

KYRGYZSTAN: Church of Muslim converts told to close

World Watch Monitor (04.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KJkUD0> – A church in Kyrgyzstan that is home to many former Muslims has been ordered to cease its Sunday worship.

A local source told World Watch Monitor that services at the church, which is led by a convert from Islam, have been interrupted twice in the last few months by a group of people consisting of local officials, representatives of the Prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, assistants to the local imam and former colleagues from the school at which the pastor used to teach.

World Watch Monitor cannot name the town in which the incident took place, for security reasons.

On both occasions, members of the group demanded that the service be stopped and told them: "You will not be able to live and carry out your ministry here." The church members tried to settle the conflict, World Watch Monitor was told, but the group continued to issue threats and insults.

The church members then started filming them with their mobile phones, after which the group left the building hiding their faces but saying to the congregation: "We will come here again and again to disturb and persecute you in every possible way," the source said.

The church has for more than a decade been led by Pastor Miran*. The leadership of the school where he worked threatened to fire him after they learned of his conversion and his role as a church leader. He was also accused of child abuse by the school and jailed for six months. The source said that no lawyer would defend him at his trial because they were afraid of falling foul of the security services, no witnesses were present in court, and the charge against him was not proven. The source said the church felt the allegation was only levelled against him because of his conversion.

Since his release, Pastor Miran, a father of five, has been unable to find paid work. According to the World Watch Monitor's source, local Muslims say of him: "If Miran could betray his 'native pure Islam', maybe he could do other bad things too."

Details about cases such as Pastor Miran's remain vague due to the sensitive security situation facing those involved and the potential for repercussions against them.

Background

The vast majority of Kyrgyzstan's estimated 300,000 Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church and there is a small but growing number of Christian converts from a Muslim background. Converts face pressure from family, friends and the wider community. The Kyrgyz constitution officially guarantees freedom of religion, but proposed new laws impose stringent registration rules, and all religious literature must be approved.

Kyrgyzstan dropped off the Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian for the first time in five years in 2015. This was said to be due to an increase in problems in other countries, rather than improvements in religious freedom.

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