

Orthodox Church Gives Priests Freer Rein in Politics

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The Russian Orthodox Church has established rules for priests seeking elective office, a church representative said, despite a ban on almost all political activity by the clergy in a country that considers itself secular.

At a meeting, the church's Holy Synod reaffirmed rules set last year allowing priests to contest elections in cases when "schismatic" forces, or those of another faith, are seeking to use elective office to fight against the church.

Such a case could arise, for example, if "a political force declares that it is running in elections and that one of its aims is to fight Orthodoxy and the Russian Church," Vladimir Legoida, a church spokesman, said in comments posted online Friday.

Those rules are not new, Legoida said. But the church also set out "a clear mechanism" for priests or other church representatives who believe they should run for office.

They must apply to the church leadership for permission, explaining their reasoning, he said.

Priests are still barred from joining political parties, even if they run in elections, Legoida said, and he said those restrictions had been tightened.

Despite the restrictions, the move indicates that the church "wants more involvement in politics," said Ksenia Sergazina of the Sova think tank.

She said another example was legislation submitted to parliament last month that could set jail terms of up to three years for offending the religious sensitivities of the faithful.

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