



Kazakhstan



A group of Christian children in Kazakhstan

In 2012 Aleksei Asetov, leader of a small unregistered church in Ekibastuz in the Pavlodar region of Kazakhstan, was fined about 18 months of the average local wage for banned religious activity. He was one of the first Christians to be fined under harsh new laws on religious practice introduced in October 2011.

Churches in Kazakhstan already faced severe restrictions, but the new laws introduced even tighter controls. A complex system of registration was established for all religious organisations, and unregistered activity was banned; all groups were required to re-register by October 2012 or face liquidation. A group must have at least 50 members to be registered, and many small churches were stripped of their legal status in early 2012. Larger congregations have also been denied re-registration on various grounds.

Unregistered churches face harassment and judicial penalties; meetings have been raided and leaders and members fined or detained. One group of churches that refuses on principle to register with the authorities has been warned that members' homes that are used for worship will be confiscated if the Christians continue to meet there. In October 2012 officials in Almaty filmed the worship service of one of these churches and wrote down the names of the worshippers.

Even registered churches are subject to controls and interference with their activities. Their registered status seems to provide little protection against raids, fines and the confiscation of literature. Smaller Christian groups are also enduring increased discrimination, as well as negative coverage in the state-run media.

More than half of Kazakhstan's population are Muslims, but the country also has a large Russian Orthodox community. Yet the number of (known) believers among ethnic Kazakhs, a traditionally Muslim people group who make up just over 50% of the population, grew from none in 1990 to as many as 15,000 by 2010. Converts frequently face pressure from their Muslim communities to return to Islam.

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