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On December 26<sup>th</sup> of 1991, the Soviet flag was lowered the Kremlin in Moscow forever. A few days earlier, representatives from 11 Soviet republics met in the Kazakh city of Alma-Ata and announced that they would no longer be part of the Soviet Union.

Following this event, on August 30, 1995, as a result of the nationwide referendum, Kazakhstan's Constitution – the supreme national law – was adopted, establishing the rules and principles for building Kazakhstan as an independent, sovereign, economically liberal democracy. All internationally recognized rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution.\*

For instance:

- Article 14 prohibits “discrimination on a religious basis.”
- Article 19 provides that all people have the “right to determine and indicate or not to indicate his/her ethnic, party and religious affiliation.”
- Article 39 provides that “human rights and freedoms shall not be restricted in any way.”\*\*

Kazakhstan stoically endured all the difficulties and problems associated with the construction of the new state. Passing through a complex path of economic and social development, the country has taken its new position in Eurasia and the world. Achievements in the field of human rights, such as freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, were a positive example for the entire region.

Many religious communications freely existed in the territory of Kazakhstan. Along with the most popular religions, such as Islam and Christianity, many Protestant churches and other religious groups have evolved in peace and security.

Unfortunately, restrictions on religion are rising markedly as a result of the 2011 law "On Religious Activities and Religious Associations" and the law "On Amendments and Addenda to Some Legislative Acts on Issues of Religious Activities and Religious Organizations," imposing changes in the area of religion in nine other laws, including Administrative Code Articles 374 and 375, widening the range of sanctions for violations of the Religion Law.

Despite the declarative goal of fighting extremism, the New Religion Law actually works to establish the domination of one religion - the Sunni school of Islam, to provide a relatively free environment for Orthodoxy and severely restrict the activities of others. Evidence of this is the mandatory re-registration prescribed by the new law, which 1463 religious organizations did not pass, as well as the use of force against unwanted religious minorities.

This behavior is dangerous because it undermines the security and stability in Kazakhstan.

In recent studies of restrictions on religion, the Pew Research Center found a connection between social hostility and the restriction on religion. The one type of government restriction that has the strongest association with social hostilities involving religion is the government favoritism of one religion to the detriment or exclusion of other religions.

**Protestants are one the most targeted religious group under the new Religion Law.**

Prior to October 25, 2012, the re-registration deadline established by the Religion Law, many communities reported that Kazakh officials applied pressure to religious communities seeking registration. Kazakh officials reportedly pressured nearly a quarter of the signatories on the application of the Grace Protestant Church in Karaturyk to remove their names. Regional officials made phone calls or visited signatories, warning them about the dangers of the "sectarian" Grace Church and demanding that they revoke their signatures on the application.

Following the October 25 re-registration deadline, there has been a precipitous drop in the number of registered religious communities. In October 2012, Kairat Lama Sharif, the head of Kazakhstan's Religious Affairs agency declared, "204 Protestant churches didn't meet the registration criteria and are to be liquidated."

On Easter Sunday, a private residence was raided for hosting nine members of a small congregation of the New Life Pentecostal Church who were meeting for private worship.

Seven members of a Baptist church in Ayagoz, including two grandmothers in their late seventies, were fined the equivalent of nearly two months' local average wages for a teacher. Their offense was participating in an unregistered religious meeting in a private home.

But the most disturbing news came from Astana, where Bakhytzhn Kashkumbaev, the pastor of the Grace Church in the city of Astana, Kazakhstan, was charged with exerting "psychological influence" on his congregation and using a "hallucinogenic drink" during Communion, as well as inflicting "serious damage on the health of his parishioners." The "hallucinogenic drink" turned out to be red tea from local suppliers, used as a non-alcoholic element for Communion, and, according to the investigators, the "psychological influence" was caused by prayers and chants.

After this, Pastor Kashkumbayev was transferred against his will to the psychiatric facility where he was subjected to a daily intramuscular injection of a certain drug. The first injection made Pastor Kashkumbaev ill. He vomited, his

heart started beating irregularly, and he lost consciousness. If no one else had been present in the psychiatric ward, Pastor Kashkumbayev would have surely perished.

This attitude toward Protestant Christians is puzzling, especially in the light of their activities in Kazakhstan. They are law-abiding, peaceful citizens of their country, and their preaching is based on the love of God and love of their neighbor. Protestant associations have never been seen as rebellious or extremist.

On the contrary, in their teaching and preaching, Protestants pray for the government and their politicians. Many Protestant rehabilitation centers for drug addicts restore those who were considered lost forever.

In his meeting with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, President Nursultan Nazarbayev said that for Kazakhstan, the strengthening of traditional moral values is extremely important. Protestants are in the same boat with the President and the people of Kazakhstan.

For all these reasons, I urge the government of Kazakhstan to return to the path of religious tolerance and freedom of conscience, in which this country has moved for twenty years; review the provisions of the law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" adopted in 2011; release Pastor Kashkumbayev immediately; and stop the unwarranted defamation of evangelical communities by the media.

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\* Kazakhstan Mission to the United Nation <http://kazakhstanun.org/press-releases/kazakhstan-celebrates-constitution-day.html>

\*\*Embassy of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan: Country Profile," 2012. Available at: [http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/publications/Kazakhstan\\_Country\\_Profile\\_2012.PDF](http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/publications/Kazakhstan_Country_Profile_2012.PDF).



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