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USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Belarus, where the government tightly regulates religious communities through an extensive security and religious affairs bureaucracy, which has driven some groups underground. Officials are particularly hostile towards religious groups viewed as political opponents, such as Protestants. The government strictly controls foreign citizens who conduct religious activity, particularly Catholic priests. The rights of prisoners to practice their religion or belief – even those on death row – are routinely denied. In 2015, Belarus adopted an alternative service law, but it does not fully protect the right to conscientious objection to military service.

Background

Of Belarus' 9.6 million population, an estimated 68 percent belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 15 percent profess no religion, and 14 percent are Roman Catholic. The remaining three percent are adherents of other religious groups, which include Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Ukrainian or Greek Catholics, other Orthodox communities, Old Believers, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Hare Krishnas, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Armenian Apostolics.

Government Control over Religious Activity

A government agency, headed by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, oversees an extensive bureaucracy to regulate religious groups; each of the country's six regions employs multiple religious affairs officials, as does Minsk city. Officials from local Ideology Departments and the Belarusian secret police (which retains the Soviet-era title of Committee for State Security (KGB)) also are involved in religious controls. The 2002 religion law, which includes compulsory state registration of all communities and geographical limits on religious activity, is central to a wide web of regulations that tethers all registered religious groups. The religion law recognizes the "determining role" of the Moscow Patriarchate Belarus Orthodox Church (MPBOC) in national traditions and deems four faiths "traditional" – Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism – but does not include the Old Believers and Calvinist churches, present in the country since the 17th century. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities only can gain registration with the approval of a local MPBOC bishop.

Religious meetings in private homes must not occur regularly or involve large numbers. Use of houses of worship and any public exercise of religion requires state permission, which is rarely granted for disfavored groups, particularly Protestants. Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox and Catholic communities are less affected, partly due to the state's more positive view of them, but also because they are more likely to occupy historic churches. The New Life Church, a 1,000-member Pentecostal congregation in Minsk, has struggled since 2002 to keep control of its private church property, a renovated cow barn that authorities claim cannot officially be used as a church.

Unregistered religious activity usually is treated as an administrative offense punishable by a fine. Since registration is compulsory, the religion law makes no provision for those which do not wish to register, such as the Council of Churches Baptists and a similar Pentecostal group. A religious group found to have violated the religion law must correct the alleged violation within six months and not repeat it for one year or face closure. There is no legal avenue for religious groups to challenge such warnings, as the Belarus Constitutional Court noted in 2007. After that ruling, Jehovah's Witnesses often have tried, but failed, to establish the legal right to challenge such rulings.

Status of Public Religious Activity

In a positive development, during the reporting period, several religious groups were permitted to hold large religious events outside registered places of worship. Protestants held outdoor baptisms in lakes, Catholic and Orthodox churches held large public processions, and the Protestant Full Gospel Union received official permission for the first time in 20 years to rent a major public sports venue in Minsk. However, although Hare Krishnas were denied permits for large processions, they did hold small processions. Also, officials reportedly tried to prevent individuals from offering religious texts on the street, even if punishment is infrequent. In June 2015, three Hare Krishnas were briefly detained in Vitebsk for offering religious texts to passers-by. In November 2015, a lawyer who belongs to an unregistered Protestant church in Minsk asked parliament to explain why he was denied permission for a public Bible reading although registered religious groups are allowed to do so.

Actions against Religious Minorities

In July 2015, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church's parish in the capital Minsk gave up its years-long attempts to register. In May 2015, riot police raided the rented worship place of the Reformed Orthodox Transfiguration Church in Gomel; one month later, officials forbade the church from renting space, in effect a meeting ban. Its pastor, Sergei Nikolaenko, faces administrative charges and his home was searched. Also in May, armed police raided the Council of Churches Baptists in Svetlogorsk. Three members were later fined for unauthorized worship meetings; others face similar charges, as does the owner of the home where the church meets. In December 2015, police in Gorki raided a private religious meeting of a Council of Churches Baptists congregation. Its leader, Mikhail Shulgan, was told he should not hold a meeting without state permission, but as of 2011 that is no longer an administrative offense; his wife, however, was charged with the administrative offence of "not using living premises for their designated purpose." In February 2016, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, threatened to revoke the registration of Jehovah's Witness communities, although he lacks the legal authority to do so.

Actions against Foreign Priests

In July 2015, Belarusian border guards denied entry to the U.S.-based Archbishop of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. In December 2015, the government denied entry to two Polish Catholic priests invited by the church to work in Belarus. The Catholic Bishops Conference has noted publicly the increased difficulty their priests face in receiving official

permission to enter Belarus. In February 2016, Plenipotentiary Gulyako was publicly critical of Catholic priests' "destructive" activity and also criticized the Catholic Church for its alleged failings in training clergy. According to Forum 18, the Plenipotentiary's Office impeded the required registration for the Catholic Theological Academy that remains under construction in Minsk. The Conference of Catholic Bishops observed that training of clergy is an internal issue and noted there are 19 students in Catholic seminaries in Belarus and abroad.

New Alternative Service Law

In June 2015, Belarus adopted its first Alternative Service Law, which will go into effect on July 1, 2016. Members of pacifist religious communities will be eligible for civilian alternative service, under the control of the Labor and Social Security Ministry, for a term that is twice as long as military service. The new law does not address the status of objectors from religious communities that are not formally pacifist or non-religious conscientious objectors. Young men already in military service cannot apply for alternative service if they change their views. As of September 2015, one Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector still faced conscription attempts, even though criminal and administrative charges against him were dropped. A second Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector was acquitted at his criminal trial.

Recommendations

After Russian forces invaded Ukraine in 2014, Belarus has hosted several high-level international meetings on the crisis. These meetings have included State Department representatives, even though the United States has not had an ambassador in Belarus since 2008. With such increased U.S. government engagement with Belarus, USCIRF recommends the State Department raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights with Belarusian officials. In addition, the U.S. government should raise publicly Belarusian religious freedom violations at appropriate international fora, such as the OSCE and the UN, particularly the need to reform the religion law.

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