



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: KYRGYZSTAN

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

By *Mollie Blum, Researcher*

## Religious Freedom Landscape in Kyrgyzstan

### Overview

The space for religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan is limited. The government unduly restricts religious activities through various laws, policies, and actions that violate international human rights standards and has recently taken additional steps to further reduce religious freedom. This country update provides an overview of the religious freedom landscape in Kyrgyzstan by outlining the laws and trends that impact religious communities' ability to freely practice their beliefs. The report summarizes Kyrgyzstan's 2008 religion law and discusses its law on extremism, under which religious groups have been banned as "extremist" organizations and alleged members of these organizations targeted for their peaceful religious activities. The report also outlines issues pertinent to certain Christian groups, individuals prosecuted for their online religious activities, and the Jewish community in Bishkek.

### Background

The constitution guarantees the separation of religion from the state, prohibits the establishment of a state religion, and nominally guarantees freedom of religion or belief for all Kyrgyz citizens. The constitution additionally informs for *the Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2021–2026* (the concept) which President Sadyr Japarov signed in 2021. The concept sets forth state policies regarding religion through five main priorities that target different sectors of society to increase the space for freedom of religion or belief. Priorities include ensuring the constitution and laws are secular, increasing cooperation between state and religious authorities, improving religious education, reducing religious intolerance, and encouraging interreligious harmony.

According to the U.S. Department of State, ethnic Kyrgyz *comprise* about 74 percent of the population and ethnic Uzbeks make up 15 percent, with both groups primarily adhering to Sunni Islam. Other denominations of Islam include small Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslim communities. About 7 percent of the population is Christian, 40 percent of whom are Russian Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other groups including Jews, Buddhists, and Baha'is comprise 3 percent of the population while about 50,000 people practice Tengrism.



## Democratic Backsliding and the Implications for Religious Freedom

Observers have generally considered Kyrgyzstan an outlier among its more authoritarian regional neighbors due to its record of maintaining a relatively open civil society, democratic features, and space for human rights. However, in 2021 President Japarov [consolidated](#) power through a series of constitutional amendments that eroded democracy and human rights. Within the last year, the government of Kyrgyzstan has targeted independent media. It forced the [closure](#) of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Kyrgyz service Azattyk, which regularly reports on religious freedom concerns in the country, and the Bishkek Prosecutor’s Office [filed](#) a lawsuit to shut down Kloop Media Public Foundation.

Recent legislation limiting human rights also shrinks the space for religious freedom. Notably, in August 2023, President Japarov enacted amendments to the laws “on mass media” and “on measures to prevent harm to the health, physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual and moral development of children in the Kyrgyz Republic.” These amendments prohibit the distribution of information that is “harmful” to children by inhibiting their “spiritual” and “moral” development, such as “negating family and traditional social values.” There are concerns that the emphasis on “tradition” is an attempt to promote the social and religious beliefs of the majority of the country at the expense of minority groups. In May 2023, members of parliament [introduced](#) a draft law on “foreign agents,” which requires nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Kyrgyzstan, receiving foreign funding, and engaging in “political” activities to register or reregister

with the state and regularly report their activities. The draft legislation closely [mimics](#) Russia’s foreign agents law, which has been used to target religious leaders.

## Regulation of Religion through Law

Kyrgyzstan regulates religious activities through its 2008 law [About Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic](#) (religion law). The religion law purports to guarantee everyone the freedom of religion or belief but includes some provisions that unduly restrict religious activities, especially those of religious minorities.

## Registration and Restrictions on Religious Activities

The religion law requires that religious entities, including religious groups, missions, foreign missionaries, and religious schools register with the state to operate legally. All unregistered religious activity is penalized. As of April 2023, the official State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) [reported](#) that there were 3,385 registered religious organizations, of which 2,960 were Sunni Muslim religious organizations, and only one was a Shi’a Muslim organization. The remaining 425 registered organizations are mostly Christian, with many Orthodox organizations, along with small numbers affiliated with other religious groups. It is unclear how many groups have attempted to gain registration but were unsuccessful, although the state has [refused](#) to register Ahmadiyya Muslims, [Tengrists](#), and [Hare Krishna devotees](#) as religious organizations. Moreover, other religious groups, such as small Protestant churches, [report](#) that they do not feel comfortable even attempting to register for fear of state retaliation.

According to Article 200 of the Kyrgyz [Criminal Code](#), anyone found to have organized or led an illegal religious group that goes on to conduct activities that “harm the rights of citizens” is liable to face punishment, including the deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for up to three years, correctional labor for up to one year, a fine, or imprisonment for up to five years. Anyone found to have participated in the “harmful” activities of illegal religious groups could face up to three years of correctional labor, a fine, or imprisonment for up to eight years.

The registration process, as outlined in the religion law, is arduous. A religious group must gather at least 200 citizens as “initiators” who are of legal age and permanent residents of Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, initiators must provide notarized documents with personal information including their name, date of birth, citizenship, place of residence, and passport number. Each religious group must also provide documents including its charter, information about the history of the group’s religion and its values, and a lease agreement or property deed confirming the location of the group’s meetings. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan [removed](#) the legal requirement that religious organizations, missions, and missionaries seeking registration first obtain the approval from both their local council and the SCRA. The double approval mechanism had [created](#) a substantial burden for religious groups that resulted in numerous registration denials. In addition to the barrier posed by mandatory registration, the religion law also prohibits proselytization and forbids minors from participating in the activities of religious organizations. In the event a religious organization violates the law, the government can seek its liquidation by court order and suspend its religious activities pending a court decision.

The religion law requires that missions register with the state annually and stipulates that registration applications include the main goals of the mission, the location of its activities, management structure, financing, procedure for closing the mission, personal information about missionaries, and proof of registration in the mission’s country of origin. The SCRA has the right to suspend the religious activities of a mission or refuse registration if its work is found to constitute a “threat to state and public security, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional harmony, public health and morals.”

Missionaries and foreign citizens who are in Kyrgyzstan to carry out religious activities must also register with the state on an annual basis and cannot stay in the country more than three years. To obtain the necessary registration, a missionary must produce a letter of invitation from a registered religious organization in Kyrgyzstan along with the names and other personal information of that organization’s initiators. In July 2022, the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) [terminated](#) the missionary activities of a group of foreign citizens found to be illegally operating in Bishkek.

The state is authorized to request additional information from missions and religious organizations and to submit documents for religious examination, which could delay the registration process. The government of Kyrgyzstan can revoke the registration of a religious organization, mission, or religious school for multiple reasons, including the breakup of a family, the refusal of medical care on religious grounds, or the refusal of mandatory education.

### Regulation of Religious Materials

According to the religion law, registered religious organizations have the right to distribute, purchase, export, import, and store religious literature, including printed materials, audio-video materials, and other religious items. The state has the right to examine religious materials for “calls to change the constitutional structure, moral foundations of society, and religious devotion.” In addition, members of registered religious organizations are required to label all their religious materials with their full names and religious affiliation. The government prohibits the distribution of religious materials in public places, including parks and on the street, as well as outside of apartments, children’s institutions, and educational institutions. Individuals are additionally prohibited from purchasing religious materials outside of places of worship and specially designated stores. Several state agencies have the authority to ban religious materials deemed to contain “extremist,” “separatist,” or “fundamentalist” ideas. Article 332 of the Criminal Code provides up to seven years’ imprisonment for anyone found to have prepared or distributed extremist materials.

## Mandatory Reporting

The religion law requires that registered religious organizations provide periodic reports on their activities to a variety of government authorities. In addition, registered religious organizations are required to report the names of individuals involved in the organization's administration as well as the extent and source of all foreign funding. The state has the authority to send representatives to observe events held by registered religious organizations to ensure their compliance with the law. If a registered religious organization fails to provide the required information, the state files with the courts for its liquidation.

## State Targeting of Independent Muslims

### Extremism Law

The 2005 law [About Resistance to Extremist Actions](#) (extremism law) permits the state to ban certain religious groups to prevent "extremism," a term vaguely defined in the law that can encompass activities that do not involve the use or advocacy of violence such as "insulting national honor," or "inciting racial, ethnic, or religious hatred." Various provisions of the Criminal Code allow for the penalization of "extremist" activities with up to 15 years' deprivation of liberty. Relatedly, if a religious organization is found to have engaged in extremist activities, the state can liquidate the religious organization.

The Kyrgyz government [maintains](#) a list of organizations it has designated "extremist" and whose activities in the country are consequently banned. In November 2022, Kyrgyzstan's parliament [discussed](#) potential amendments to the extremism law and debated the existing list of banned organizations.

While authorities regularly detain individuals for their peaceful religious activities in association with banned organizations, government officials are reluctant to share information about any subsequent punishments in a purported concern for national security. Consequently, it is often difficult to acquire information about the fate of detainees after their initial arrest. In some instances, however, SCNS officials speak with detainees who allegedly "support" banned organizations to explain why these groups are illegal. As a result of these conversations, detainees often [renounce](#) their beliefs on video or directly to authorities. According to SCNS reports, these individuals renounced their faith because they have "realize[d] the fallacy of their chosen religious direction."

In 2017, Kyrgyzstan [added](#) Yakyn Inkar to the list of extremist organizations with the support of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), which works closely with the SCRA. The Yakyn Inkar movement follows a strict interpretation of Islam that encourages adherents to lead a pure and religious life. Adherents object to the secular nature of state education and often [face](#) fines and jail time because they [choose](#) not to send their children to public schools. In recent years, authorities have detained several alleged Yakyn Inkar members. In May 2022, regional and district authorities in the region of Chui [detained](#) six alleged members and their leader and seized religious materials. The following month, in June 2022, authorities [detained](#) a Yakyn Inkar member in Ak-Suu district for preaching about the movement. Local authorities reported finding extremist materials in a search of the detained man's home. Similarly, in July 2022, law enforcement [searched](#) the homes of three Yakyn Inkar members, confiscated their religious materials and cell phones, and detained them for proselytization. In June 2023, the SCNS [detained](#) 15 alleged members of the group in the Chui region and seized "a significant amount" of religious materials. That same month, SCNS officials coerced an alleged supporter of Yakyn Inkar to renounce his faith.

Alleged members of the similarly banned Hizb ut-Tahrir face regular harassment from the authorities through undue property searches, detainments, and even imprisonment for their peaceful religious activities. For example, in October 2022, authorities [detained](#) 11 suspected members of the group in Suzak district for allegedly producing and distributing extremist materials. In March 2023, authorities [detained](#) three women for allegedly spreading extremist ideology and proselytizing for a banned organization. In June 2023, the Manas District Court [sentenced](#) a man to two years in prison for allegedly purchasing religious books that contained the group's ideology. In several instances spanning [February](#), [March](#), and May 2023, numerous individuals affiliated with the group [renounced](#) their beliefs on video.

### Crackdown on Independent Islamic Institutions

In August 2023, authorities in Osh region [closed down](#) over 60 mosques and madrasas during a mass inspection of Islamic institutions. The justification for these closures varied from violations of building and safety codes to preventing extremism. About 40 additional Islamic institutions received fines for similar reasons. These inspections seemed to particularly target Muslims



who practice a form of Islam that differs from the state's preferred version. For example, in another mass inspection of mosques in Jalal-Abad in June, authorities found that 60 mosques were operating without state registration and their imams likely giving sermons not approved by the SAMK, activities that are illegal in Kyrgyzstan. Authorities also [conducted](#) a mass inspection of Islamic institutions in Talas region later in August 2023 and found that 29 mosques do not have registration.

## Persecution of Christians

Ethnic Kyrgyz Protestant Christians—particularly converts residing outside of Bishkek and those affiliated with Baptist and Evangelical groups—continue to experience persecution. Protestants living in small, rural towns often face harassment by those in local positions of power who believe that ethnic Kyrgyz should be Muslim. Government officials have claimed that prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against Christians could undermine the broader goal or outward portrayal of societal harmony and portray any [instances](#) of violence or vandalism as isolated cases. Yet, the national government also has directly restricted Christians' religious activity, as some groups have found it difficult to gain registration and even those organizations with legal status have faced fines and raids.

## Mob Violence and the Desecration of Christian Graves

Violent mobs have attacked non-Muslims, an occurrence that victims rarely [report](#) for fear of retaliation from both authorities and mobs. For example, in November 2022, a mob [intimidated](#) Christians and threatened to force them from their homes if they refused to convert to Islam. Although local authorities [dispersed](#) the mob, no one involved faced charges.

In Kyrgyzstan, the SCRA is tasked with ensuring that every religious group has a space to bury their dead, even though local government has authority over cemeteries. Yet, in more rural areas, the SCRA finds it difficult to provide all religious groups with equivalent cemetery space. Rural cemeteries are typically only sectioned off for Muslims or Orthodox Christians, leaving Protestant Christians—especially converts—without dedicated plots. Unknown individuals have reportedly exhumed the bodies of Christians who were buried in a cemetery section belonging to another religious group. In addition, vandals regularly [target](#) the graves of Christian converts. Local authorities are reluctant to respond to such crimes out of a desire to maintain societal harmony.

## State Targeting of Jehovah's Witnesses

The government has increasingly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan. In 2019, the state began a criminal investigation into the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses on charges of inciting "racial, ethnic, national and religious or interregional hatred." By March 2021, authorities acquired a search warrant for the Jehovah's Witness national administrative center in Bishkek and confiscated religious literature, computers, and a server. While authorities have returned everything taken as part of the raid, the criminal investigation remains ongoing.

In November 2021, the General Prosecutor's Office petitioned a court to officially declare 13 pieces of Jehovah's Witness literature as "extremist." Jehovah's Witnesses only heard about the hearing a few days in advance, leaving them inadequate time to prepare and find legal representation. Although the judge dismissed the case due to procedural issues, Jehovah's Witnesses are concerned the General Prosecutor's Office will seek to reopen the case.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses are registered at the national level in Kyrgyzstan, some local governments require additional registration as a local religious organization and have continuously blocked Jehovah's Witnesses' attempts to register. This has been an ongoing issue in the regions of Jalal-Abad, Naryn, Osh, and Batken since the enactment of the 2008 religion law. Jehovah's Witnesses in these regions have been denied registration as local religious organizations at least seven times since 2011 and most recently in March 2022. The United Nations Human Rights Committee [found](#) in both 2019 and 2021 that the registration denials violated Articles 18 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but Kyrgyzstan has not acted in response to the decisions.

## State Harassment of Other Christian Denominations

On March 26, 2023, armed officers [raided](#) religious services at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas region. The authorities accused two nuns from Slovakia of illegally preaching and blocked churchgoers from leaving until the nuns signed a document stating their guilt. The Church subsequently asserted that the charges against the nuns were unfounded and potentially the result of the authorities' misunderstanding the nuns' religious activities as preaching. Authorities fined each nun \$90 (8,733 soms) for violating the religion law, which the Catholic Church is [appealing](#). In addition to the raid, Deputy Director of the SCRA Zamir Kozhombardiev

[wrote](#) a letter to the umbrella organization of Catholic churches in Kyrgyzstan threatening its liquidation if St. Nicholas Church continues to violate the religion law. Another deputy director of the SCRA later denied that Kozhombardiev ever sent a letter.

Similarly, authorities [raided](#) a registered Protestant church and fined foreign churchgoers for violating the religion law around the same time as the raid on St. Nicholas Church.

### Prosecutions for Online Activities

There are a few known recent cases of individuals charged with inciting religious and ethnic hatred for their online activities. In April 2021, police [interrogated](#) and detained Gulzat Aaliyeva, a Tengrinist, for 48 hours on suspicion of inciting religious hatred when she criticized the Muftiate on her Facebook page. The Pervomaisky District Court of Bishkek [ruled](#) that Aaliyeva should remain under house arrest without access to Facebook for two months pending her trial, where she remained until June 2022. Aaliyeva was later [acquitted](#) in November 2022 due to procedural errors. Aaliyeva claimed that her family [faced](#) repercussions and threats related to her detainment.

In August 2022, a local court in the northern Chui region fined Aytbek Tynaliyev, a Protestant, \$1,140 (100,000 soms) for “inciting racial, ethnic, national, religious or inter-regional enmity” through his social media posts criticizing imams and mosques. Prior to his sentencing in August, the Ministry of Justice [conducted](#) an expert analysis of Tynaliyev’s Facebook posts and found that they included “extremist” materials that disgraced Muslims and President Japarov. Tynaliyev [chose](#) not to appeal the court decision for fear of further fines.

In September 2022, SCNS officials detained eight alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir for disseminating religious materials of a banned organization online.

### Status of the Jewish Community

There are about 1,500 Jews in Kyrgyzstan, most of whom live in Bishkek, where there is a synagogue and Jewish day school. In February 2022, the Jewish day school came under threat when city council members and locals [surrounded](#) the school to demand its closure. The protesters stated that the Jewish day school replaced a local preschool, of which there is a shortage in Bishkek, and that the school received special treatment in the form of high subsidies. The calls to evict the Jewish day school included some online [antisemitic rhetoric](#), but largely ended after advocacy from the United States Embassy in Bishkek and intervention from President Japarov. While the Jewish community has the support of national and local officials, it remains concerned about the fate of the Jewish day school.

### Conclusion

The space for human rights and religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan continues to shrink. The government of Kyrgyzstan directly violates its human rights commitments under international law by unduly and arbitrarily restricting peaceful religious activity. The state regularly fines, threatens, detains, and closes the religious institutions of those who practice religion independently from the state. At the same time, the government does not do enough to protect members of religious minority communities at risk of societal violence or subject to discrimination.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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