

# Kazakhstan launches attack on religion

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Guest Commentary

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**Almaty, Kazakhstan** — In Kazakhstan, on the governmental level religious tolerance is proclaimed and appeals are constantly being made for spiritual harmony. Yet in practice things are somewhat different.

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Elizaveta Drenicheva, 30, is a Russian citizen who was working in Kazakhstan as a missionary for the Unification Church. She has been jailed for two years for "crimes against humanity." (Photo/A. Fedorov)

These sentiments are aggravated by constant persecution, senseless inspections and searches of houses of prayer.

In the last year and a half all this has taken on particular severity as Parliament has been considering changes and amendments to various legislative acts regarding freedom of the exercise of faith and religious organizations. This project has been fully deliberated in Parliament, but in light of numerous remarks by international experts, religious leaders and the society at large, is now being presented to the Constitutional Council for its conclusions.

The law has not yet been passed, but we already observe its application in practice. Let me bring up just a few of the many examples.

First is the pogrom launched by the authorities of Karasayskiy district of Almaty, whose victims were the members of the Society for Krishna Consciousness. The law enforcement officers tore down all the dwellings of the group's monastics with bulldozers and demolition cranes.

That served as a signal to local officials and law enforcement agencies to launch an onslaught of dirty deeds against any and all “undesirable” religious entities.

From that point searches and confiscation of religious literature began against Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, charismatic Christians, Scientologists, the Unification Church, the Akhmady group, etc. A campaign unfolded on television and in the government press to discredit and discriminate against Protestant, neo-Protestant and new religious groups, unprecedented in its ignorance and aggressiveness.

Moreover, the methods used are altogether filthy. Now they are summoning highly dubious people for questioning through the press and television broadcasts – such as, for example, the former elder of the Church of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bakhytbek Tarzhanov, who was publicly expelled for immoral behavior, and the “spiritual daughter” of Russian religious official Alexandr Dvorkin, a certain Julia Denisenko, who is displaying film clips supposedly taken by a concealed camera, although in fact they were taken in a psychiatric ward or appropriated from artistic films.

And all this is being given the nod of consent by the official, active religious communities. In a word, there is blatant falsification of the facts.

To take an example, on television they have shown segments of the film “Darkness Shrouds the Borskiy,” and in the background the narrator explains that it was filmed by a hidden camera at an gathering of Pentecostals.

A certain Alexey Tolchennikov has spoken out as a “debunker” of the Akhmady community, whereas in fact he was kicked out on account of drunkenness and for stealing 32,000 tenge (US\$262) from the person who rented an apartment together with him in a suburb of Almaty. But this is the most telltale indicator: The claims of this indecent character, fabricated and having nothing to do with the truth, are accepted as the grounds for conducting a search of the community, a financial investigation of its activities, and more.

There is another even more outrageous case. At the beginning of last year, almost simultaneously, material was published in both the official district administration newsletter and the city newspaper – which were identical word for word – under the title, “The most dangerous sect is the one which the person near and dear to you has fallen prey to.”

But what is surprising is that the same material appeared in different publications accredited to different authors. For example, in Paris Commune the author was A. Morskoy, in Tekel Worker it was Kharuan Yakhniya, and so forth. The true author, the Committee for National Security, openly revealed itself in only two publications – The Fires of Alatau and Evening Almaty.

But the key point is not who wrote this article. What is important is that the author, or authors, had a very rude and vague understanding of the subject of this “journalistic” work – the doctrines of faith and the ritual practices of the Church of Scientology and the religious organization Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Yet it was on the basis of these articles and their innuendos that searches were conducted in the premises of the Church of Scientology in Karaganda and Almaty and in a series of communities of the Jehovah's Witnesses. At the Church of Scientology the special forces confiscated the writings of religious manifestos, and in so doing violated the holy of holies – their sacrament. Leading out of this inquest, a criminal case has now been opened against the leaders of the community.

The list of such cases goes on and on. But the case of Elizaveta Drenicheva has evoked particular social resonance. A Russian citizen, she came to Kazakhstan as a volunteer for the Unification Church, and was found guilty of "crimes against humanity" on Jan. 9 this year and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. She was taken into custody right in the courtroom.

Here is what Evgeniy Zhovtis, the director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Preservation of Legality, member of the Public Council at Mazhilis of the Kazakhstan Parliament, and member of the Expert Council on the Presidential Commission for Human Rights of the Republic of Kazakhstan, wrote in his statement to the international community:

"The text of the verdict needs no commentary since, to put it in even the mildest terms, it is patently demonic, a witchhunt, medieval, a peculiar atheistic inquisition. Drenicheva is nothing more and nothing less than accused of committing a crime against the peace and security of humanity, in propagandizing the inferiority of citizens on account of ethnic and class traits. In fact, the court called belonging to the human race an ethnic trait (I'm not joking, the text of the verdict reads thus) and considered the family a class. Drenicheva's sermon on the sinfulness of man and the truthfulness of service to God was evaluated by the court as propaganda demeaning all people, on the basis of the expert conclusion of Ms. Burova, who has taught atheism her whole life long and does not know that freedom of conscience, religion and evangelizing is upheld in Kazakhstan and that from the year of independence our country has actively promoted itself as a place where the secular state and religion freely coexist. The court completely ignored the conclusions of the leading experts on religious science in Kazakhstan."

The defense attorney of Kazakhstan would add to this emotional but completely objective opinion:

"First of all, who is this Burova? She has a Ph.D., furthermore, she is a leading member of the science faculty of the Institute of Philosophy and Political Science. In her days she has participated somewhat in the propaganda of atheism and apparently just awoke from her liturgical sleep. Perhaps E. Burova is indeed competent in her field of specialization, 'Philosophy and Methodology of Science,' but all that has no relation whatsoever to religious science."

All of this bears witness to the fact that in our ranks everything is not in order, that we who are avowed to religious science are only weakly upholding the principle of freedom of conscience, and as a result it is more and more losing its significance as a ground-laying cornerstone, for which science is paying its disrespect.

Therefore it would seem fit to me that each person who holds dear the ideals of democracy, freedom, tolerance, religious tolerance, freedom of thought, and harmony

and agreement among the nationalities, ought to raise his or her voice in defense of the values which all humankind holds dear.

Our nation, which expects to preside over the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, must show an example of impeccable fulfillment of its founding documents, in particular, the Copenhagen Declaration made on June 29, 1990 at the Conference for the Human Dimension.

I would appeal, paraphrasing the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, not to make the laws harsher, but rather to frame a new categorical imperative: to think and act in such a way as to never repeat the mistakes of the war against religion, for he who advocates war "directly facilitates barbarism."

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**For further information on this case and religious freedom issues in general please contact:**



**Your Forum for religious Tolerance & Human Rights**

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