Religion in Kazakhstan: Congress of World Religions and dispersed believers

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In October 2018, Astana is to host the VI Congress of World Religions. The main theme, “Religious leaders for safe world”, is in the mainstream of the Kazakhstan Leader Narsultan Nazarbayev’s policy. On one hand, Astana declares its leadership in the dialogue between civilizations, on the other it is deeply concerned with security and religious extremism issues.

Surely, the conference participants would discuss the latest changes in Kazakhstan's religious legislation. Last year, the country's government adopted a Concept of State policy in the Religious sphere for 2017-2020 years, and prepared a bill on amendments to a number of laws on religious activities and organizations.

These updates prove that after the shocking Aktobe shootings on 5 June 2016, security measures are more and more prevailing in the government’s religious policy while infringing the rights of believers. In this connection, foreign human rights organizations express their concerns. For example, the 2017 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reads: “domestic conditions for freedom of religion or belief and other civil liberties deteriorated in 2016.” Because of this fact, Kazakhstan was again placed by the USCIRF in Tier 2 in 2017, where it has been since 2013.

According to the common opinion of Kazakhstan’s religious communities, the adopted Concept promotes a corrupted image of “secularity” as the national ideology. Furthermore, the changes to the legislation introduced to Parliament contradict both with this Concept and the Constitution.

The ban on discussing faith matters in the media, restriction of missionary activity and impediments in religious education are in odds with the Concept’s principles on promoting religious education and culture. Such measures won’t protect the country’s society from inter-confessional conflicts but will likely strengthen mutual distrust between believers.

The bill’s authors plan to restrict children under the age of 16 from attending religious services while not being accompanied by one of the parents and without a written consent of the other. Such a hasty decision would actually bar children from excursions to religious sites and monuments, pilgrimage. Vacations at camps organized by religious communities will also be outlawed. This clearly violates the Constitution’s Article 35 dedicated to the children’s rights.

Moreover, the responsibility for compliance with this requirement is to be laid upon religious organizations. Thus they are simply forced to drive

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the faithful and just curious teenagers out of houses of prayers in the fear of fines and three-month suspension of their activities. It would be equal to putting a big lock on the door to scare off people. Eventually, the full-scale activities of religious organizations become simply impossible. So does the realization of constitutional rights of the Kazakh people to freely express their religious views. Believers, making up about 80% of the country's society, will have to practise religion at home to evade accusations of missionary.

The Initiative on amendments to the religious laws provides prospects for exactions while alternative ways to realize the rights of believers haven't been introduced yet. Bans have led to some absurd situations mostly affecting the representatives of religious minorities. For once, human rights activists had to fight for the freedom of Protestant minister Yuri Pak sentenced in 2016 to two years in prison on far-fetched charges. Alongside with him, Orthodox Christians, Kazakhstan's second largest denomination, were fined. The bases for the penalties were an attempt to disseminate the book about the Life of St. Sergius of Radonezh and an ad for a self-made picture of the Virgin Mary.

Such repercussions prove the bill hasn't been properly scrutinized yet. One of the reasons may be the under-qualified officials who decided to completely suspend religious life instead of identifying extremist organizations and destructive cults.

Hopefully, the leaders of world and traditional religions would suggest to the Kazakh government better ways of fighting national security threats related to religion unless the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation built in 2006 especially for inter-confessional conferences would not be dismantled as undermining Astana's news perception of "secularity."

Company Contact:

Boiko Hristov

E. b.hristov987@gmail.com
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