



OSCE/ODIHR HDIM, Fundamental Freedoms I, Freedom of Religion or Belief,
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Freedom of Religion or Belief in Central Asia

Mr/Mdm Moderator, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee and partners Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, and Norwegian Mission to the East are grateful for this opportunity to address the situation on Freedom of Religion in Central Asia.

One year after the launch of our significant report “Broken Promises: Freedom of Religion or Belief issues in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan”, we still see the importance of working for Freedom of Religion or Belief in this region and continue our cooperation towards this end by updating the report and widening our focus to also include Tajikistan.

In Kazakhstan, the restrictive draft law on religion was re-introduced by the Government on 1 September, as soon as the Majlis reconvened after summer. Three weeks later, the draft law has already passed the lower house of Parliament without being subject to an open, inclusive debate with relevant stakeholders, and there is great concern that it will be passed also by the Senate already first coming Thursday and further limit the freedom of religion or belief in Kazakhstan. However, there is still time to vote against the draft law, remove from it critical provisions like censorship and the compulsory registration of religious groups and missionaries, and put the law in line with the human dimension commitments of the organization Kazakhstan chaired only last year and where it is now part of the Troika.

In Kyrgyzstan, the newly elected Parliament and the soon-to-be new President now have a rare opportunity to abolish Bakiev’s restrictive Law on Religion from 2009, and ensure participation of relevant stakeholders and religious communities in an open and transparent process to draft a new law. The new law should then comply fully with the joint Council of Europe Venice Commission /OSCE Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief legal review of October 2008 and contribute to reconciliation between Kyrgyzstani citizens of various religious denominations.

In Tajikistan, legal restrictions on children’s and parents’ freedom of religion have been introduced in a new law. Religious activity is banned for children up to 18 years of age, but at the same time there are no clear guidelines as to how this law is to be implemented. The government has also called for students at religious institutions abroad to return home, and banned unregistered Moslem teaching, even in smaller private gatherings. Tajikistan is concerned with increased radicalism and extremism in the poverty stricken country, but should take into consideration that repressive state measures against people carrying out their fundamental freedoms only lead to more extremism and radicalism, not less.