

Appeals Judge in Azerbaijan to Decide Fate of Church

A Christian congregation in Azerbaijan is waiting pensively to see if a judge will uphold a court order that banned its right to meet and “liquidated” the church.

“They are upset, but at the same time they continue coming out hoping for the best,” said Mehti Suleymanov, an elder at Greater Grace Church in Baku, Azerbaijan, which has been meeting for roughly 20 years.

Judge Tahira Asadova of Baku’s Administrative Economic Court on April 25 ordered the Greater Grace Church to be “liquidated” after the State Committee on Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO) filed suit against it for failing to register with the committee. The liquidation rendered all activities of the church illegal.

The church appealed the decision on May 24 and is waiting for another ruling, scheduled for July 17, from a judge at the Baku Court of Appeals.

“If the court upholds the decision, we will have no right to assemble,” Suleymanov said. “If we continue to meet, then they will come and start harassing us.”

The Greater Grace Church registered with the Justice Ministry in 1993 and gave copies of its registration papers to the SCWRO. According to Forum 18 News, the committee never sent the church a request to re-file a registration with the committee.

Church leaders also said the committee informed them of the need to register only after a committee-set deadline had already passed.

Saving Face

Greater Grace's problems are part of a larger crack-down on religion in Azerbaijan, according to members of the church.

The population of Azerbaijan is 87.6 percent Muslim, according to *Operation World*, though the government is secular and freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. But in 2009 the SCWRO required all religious groups to register with the government.

Matti Sirvio, one of the founders of Greater Grace, said he sees the crack-down on Christians as an attempt by the government to save face with Islamic groups within the country.

In December 2011, authorities arrested the pastor of a church in Neftechala that was not registered with the SCWRO. Authorities seized Bibles, books, magazines, audio recordings and videotapes. Initially, authorities also sealed the church building the congregation used. Police interrogated members of the congregation.

Pastor Telman Aliev was fined but has declined to pay it. He is still leading the congregation.

Only two Protestant churches in Azerbaijan have had their registrations approved. The overwhelming majority of the registrations have been granted to Shia Muslim groups.

Both Sirvio and Suleymanov said recent changes on SCWRO's board of directors will result in the positive resolution of the court case. Until then, Suleymanov said, his church will wait.

"For the most part, people are quiet," he said. "They know there is nothing to be done about it. They are just trusting God."