

KYRGYZSTAN: About the arrest and sentencing of Kyrgyz journalist Zulpukar Sapanov

Is Kyrgyzstan gradually becoming an Islamic Republic?

“Kyrgyzstan is no longer the country that the world community knew and which once followed the course of democratic development...Kyrgyzstan is gradually becoming an Islamic republic.”

– Dinara Mukanbaeva, Kyrgyz lawyer and human rights activist

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HRWF (05.10.2017) – On Tuesday 12th September 2017, Kyrgyz journalist and author Zulpukar Sapanov was sentenced to a four-year imprisonment for allegedly ‘inciting hatred between religious faiths’ – contrary to Article 299 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code. Seventeen days later, the Bishkek City Court reduced the previous ruling to a two-year suspended sentence. Despite the reduction of his sentence, Sapanov’s arrest and trial has certainly triggered an outcry from human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan and abroad.

In summer 2016, Sapanov published a book entitled *Kydyr Sanzhyrasy* (Genealogy of the Forefather Kydyr). His book is a detailed study of pre-Islamic beliefs in Kyrgyzstan, where he suggests that the Kyrgyz people descend from the (possibly mythical) holy person ‘Kydyr-Ata’, mentioning that in ancient times the Kyrgyz were not Muslims and questioning whether “Kydyr is the true God and Allah is a Satan?” Its publication was followed by fierce criticisms stemming from Kyrgyz religious leaders. The author and his book were denounced for attempting to destabilize the country by spreading content

that – allegedly – diminishes the role of Islam and creates a negative attitude towards Muslims.

Sapanov's arrest and sentence could become a disturbing precedent in a country which identifies itself as 'a sovereign, democratic, legal, secular, unitary, social state' (Article 1, The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic), and where – in theory – 'everyone has the right to freely seek, receive, store, use information and distribute it orally, in writing or in any other way' (Article 33, The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic). Dinara Mukanbaeva, Kyrgyz lawyer and human rights activist, considers that Sapanov's sentence "discredits the secular and democratic status of the country". Clearly, Sapanov's case reflects the complicated interreligious relations that currently exist among communities across the country.

What is apparent is that although Kyrgyzstan's constitution protects and guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of conscience and religion, this protection is becoming highly dubious in practice. Religion and politics seem to be mixing in what is – in theory – a secular state. The role of radical Islam seems to be growing steadily throughout recent years, which might explain the flourishing of mosques and Islamic institutions across the country.

To conclude, the uneasy question is: *Is Kyrgyzstan gradually becoming an Islamic republic?*

Further reading: 'Kyrgyzstan's Self-Defeating Conflict With Moderate Islam'

Sources:

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