

Kazakh Parliament approves restrictive new religion law

Country/Region: Kazakhstan, Central Asia

Kazakhstan's Parliament has passed [new legislation](#) that will severely restrict freedom of religion in the country.

The Lower House of Parliament approved on 21 September a new religion law that requires all religious groups to re-register with the state under a complex four-tier system. The Senate followed suit on Thursday (29 September) and it now needs only the signature of President Nursultan Nazarbaev to become law – a mere formality since it was he who urged parliament earlier this month to introduce tighter controls over religious groups.

Under the new rules, organisations will be required to provide detailed information about their original leaders, activities and beliefs including their attitude to marriage, the family and education. Any new place of worship will require the approval of national and local authorities.

The distribution of religious literature will be allowed only in registered places of worship, approved religious education institutions and “special stationary premises determined by local executive authorities”.

Religious organisations will be required to take steps to prevent the attraction and/or participation of children in their activities if one of the child’s parents or legal guardians objected. An amendment to an associated law bans religious ceremonies and “actions directed at spreading a faith” in children’s holiday, sport, creative or other leisure organisations, camps or hospitals.

Laws criticised

The parliament also passed changes to another law that widens the range of violations punishable under the religion law. Penalties are mostly fines, but infringements could lead to a permanent ban on a religious community. There has been criticism of the speed with which the laws have been adopted and lack of public discussion about them.

The legislation is being presented by the government as necessary to protect the state from Islamic extremism. It appears to favour the country’s “traditional religions”, singling out the Hanafi school of Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity, leaving smaller Christian denominations and other religious minority groups concerned that their freedom and activities will be subject to more severe restrictions.

In an ominous sign of what lies ahead, the Agency of Religious Affairs has been demanding that members of religious minorities provide detailed information on their activities, sometimes on a weekly basis. This includes all weekly events, topics of speeches and sermons, their purpose, and any audio-visual and printed materials used.

The government previously tried to amend the religion law, in 2008, increasing the harshness of penalties for unregistered religious activities, but was blocked by the Constitutional Council the following year.



All churches in Kazakhstan
will have to re-register
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