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MONGOLIA: Religious freedom oasis? (Part 2 of 2)

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Although Protestants did not exist in Mongolia before 1990, they then seem to have experienced a boom due to the country's relatively large degree of religious freedom, Forum 18 News Service has found. However, the president of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance told Forum 18 that "it is impossible to build in Ulaanbaatar, even if a church is registered," and state registration appears to be a particular problem for indigenous Mongolian churches. Churches seeking registration may be the target of demands for bribes from local officials, or denied registration on non-legal grounds. They may also reportedly be fined - apparently for not having state registration, even though it is not compulsory under the 1993 religion law. Demands for money may also be made by local officials, even after registration has taken place. The US Embassy complains if US-led churches receive such requests, Forum 18 has been told.

Unknown in Mongolia prior to 1990, Protestant churches appear to have experienced something of a boom as a result of the country's relatively large degree of religious freedom (see Part 1 of this article http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=205). On 19 October Forum 18 observed one of three Sunday morning services at Naidvar ("Hope") Church in Ulaanbaatar, founded in 1993 by missionaries from Hong Kong. A team of young Mongolian pastors and a loud, western-style band led a mixed congregation of some 80 locals - some wearing the traditional silk "geel" - through a series of charismatic Mongolian hymns.

Of Ulaanbaatar's 37 registered Protestant churches, however, this is the only one with its own building, president of the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance N. Enkhbayar - more usually known by his Christian name, Joshua - told Forum 18 on 16 October. "It is impossible to build in Ulaanbaatar, even if a church is registered," he explained. This was confirmed by Agaa Lkhaasuren - more usually known by his Christian name, Luke - a Christian lawyer at the Rule of Law Institute of Mongolia. "If a community wants to build a church, they are charged five or six times what a business would be," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. "The authorities can't not allow it, so they obstruct in economic or bureaucratic ways."

Registration also appears to be a problem, particularly for indigenous Mongolian churches. In addition to those in Ulaanbaatar, according to Joshua, there are approximately 43 registered Protestant churches in Mongolia's 21 aimags (regions) - but a further 120 throughout the country are unregistered. While 67 of Mongolia's approximately 100 indigenous churches make up his Mongolian Evangelical Alliance, he said, only seven have registration: "Since 1997 the authorities don't register indigenous Mongolian churches." Of Ulaanbaatar's 37 registered churches - many of whom received registration after 1999 according to official statistics obtained by Forum 18 - 20 are Korean, said Joshua, including the one church to be granted registration in 2003, "in only two weeks." According to board member of the Union Bible Training Centre and pastor Dashdendev Dashzeveg, one church in the Mongolian capital has been trying to obtain registration for the past five years with no response, even though the state authorities are legally obliged to issue a decision within 45 days. "Some Korean churches donate 1000 US dollars to the city fund," he pointed out to Forum 18 on 19 October, "then registration is easy."

Dashzeveg said that he is currently involved in preparing a constitutional court complaint on behalf of the Chinese-founded "Time to Love Christ" Church, whose 2002 registration application was answered by a request for information about its finances, whether it owned a building and how many members it had. On providing these details, the church was denied registration on the grounds that it had neither sufficient funds nor a building, he said, even though these are not requirements of the 1993 religion law. According to Dashzeveg, this is the usual response received by churches unable to obtain registration in Ulaanbaatar. Joshua also told Forum 18 that individual khural (local council) members in both the Mongolian capital and the aimags were in practice "more powerful than the law." They might demand that a church obtain its own building in order to function, he said, pointing to a 2000 decree issued by Ulaanbaatar City Khural banning churches from meeting in private homes and gers (Mongolian nomadic tents or yurts) or a provision in the 1993 religion law under which dissemination of religious beliefs in state institutions is prohibited.

Mongolian Protestant representatives also told Forum 18 that, while no grounds are usually given, local authorities sometimes fine churches for not having state registration, even though it is not compulsory according to the 1993 religion law. A typical fine might be only 5000 tugrik (approximately five US dollars), according to Joshua, "but that is a sixth of a person's weekly wages." While he added that some churches "just pay the fine quietly so we don't know how frequent it is," Luke provided details of three recent cases in which police targeted Protestant churches based in gers: "In all three it was because they just didn't have registration at that particular moment." In 2001 police in the northern city of Sukhbaatar (Sühbaatar) reportedly detained a young female ger church

leader for 72 hours, in 2002 they made a failed attempt to prosecute a pastor in the nearby city of Darkhan (Darhan) after runaway children visited his church, and in 2003 police in Bulgan (250km north-west of Ulaanbaatar) simply banned a community from gathering, said Luke. The official in charge of recording statistics of registered religious organisations at Ulaanbaatar City Khural, Namsrai Baigalmaa, claimed to Forum 18 on 16 October that registration was compulsory.

Even if a Protestant church is registered, the authorities "ask for money all the time," according to Dashzeveg. A 2002 letter from Ulaanbaatar City Khural circulated to all churches requested donation of 500 US dollars to the city fund, he said, "and some churches gave it." The US embassy complained if American-led churches received similar demands, he added. A further lever which the authorities have over Protestant churches is that many must renew their registration licences annually, said Dashzeveg, even though this is not stipulated in the 1993 religion law.

Mongolia's presidential adviser on religious affairs, Samdan Tsedendamba confirmed to Forum 18 on 19 October that there were many complaints from religious organisations regarding annual registration. However, khurals do have the authority to grant one-year licences to media, religious and non-governmental organisations, he said: "Their activity is then monitored over three or four years, after which they may receive indefinite registration." Also acknowledging the trend in registration refusals and what he estimated was the "very widespread" practice of issuing fines for non-registration, Tsedendamba stated that some khurals had "not acted well." In particular, Mongolia has no legal restriction upon meetings in either private homes or gers, he maintained.

While it would be easy to regulate the situation by including a provision for annual licences in the religion law, for example, Tsedendamba countered that this "might just aggravate the situation." Rather than amending the law (see later F18News article), he argued that disputes between religious organisations and khurals would be better resolved by dialogue at the local level.

A printer-friendly map of Mongolia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=mongoli>

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