

## **Kyrgyz NGOs Fear Curbs**

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Even though the justice minister says his plan to check up on non-government groups has been misrepresented, many fear it is the thin end of the wedge.

Non-government groups in Kyrgyzstan are up in arms at reports of a government proposal to check up on their activities, with some drawing comparisons with new legislation in Russia that is likely to severely curb the activities of foreign-funded charities.

However, Justice Minister Marat Kayipov to whom the announcement was attributed says he only wants to identify religious extremists who might be operating under the guise of legal non-government organisations, NGOs.

News of the plan came out on January 24 after journalists who had attended an internal meeting at the justice ministry reported that Kayipov had ordered his staff to run checks on all NGOs, that receive funding from abroad, and establish which of them might pose a threat to national security.

Kyrgyzstan has more than 7,000 NGOs, and the most active of them were quick to condemn the scheme as a way of pressuring the non-government sector.

The following day, the Association of Civil Society Support Centres, representing groups which act as resource centres for other NGOs, issued a statement urging Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev to prevent the justice ministry turning the plan into a reality.

“Such a decision [would] undermine the current partnership relations between the state and the non-government sector,” said the statement.

On January 26, another 17 NGOs wrote to President Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov saying Kayipov’s reported remarks had “shocked the whole of civil society”.

“Perhaps the minister forgot that Kyrgyzstan is a democratic country and not a police state,” said their letter. “The minister has clearly been inspired by examples from other countries, where they have no civil sector and where people are not ready to stand up for their freedom.”

NGO leaders interviewed by IWPR were just as forthright. “It is a bad signal for us,” said Asiya Sasykbaeva of the Interbilim group. “If civil society is pressured, it will result in nothing good – it could mean a repeat of the [revolutionary] events of March 24.”

Tolekan Ismailova, the head of the Citizens Against Corruption group, added, “In Kyrgyzstan, there is a process of destruction rather than reform going on. Only the civil sector has been successful, and now we see a further attempt at pressure even here.”

Others, however, suggested that the justice ministry lacked the powers to back up any threat.

"It is an attempt to limit us, but it will not be successful, because the ministry lacks the leverage for that. Only courts can issue this kind of decision," said the head of the NGO Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, Edil Baisalov.

As Toktaim Umetalieva, head of the Association of Non-Government and Non-Commercial Associations, said, "The Law on Non-Commercial Organisations says that NGOs are subject to checks only by the tax inspectorate and the social fund. The [justice] ministry is not authorised to conduct such checks."

Some drew parallels with Russia, where the upper house of the Russian parliament this week approved a bill already passed by the lower chamber imposing tougher controls on NGOs. Moscow says the law will help prevent foreign governments from using non-government groups to undermine the Russian state, but the NGOs say the legislation will make life much harder for them and for the growth of democracy.

"Mr Kayipov is using the recent precedent from Russia, where they've started placing curbs on the NGOs through legislation," said Maxim Kuleshov, director of the Tokmak human rights resource centre.

After the furious reaction elicited by his remarks, minister Kayipov said he had never instructed staff to run checks on all NGOs, but had instead called for a study of those groups that worked in areas specifically to do with religion. "I didn't use the word 'check', but rather 'analysis'," he said.

He added that his remarks may have been misconstrued simply because it was the first time his ministry had conducted a meeting in the Kyrgyz language rather than Russian. "Perhaps that is the reason why many people didn't understand it right," he said.

The authorities in Kyrgyzstan keep a close eye on Islamic groups to identify those that might be engaged in extremist activities.

Kayipov said it was justifiable to look into covert religious groups that might be disguising themselves as legitimate NGOs, and said one such organisation had in fact been found to be operating last year. "That's why we've decided to analyse the activities of some suspicious organisations. We won't interfere in financial matters, and we would only want to know whether the activities they conduct are in keeping with their institutional charter," he explained.

The head of the government commission which oversees religious affairs, Omurzak Mamayusupov, said that the justice ministry was doing the right thing, and that there were a number of extremist groups that needed to be stopped. "We should do it [run checks] for the sake of national security," he said.

The secretary of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, Miroslav Niyazov, was more qualified in his support for the plan, warning that it must not be used against legitimate groups. "If there really are cases where NGOs are pursuing a religious orientation, then it needs to be stopped," he said.

"At the same time, we can't be making unfounded accusations against all NGOs."

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