Uzbekistan disappoints with secretively adopted religion law

Uzbekistan has adopted a new law on religion that affords some marginal concessions but mostly leaves restrictions in place, much to the dismay of faith advocacy groups.

Among the more contentious areas covered in the legislation signed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on July 5 is that concerning the right to wear religious clothing.

The new-look Religion Law discontinues a widely disregarded provision forbidding anybody not registered as a cleric from appearing in public wearing such clothes.

State entities, which can include offices or universities, still retain the right to enforce a dress code, however. How this norm will be enforced with regard, for example, to women adopting Islamic headwear will be closely watched by a public increasingly alive to debates around this issue.

Another section of the new law will nominally simplify the process of registering religious organizations and places of worship. This procedure once required an initiative to be undersigned by 100 founders, but that number has now been halved. Critics say, though, that fiddly requirements have been slipped in to make the process complicated all the same.

Strict rules remain in place in regard to religious education. Pursuing religious studies is possible only after graduating from high school. Schools and universities will continue not to have faith studies included in their curriculum.

"The inclusion of religious disciplines in curricula is not allowed (with the exception of religious educational institutions)," the law states.

This is a sore point for the ever-growing number of people wishing to instill their children with Islamic doctrines from a young age. Since around 2017, many clandestine religious classes have been detected and broken up by law enforcement bodies. The state jealously guards its exclusive prerogative over imparting religious values to the public – a position that the newly adopted law defends.

"[Independent religious education] can cause discord in society over religious issues and lead to the public falling under the influence of alien ideas and views. To this end, the provision of religious education outside of a religious educational institution is deemed an illegal activity," a state newspaper commentary on the legislation reads.

Forum 18, a Danish-registered religious freedoms advocacy group, has criticized the Religion Law approved by Mirziyoyev, saying that it retains too many of the earlier standing restrictions, in defiance of international human rights charters to which Uzbekistan has committed in principle.

The group said its concerns about bans on the exercise and teaching of religious beliefs without state sanction and the sharing of beliefs, as well as tight censorship over religious literature were echoed by a number of international bodies, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe Venice Commission.

Complaints center on points that have been billed as signs of progress.

"Although the Religion Law reduces the number of adult citizens required to apply for a community to be allowed by the regime to exist from the current 100 founders to 50, it adds an extra restriction requiring all founders to live in one city or district," Forum 18 noted.

Another criticism of the legislation was not so much its content, but how it was adopted without serious public scrutiny.

"The drafting and adoption of the new Religion Law took place almost entirely in secret, with only infrequent public announcements of progress," Forum 18 complained.

Even though the draft law was posted online last August for public discussion, it was not made clear how or when ordinary members of the public were to provide their feedback.

"The state wants total control and even discussion of the Religion Law is in secret," one unnamed human rights defender told Forum 18. "This breeds extremism."

Although legislation may not meet the hopes of those wishing for greater religious freedom, others are satisfied that things are improving in the day to day. Between 2006 and 2017, Uzbekistan was listed among the U.S. State Department's countries of particular concern for lack of religious liberties. The country was held on a so-called Special Watch List in 2018 and 2019. A further upgrade followed last year.

"On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State removed Uzbekistan from the Special Watch List, determining that it no longer engaged in or tolerated 'severe violations of religious freedom,'" according to the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

As far as religious education goes, the authorities are pinning their hopes on the pious being placated by initiatives like the newly created Islam-themed television station Hidoyat Sari (Guidance toward the path of truth).

Finance secretary asked to probe why PayPal is not operating in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: A parliamentary panel on Wednesday directed the finance secretary to hold a meeting with all stakeholders to probe why PayPal is not operating in Pakistan.

The panel also recommended that there should be an exemption in custom taxes on import of especially designed mobile phones for visually-impaired people.

A meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Finance Revenue and Economic Affairs was held at the Parliament House with Senator Talha Mahmood in the chair where the issue was discussed. People are unable to take full advantage of Amazon because PayPal does not operate in Pakistan, committee members pointed out.

The committee took up a petition filed by a citizen Mohammad Bilal Mukhtar, who had requested the Senate Secretariat to look into the issue.

"We want PayPal in Pakistan as there are lots of people who are working as free lancers and we face issues regarding payment and PayPal is the most convenient way to transfer or receive funds from freelancing websites and clients," the petitioner stated. His petition was referred to the senate committee by the Senate Secretariat.

During the committee meeting, a representative of State Bank of Pakistan said that there is no restriction by State Bank of Pakistan on PayPal. According to a document of the Finance Division, presented before the committee PayPal is a private company with a presence in various countries.

"However, PayPal has not approached State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) for the same. Entering into a particular market is a business decision and SBP is of the view that there is no restriction on entry/operations of any international payment gateway in Pakistan subject to compliance of related foreign exchange regulations," read the document.

Committee members said that PayPal is operating in many small countries that have a population lower than that of Pakistan, but it is surprising that they are not operating in Pakistan – a country with an over 220 million population.

The committee tasked Finance Secretary Yusuf Khan to hold meetings with all stakeholders to find out why PayPal and e-commerce giant Amazon is not operating in the country and sought a report after a month. In May this year, Amazon had added Pakistan to its seller's list however due to non-availability of PayPal, people are unable to properly benefit from the facility.

The committee also discussed another public petition, seeking exemption of customs duty on mobile phones for visually-impaired people.

Representatives of the Customs Wing told committee members that the issue is being examined in consultation with Ministry of Health. Members unanimously supported the petition. The committee chairman directed representatives of Ministry of Commerce and Health to attend the next meeting in order to brief the committee about the issue.

Earlier, a senior officer of Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) briefed the committee about tax notices issued during the last three years. The committee members including Senator Kamil Ali Agha, Musadik Malik, Farooq H. Naek and others said that FBR during the last three years issued millions of notices, but it could not collect tax in accordance with the number of notices issued.

The committee members, including Federal Minister for Railways Azam Khan Swati said those officials of FBR who issue false notices to people as well as tax defaulters should be given stern punishment. In his emotional remarks, railways minister said that FBR officials, who issue false notices and tax defaulters should be hanged. The committee was also informed that there is leakage of Rs1,350 billion tax as people submitted incomplete information in their returns and FBR has been working on collecting this amount, but due to litigation and other issues, this has been delayed. The committee said that the total revenue is around Rs4,000 billion and when FBR will collect the said Rs1,350 billion, it will be a big booster for the country's economy.

Kyrgyzstan denies role in Turkey's rendition of Gulen-linked educator

Kyrgyz authorities have denied claims that they conspired in the kidnapping by Turkish intelligence services of a Turkish-Kyrgyz educator who went missing from Bishkek on May 31, yet another victim of Turkey's illegal rendition of alleged terror suspects.

A spokesman for Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov said it was "absurd to speculate" that Kyrgyz authorities were involved in the kidnapping of Orhan Inandi. But rights groups say it's unlikely that he could have been taken without their complicity.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on Monday that Inandi had been brought back to Turkey, the first time his whereabouts were known since his disappearance. Inandi was widely believed to have been held at the Turkish Embassy in Bishkek. It's unclear when he was flown back to Turkey.

Erdogan proudly declared after meeting with members of his cabinet in Ankara that as a result of "unique and patient efforts," Turkey's national intelligence service had brought "a top Central Asian leader of FETO, Orhan Inandi, to our country to face justice."

Freedom House, which has documented numerous such cases, asserted in a January report that Turkey has carried out such renditions in at least 31 different countries.

Human Rights Watch, which has been following Inandi's case, said in a statement today that Turkish and Kyrgyz authorities had "abducted, forcibly disappeared, and extrajudicially transferred a dual Turkish-Kyrgyz national." The New York-based watchdog said the actions "included egregious violations of international and domestic law" and "demonstrates again Ankara's ruthless disregard for the rule of law in general."

"That Inandi, a dual Turkish-Kyrgyz national, could be abducted and missing for weeks on Kyrgyz soil only to be illegally removed from the country by Turkey's intelligence services suggests the Kyrgyz government is either unwilling or unable to stand up to Ankara or directly colluded with them," said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Kyrgyz officials deny any collusion. The Turkish ambassador to Bishkek was summoned to the Foreign Ministry over the affair. Japarov said in a July 6 interview that his government would demand Inandi's immediate repatriation to his country.

He added that since 2016, there had been three attempts to kidnap the 53-year-old teacher, most recently in early 2021.

However, there is speculation that Inandi may have been spirited to Turkey on Japarov's plane when the Kyrgyz leader met with Erdogan in Ankara on June 9.

A photograph of Inandi circulated to the media by the Turkish government showed a gaunt, unshaven man with dark circles under his eyes standing between two large Turkish flags. He wore a haunted look. His hands were clasped but, unusually for the circumstances, they were not in cuffs. Inandi's wife Reyhan, contacted by Al-Monitor in Bishkek via Whatsapp today, said she believed the reason his hands were not cuffed was because he had been tortured. "Notice how his right hand is swollen in the picture.

They were obviously forcing him to sign something and he refused. Look at what they did to this man. He had beautiful hands. He has lost so much weight. May whoever did this to him be ripped to a thousands pieces, may the Almighty give them the punishment they deserve," she said.

Numerous Gulen-linked suspects who similarly disappeared and surfaced in Turkish custody months later have alleged during their court hearings that they were held at black sites and tortured by their MIT captors. Several Gulen-linked individuals remain missing within Turkey proper. Yusuf Bilge Tunc, among tens of thousands of alleged Gulenists purged from the government, has been missing since August 2019.

Huseyin Galip Kucukozyigit, another purged bureaucrat, has been missing since Dec. 29 last year.

Sebnem Korur Financi, a forensics specialist who has treated scores of torture victims in Turkey, also said that the condition of Inandi's hand suggested that he may have been subjected to ill treatment. "We see that one hand is larger than the other We see a change of color on the larger hand. It might be due to some direct blows to the hand."

Turkish authorities allege that Inandi, who has resided in Kyrgyzstan since 1995, served as the Central Asia "imam" for the Gulen network. Erdogan charged, "This individual, during his time in Turkey, took part in the secret cells of the organization. After joining its senior leaders, this individual invested FETO's dirty money in Central Asia and used the brains that he poisoned to implement the organization's dark agenda."

Turkey's state-run radio and television network TRT alleged that Inandi had secured 25 Kyrgyz passports for Gulen-linked fugitives and said that Turkish authorities had established that the educator had traveled to Pennsylvania numerous times to "receive instructions" from Gulen, most recently in March.

Nepal's unsteady progress towards fiscal federalism

Amid swirling uncertainties created by internal party wrangling and a second wave of Covid-19, all seven of Nepal's provincial governments, newly created by the 2015 constitution, introduced their budgets for FY 2021/22 on June 15, meeting the statutory deadline.

But Nepal's halting progress towards fiscal federalism, in place only since the elections of 2017, still has some serious kinks to work out.

As expected, and in line with federal priorities, the new provincial budgets make health security and economic recovery from the pandemic their top priorities. Like last year, all the provincial budgets are focused on fighting Covid-19, through infectious-disease control, expanded healthcare services, and the development of health-related infrastructure and human resources.

This penultimate round of budgets before next year's provincial elections also emphasizes rapid economic development, poverty reduction, advancement for backward areas and communities, expansion of social security, and improvements in living standards.

Despite limited capacity and resources, compounded by federal neglect, the provinces have made considerable progress in the step-by-step, year-by-year process of building a functional system of public financial management (PFM).

The new federal system merged and sometimes split districts to create the provincial governments, and there was no comprehensive documentation of their demographic, administrative, and economic profiles—what are the public services and utilities; where are the factories and banks; what are the administrative boundaries.

Bangladesh hits record COVID cases amid fears of oxygen crisis

Bangladesh has reported 11,525 COVID-19 cases, the highest in a day since the start of the pandemic, as authorities fear a crisis of medical oxygen critical in its treatment.

At least 163 people died in the last 24 hours, raising the total number to 15,392, according to the government's data on Tuesday. The total caseload is 966,406.

Bangladesh on Monday extended a strict nationwide lockdown, confining people to their homes for another week as the numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths hit new records.

Bangladesh's cases of new infections increased last month when the Delta variant – first discovered in India – hit the country's border regions in the northern and southwestern regions.

The country shares a large border with India, and health experts say the actual numbers of infections and deaths are likely higher.

Meanwhile, oxygen supply at COVID-19 hospitals in Bangladesh is feared to be running out, while hospitals in capital Dhaka are nearing a breaking point amid a record surge in cases.

The country's health officials say it would be difficult to address the demand for oxygen supply if the daily infections continue to remain high.

The country has a total of 1,217 incentive care unit (ICU) beds, Anadolu Agency reported.

Dhaka alone has 839 ICU beds, which has created huge pressure on the capital and disparity among cities. Of the total, some 356 ICU beds were available as of Tuesday, Anadolu said.

Belal Hossain Rahat, 30, a resident of the southwestern Jhenaidah district, told the agency that both his parents developed breathing difficulties and high fever due to COVID-19 and are current in a day since the start of the pandemic, as authorities fear a crisis of medical oxygen critical in its treatment.

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Belal Hossain Rahat, 30, a resident of the southwestern Jhenaidah district, told the agency that both his parents developed breathing difficulties and high fever due to COVID-19 and are currently under treatment at their home.

There is no ICU facility at the Jhenaidah government district hospital, according to the Directorate General of Health Services data.

"The existing poor and faint conditions in the district hospital have forced us to arrange their treatment at home. We have already taken the necessary preparations. And if their condition remains unchanged, we will have to move to Dhaka for better treatment," Rahat said.

Referring to the current situation in the government hospitals at the districts level, DGHS spokesman Dr Nazmul Islam told Anadolu Agency that the doctor-patient ratio in Bangladesh is only 5.26 per 10,000 people.

"Till now, there is no serious oxygen supply crisis but if the infection figure continues to mandate and people need oxygen then it certainly will be difficult to address the demand," he said.

"We have already prepared a procurement plan to reserve more oxygen at a number of hospitals."

The DGHS said it has the capacity to provide 210-220 tonnes of liquid oxygen daily.

But experts and media reports estimate that the daily demand for oxygen has crossed 230 tonnes amid the surging infections since last week.

The country is also facing a crisis in vaccination after India stopped exports of AstraZeneca shots because of its own outbreak in April. Bangladesh has a deal to get 30 million doses from India's Serum Institute.

Only four million Bangladeshis have been vaccinated in a country of 160 million people. Authorities are hoping to start a new mass vaccination campaign with China's Sinopharm and other vaccines.