

# Orthodox Priest Will Run for Office After Ban Relaxed

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**The  Moscow Times**

A Russian Orthodox Christian priest plans to run for mayor, in the first such bid in an election since the church relaxed a ban on clergy entering politics, newspapers said on Wednesday.

Priest Anton Butin registered this week as an independent candidate in Nerekhta, a town of 30,000 people 300 kilometers southeast of Moscow.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the church banned clergy from state jobs in what experts say was a bid to wield greater control over independent-minded clergy.

Last week it declared they could enter politics in "exceptional cases," where the church encounters hostility from other faiths and factions, but did not elaborate.

It was unclear whether Butin falls into that category. His superior, the archpriest of Kostroma, warned the move could cost him his robes, Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper reported.

"It's unclear whether they will elect me. When I concretely go to work as mayor, then I will

certainly seek [the church's] blessing," Butin said.

A local elections commission spokeswoman confirmed that Butin was on the ballot for the March 13 vote in the Kostroma region, set to run against five other candidates.

"I called the head of the elections commission and asked whether I had the right," Butin, who became a priest in 1985, told Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

"Then I put my trust in God. ... Within three days we gathered the 453 signatures required to register," daily Noviy Izvestia quoted him as saying.

The Constitution officially separates church from state but electoral law does not specifically ban clergy from state office, saying any citizens may stand.

President Dmitry Medvedev last week backed the Orthodox Church's decision to lift the ban, calling it "the largest and the most respected social institution in modern Russia".

But rights campaigners say its power is encroaching on the separation of religion and state, while Muslim and other minorities say they feel excluded.

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