

## Russian church leader rejects criticism over state ties



The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who has called President Vladimir Putin's rule a "miracle of God", defended its close ties with the state on Friday against criticism fuelled by the trial of three members of the Pussy Riot punk band.

In remarks published a day before a court issues its verdict in the trial over the band's protest against the Church's political role on a cathedral altar, Patriarch Kirill said the Church and state were merely bound by a "common agenda".

The patriarch did not refer directly to Pussy Riot. But his comments amounted to a firm rejection of the band's criticism, which has triggered debate in Russia about whether the country's dominant religion should play any role in politics.

"In Russia, possibly for the first time since the (1917 Bolshevik) revolution, the rule of the Church's separation from the state, proclaimed as a result of the October Revolution, is being followed quite closely," Kirill said in an interview with Polish media before a visit to Poland.

"This means that the state, the authorities and the Church are autonomous from each other. We are truly autonomous, we do not interfere in one another's dealings and we cherish this autonomy. The Russian Orthodox Church very much cherishes this freedom and this autonomy that exists today."

Maria Alyokhina, 24, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30, burst into Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral on February 21 and sang a protest urging the Virgin Mary to "Throw Putin out!"

The protest united many Russian Orthodox believers in outrage, but their trial has exposed deep rifts over the Church's role in politics.

## **PUSSY RIOT TRIO FACE JAIL**

The women could face three years in jail on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred in a case that has also drawn international criticism over Moscow's record on human rights and political freedoms.

The verdict due on Friday may overshadow Kirill's trip to Poland, the first by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to Russia's Roman Catholic western neighbor.

In a copy of the interview obtained by Reuters, Kirill portrayed the Church's relationship as nothing out of the ordinary. He said any "normal state" would share the Church's interest in "questions of morality".

Putin's ruling United Russia party has, like the Church hierarchy, sought to portray the Pussy Riot protest as immoral and blasphemous.

The three women say they did not mean to offend Orthodox believers, although many of them regard the cathedral as a sacred place, and wanted to protest against the strengthening links between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Christianity is the most popular religion in Russia, with some 70 percent of the population describing themselves as Russian Orthodox Christians, although far fewer regularly attend church.

Putin, a former KGB spy now back in the Kremlin as president since May 7, has walked a thin line between promoting Orthodox Christianity and celebrating a secular state of many religions.

The Russian Orthodox Church denies having any role in politics. But about half of Russians believe it does, in fact, play such a role, according to an opinion poll released on Tuesday by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center.

The poll showed three quarters of respondents believe it should stay out of politics, and many Russians have said they were disturbed when Kirill, speaking before the March 4 presidential election, called Putin's rule a "miracle of God".

*(Editing by Timothy Heritage)*

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