

Children May Lose Religious Rights in Tajikistan

Parliament in Tajikistan adopted two new laws Thursday, which would ban most children under the age of 18 from religious activities.

As reported by Forum 18, these documents are to be forwarded to President Emomali Rahmon for his approval. If Rahmon signs these legal documents, it could spell out increased suppression of parent and child religious rights in the country.

Joel Griffith with Slavic Gospel Association says: "Apparently the presidential administration was sort of behind [the effort] to put this kind of a law through to begin with, so the initiative came from there. So if it's not signed, it would certainly be a miracle."

Specifically, the two measures adopted are the Parental Responsibility Law and the Criminal Code amendments. These would affect many religious organizations, including churches in Tajikistan supported by Slavic Gospel Association.

The Parental Responsibility Law, in practice, would place a ban on most children under 18 from participating in religious activities. The Office of Human Rights in Tajikistan told Forum 18 that the law is needed especially for parents who lose control of their children to extremist religious groups.

"I'm sure the government would say that it's aimed basically at extremism," says Griffith. "It's really difficult to know what their real motivation is for passing such a thing, because it goes beyond targeting just what everybody would agree maybe would be extremist elements and ends up impacting mainstream as well. ... As the law is worded, it would seem to impact everybody."

On top of that, the Parental Responsibility Law also calls for parents to restrict certain types of jewelry, tattoos and even names they can choose for their kids.

This, paired with the amendments to the Criminal Code, demonstrates the type of penalty given to violators. A maximum of two years' imprisonment would be sentenced to organizers and participants in things such as unapproved gatherings, meetings, and demonstrations.

Griffith says: "You've got local churches themselves that would be impacted by this; there's question whether children would even be allowed to go to a worship service until they're 18 years old. ... It's a matter of deep concern to the churches."

If the laws are enacted and put into practice, state religious affairs officials told Forum 18 that they have specialists who would be in place at religious services to be sure the laws are being followed. If they find kids or teens in religious activities, higher structures will be appealed to.

"Evangelical churches are going to continue to proclaim the gospel no matter what, and I'm sure that they are going to continue to teach their children the things of the Lord," Griffith assures. "But obviously as they proceed to do that, it would put churches and their families at great risk if this [proposed law] is enforced aggressively."