

New restrictive religion law: desperate and clumsy attempt to stop Islamization

At the end of October Kazakhstan adopted a new Law on Religious Activities and Religious Organizations. The speed with which it was developed and passed through Parliament was very impressive. On 1 September, at the joint session of Majilis and Senate, President Nazarbayev charged deputies to adopt a new law. The draft was swiftly prepared by the state agency for religious affairs and passed to Parliament on 7 September, coming into force on 25 October.

Officials explained the necessity of the new religion law on the grounds that the previous one, adopted in 1992, had become too outdated and that it was necessary to better regulate the religious sphere. Experts treat the first argument with scepticism and pointed out that serious amendments were introduced into the law in 2005. The second argument is seen as the main driver of the new legislation. The events of spring and summer (the May explosion in Aktobe, carried out by a suicide bomber; the shoot-out between police and Islamists in Shubarshi village in Aktobe oblast in July, and the arrest of the group of extremists in Atyrau in August) and growing fears of Islamization and radicalization of society prompted strong measures from the state.

The lightning speed adoption process left no room for public discussion, which was substituted by an aggressive media campaign on the dangers of various religious sects. Therefore, it is not surprising that the final product suffers from multiple deficiencies and risks being counterproductive. According to legal expert Roman Podoprigora, the vague definitions and lack of precise terms in the law create high corruption potential. In his opinion, the

requirements introduced by the law would be difficult to comply with for religious organizations, which may lead to their mass scale liquidation.

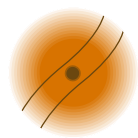
According to the new law, all religious organizations are required to apply for official registration or re-registration within one year and to submit any literature they use for expertise. It is not clear how state bodies are planning to screen all the religious literature. The law also bans the performance of religious rites in state institutions including the military, prisons, schools, universities and government offices. Communal religious activities can take place only in officially recognized places of worship.

The legislation was criticized both by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the key Muslim authority, and representatives of religious minorities. Human rights activists pointed out that it violates freedom of religion as guaranteed by the Constitution. The EU made an official statement regretting the adoption of the law and noted that it is at odds with Kazakhstan's international legal obligations and OSCE commitments.

The law is also out of line with Astana's previous policy and its successful cultivation of the image of Kazakhstan as the land of peaceful and harmonious co-existence of many religions. President Nazarbayev initiated two international forums of world and traditional religions in Astana, held in the specially constructed Pyramid of Peace and Accord. It is also worth recalling that the slogan of Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE chairmanship was "Tolerance, Trust, Tradition, Transparency". Astana organized conferences on tolerance and non-discrimination and presented itself as a success story.

What convinced Kazakhstani government to adopt the new legislation that made such a dent in the

*Director of the Central Asian Studies Center at KIMEP (Kazakhstan Institute of Management and Economics and Estrategic Research)



country's carefully crafted image? Clearly, they are very concerned about security challenges and threats of growing Islamization. As noted by the head of the state agency for religious affairs, Kairat Lama Sharif, the legislation was designed to preserve the secular nature of the state. The objective is to control the spread of Islam, keep it separate from the state, and suppress radical and "pseudo-religious" movements and sects. However, can the law contribute to this goal being met? Many experts are sceptical. They argue that it will punish law-abiding religious organizations and force more people to practice their faith covertly, and will not affect the organizations that are underground. The state has been practicing repressive measures targeting extremists for a while already; there was no need to adopt a new legislation.

Considering global and regional trends, it is very unlikely that the state can stop the Islamization of society. It is partially responsible for what is going on, since in the 1990s it flirted with Islam trying to use it as an aspect of the new identity. Now that the government has seen the danger, it is trying to suppress it with harsh measures. However, this risks putting Kazakhstan in a difficult cycle. The authoritarian regime suppresses liberal-democratic opposition and Islam-based dissent movements, which the latter can weather better. Lack of clear values in society and shortage of critical thinking in the education system make people more susceptible to the teachings of various proselytizers. The new religious movements tend to be even less tolerant than the state. As a result, Kazakhstani society may eventually find itself between the Scilla of authoritarianism and Charybdis of fundamentalist Islam.

Tony Blair becomes official adviser to President Nazarbayev

In October the British newspaper The Telegraph reported that former prime minister Tony Blair had become official adviser to Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The news was confirmed

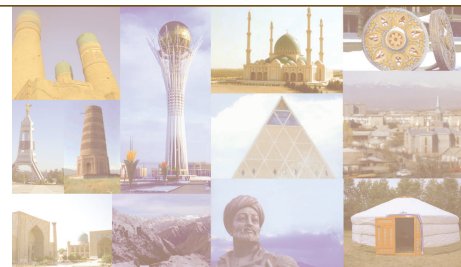
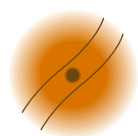
and caused negative coverage both in Western and independent Kazakhstani media.

Officially, Tony Blair is to help Kazakhstani government to carry out reforms "aimed at furthering democracy, strengthening the rule of law and improving the economic environment in Kazakhstan." It is reported that he has helped put together a team of international consultants to set up an advisory group, with a team of people working on the ground. It is not clear why a British politician with no deep knowledge of local realities is best equipped to do that. According to The Telegraph, quoting "informed sources", Tony Blair was asked to help Nursultan Nazarbayev secure the nomination for next year's Nobel Peace Prize, the lifelong ambition of the Kazakhstani President. He can receive it for his denuclearization efforts and promotion of peace between different ethnic groups and religions (the latter record is undermined by the latest religion law). It is speculated that Blair would receive considerable financial compensation for his contribution, but he denies profiting from his links with Kazakhstan.

The news concerning Tony Blair's new mission came as a surprise but it also fits a certain pattern. It is not easy to understand why Blair decided to risk a reputation that had already suffered a blow from his various "politics-meets-business" dealings. As for the Kazakhstani leadership, "befriending" important Western politicians has been the staple of Astana's foreign policy.

Will there be Kazakhstani gas for EU Southern Corridor project?

In early October EU Energy Commissioner Guenther Oettinger visited Kazakhstan to attend the Eurasian KAZENERGY conference. In his speech he invited Kazakhstan to participate in the Southern Corridor project that is to bring Caspian gas from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to EU markets. The project was conceived as a way to diversify supply and decrease dependence on Russia-controlled gas



transportation systems. In practical terms, it envisions building the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan, and Nabucco pipeline from Turkey to Austria. Commissioner Oettinger pointed out that the TCGP would comply with the highest level of European environmental standards (possibly environmental damage to the Caspian Sea is one of the stumbling blocks of the project) and enhance stability and prosperity in the region.

Two days later at another energy conference (KIOGE-2011), deputy minister of oil and gas Lyazzat Kiyinov gave an indirect response to the invitation. He said that Kazakhstan realizes the necessity of building the TCGP, since without this pipeline it would be impossible to export gas via Nabucco. However, the biggest problem for Astana's participation in these projects is lack of available gas in the near future. Once Kazakhstan produces more gas, it can consider the possibility of exporting it by the Southern corridor.

While there is no gas available at present, the country has major reserves and production is growing rapidly. The Karachaganak field has a current output of just under 20bcm or 40% of all gas produced in Kazakhstan and is planning expansion. By 2015 it is expected that Kazakhstan will export more than 30 bcm of gas (the export this year is estimated at 9.2 bcm). Therefore, in principle, there will be "blue fuel" available for the TCGP, provided it materializes.

However, it is not clear whether Astana will have the political will to join a project that goes counter to Moscow's plans and wishes. In the light of ongoing integration with Russia through the creation of the Customs Union and Single Economic Space, prospects of this happening in the near future seem unlikely.

The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Central Asia Observatory (CAO). The institutions that constitute the CAO are not responsible for the use of these contents.

