

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated. The government continued to penalize peaceful religious practices, enforce restrictive, long-existing legislation, and impose additional legislation that violates international standards pertaining to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). These legal and policy developments included amendments to the laws On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations and On Combating Extremist Activity as well as policies to uphold “Kyrgyz traditions” and “traditional Islamic values.”

The government continued to ban organizations that it vaguely labeled as “extremists,” including religious groups with no known history of violence such as Yakin Inkar and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the latter of which sometimes propagates antisemitism. Department of Internal Affairs and State Committee for National Security (SCNS) officials raided homes of and arrested members of both organizations. Raids against Yakin Inkar members took place in Osh, Batken, Jalal-Abad, and Chui, many of whom officials arrested and forced to renounce their faith. Authorities also opened criminal investigations against some of them, such as in May when officials in Osh detained seven alleged Yakin Inkar members, seized over 100 religious materials from their homes, and forced at least one detainee to renounce his faith and to promise adherence to “traditional Islam.” That same month, SCNS and Internal Affairs officials in Chui detained 16 Yakin Inkar members, including one man who self-identified as the “caliph.” Authorities placed him in pretrial detention for allegedly creating an “extremist” organization.

HT members faced similar raids. In March, Chui police reported the detention of a man under Article 332 of the Criminal Code—which penalizes the production and distribution of “extremist” materials—for distributing HT materials via Facebook and subsequently refusing to renounce his beliefs. In June, SCNS officials placed in pretrial detention

six HT members from Suzak, Jalal-Abad, after police claimed to have discovered “extremist” materials during residential raids.

Officials continued to raid and suspend or close *madrasas* (schools for Islamic instruction), religious camps, and mosques. In Jalal-Abad, SCNS officials investigated and fined a man 7,500 soms (\$87) under Article 142, Part 1, of the Code of Offenses for teaching minors religious literature without approval from the quasi-independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (SAMK). In July, a Chui interdepartmental committee—including Ministry of Internal Affairs officials and Muslim clergy—collaborated to “minimize the influence of non-traditional movements,” resulting in the discovery of one illegal *madrasa* in Sokuluk that catered to minors and two illegal *madrasas* in Ysyk-Ata. Officials suspended the activities of these *madrasas* and fined the organizers under Article 142, Part 4, of the Code of Offenses, which penalizes performing unauthorized religious work. Officials also carried out a similar raid on at least one other illegal *madrasa* in Talas. In July, the SCNS found and terminated the activities of four religious summer camps in Bishkek, reminding parents that Article 4, Part 5, of the religion law prohibits involving children in religious organizations.

Authorities also subjected non-Muslim groups to raids. In July, SCNS officials joined Combating Extremism and Illegal Migration police in investigating and blocking the activities of the “Word of God” religious movement in Issyk-Kul, arresting and fining three foreign nationals for “carrying out illegal religious propaganda,” under Article 142 of the Criminal Code. In August, authorities raided a Jehovah’s Witness meeting in Kyzyl-Kyia, Batken, seizing religious literature and detaining 18 people—some of whom they subsequently interrogated and photographed. That same month, police in Naryn detained 10 Witnesses for interrogation, demanding information about fellow believers on threat of administrative arrest.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kyrgyzstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international FoRB standards among the Kyrgyz and other regional governments;
- Collaborate, through the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs, with the government of Kyrgyzstan to seek a legal opinion on the religion law and draft extremism law from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; and
- Suspend U.S. National Guard Bureau military-to-military engagements with Kyrgyzstan until that government increases transparency and clarity regarding its “anti-extremism” operations targeting banned but peaceful religious groups.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Kyrgyzstan’s religious freedom conditions through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Issue Update: [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- Issue Update: [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

Background

Of Kyrgyzstan's approximately six million people, around 90 percent [identify](#) as Muslim, and most adhere to Hanafi Sunni Islam, while one percent adhere to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population largely includes Christians, who make up seven percent of the remaining population. Around 40 percent of them identify as Russian Orthodox; other groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The rest of the population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, International Society for Krishna Consciousness members, and Tengrinists.

Legal and Policy Developments Impacting Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, the government introduced—and in some cases passed—laws, policies, and decrees that impact the religious freedom space or would do so, if passed. For example, the government introduced amendments to two laws, On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations—commonly known as the religion law—and On Combating Extremist Activity, which would increasingly securitize the activities of all religious groups, if passed. Officials largely explained such actions as necessary for upholding Kyrgyz “traditions,” a trope that authorities commonly invoke throughout the region to justify Soviet-era, “secular” policies intended to control the religious sphere.

In August, the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) released updated draft amendments to the religion law to address “Islamization” and other threats to national security. The amendments mandate that religious people “maintain a neat appearance,” prohibit the door-to-door sharing of beliefs, require those seeking religious education abroad to first obtain official permission, increase registration standards, expand the requirements for theological examination, name the SAMK as the central governing body of Muslims, and more. By the end of the year, the Kyrgyz Parliament approved the draft law following its revision by a working group. Additionally, in September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs developed draft amendments to the law On Combating Extremist Activity, which would strengthen penalties for producing and distributing “extremist” materials through the media or internet and punish the possession of “extremist” materials and public calls for “extremist” activities. Kyrgyz authorities often level accusations of “extremism,” a term vaguely defined under law, to target the peaceful religious practices of Muslims.

In addition, the Bishkek City Internal Affairs Department installed facial recognition cameras around 22 local mosques, allegedly to dissuade theft. During both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the SAMK called

for Muslims to hold prayers only in mosques due to “recent situations in the world,” likely in reference to the March attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia, by suspected Tajik Islamic State terrorists. In July, President Sadyr Japarov signed into law amendments to the Civil Code to ban the use of religious terms in the names of corporate entities. In October, Japarov signed a decree, On Measures to Implement the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Funerals and Burials, which calls for the SAMK to prevent Muslims from holding extravagant burials because such “excessiveness” suggests that Kyrgyzstan “disregard(s) religious customs and traditions.”

The government also targeted those who opposed its religious policies. In February, the Kara-Suu district sentenced [Asadullo Madraimov](#) to three years in prison and [Mamirzhan Tashmatov](#) to two years in prison under Article 330, Part 1, of the Criminal Code—which penalizes the incitement of discord through the internet—for posting a video online that criticized the closure of their local mosque. However, in May, the Osh Regional Court reduced their prison terms by half upon appeal, allowing for Tashmatov's immediate release. The Supreme Court later restored Madraimov's original sentence.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government engaged with the Kyrgyz government in various fora in 2024. In March, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) visited Bishkek to discuss Kyrgyzstan's State Partnership Program with Montana, which is administered by the U.S. National Guard Bureau to foster international civil-military affairs cooperation. In April, then U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs John Mark Pommersheim and Kyrgyzstan Deputy Foreign Minister Aibek Moldogaziev [co-led](#) the 2024 United States-Kyrgyz Republic Annual Bilateral Consultations. During those consultations, participants discussed political and security cooperation, economic partnerships, and support for civil society and rule of law. Human rights discussions focused on the rights of women and gender-based violence but did not appear to include religious freedom. In June, then President Joseph R. Biden nominated Brian Stimmler to be Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Kyrgyzstan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of the C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. As in prior years, the U.S. government partnered with the Kyrgyz government to repatriate Kyrgyz nationals—particularly women and children—from prison camps in northeast Syria.