.

"Citizens and religious organisations have the right to purchase and use religious literature only in places of divine service and in specialised department stores," he says, citing the law.

Muslim scholar Kadyr Malikov says the law and the government's stance on religion is affecting Muslims as well as Christians, particularly smaller groups.

"This law makes it difficult, first of all for Islamic movements and the Muslim community to open new mosques and madrassas. This creates difficult relations between the secular government and the Muslim community," he says.

Corruption to blame?

Mr Malikov says the government sees any Muslim who steps outside officially recognised Islam as dangerous.

"The people in government can't separate traditional or peaceful Islam from extremists," he says at his office in Bishkek.

Mr Malikov says this view has adversely affected the education of some girls.

"In some schools they prohibit girls who wear the hijab from going to school. In the constitution everybody has the right to education."

Many of Kyrgyzstan's remaining ethnic Russians are Orthodox Christians. The government has decided to broadcast television programmes by their priests and authorised Muslim preachers, as a way of showing what it says are the correct religious paths. It is also introducing religious education in schools.

But Mr Malikov says the authorities need to deal with Kyrgyzstan's economic problems and corruption, in places such as the judiciary, in order to turn people away from radicalisation.

"If people don't find justice in secular laws they turn to Sharia laws, which give big guarantees of justice."

'Drawn to prayer'

Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan was previously known in the region for its relatively liberal laws regarding religion.

The head of the government's commission on religion, Kanibek Osmonaliyev, says that led to an influx of what he calls religious sects, trying to convert and recruit Kyrgyz citizens.

"People asked us to take measures because they were worried their families would be broken up by these groups," he says.

"We haven't reduced religious freedoms, we are just trying to bring some order to these organisations."

He also denies the government has inadvertently created the conditions for radical groups to thrive, by failing to tackle corruption and improve the economy.

He says people may be drawn to religion when faced by difficulties, but not to radical groups.

"People are drawn to prayer, to a Protestant God, an Orthodox God, or Islamic God, but not Hizb ut-Tahrir," he said.

Mr Osmonaliyev adds that Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned and does not enjoy widespread support. He says the government is taking strong measures to prevent further attacks by militants.
