

KYRGYZSTAN

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

KEY FINDINGS

Although Kyrgyzstan is less repressive than other Central Asian states, discriminatory decision-making, hostility, and indifference are still a reality for many religious communities. Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks have been targeted by official discrimination, especially in the aftermath of bloody inter-ethnic clashes in Osh in 2010. USCIRF has monitored religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan for several years.

BACKGROUND

Over 80 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population of 5.7 million is Sunni Muslim; 15 percent is Christian, mostly Russian Orthodox; and the other 5 percent includes very small Shi'a Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i communities or individuals who are unaffiliated with any religion. The country's large ethnic Uzbek community (up to 40 percent of the population of southern Kyrgyzstan) mostly adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.

2009 Religion Law

The constitution purports to provide for religious freedom for all citizens, but Kyrgyzstan's 2009 religion law violates international standards of freedom of religion or belief by criminalizing unregistered religious activity and imposing burdensome registration requirements, including that a religious group must include at least 200 resident citizens as founders. The state Muslim Board controls all Muslim communities and the banned Ahmadis cannot meet or worship together. The OSCE, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, and the UN Human Rights Committee have called for reform of the law's registration requirements, criminal penalties for unregistered activity, overly broad restrictions on "fanaticism and extremism," and limits on missionary activity and on the distribution of religious texts. The Kyrgyz religion law limits conscientious objection to military service status to members of registered religious groups. In addition, the authority of the Kyrgyz State Committee for Religious Affairs (KSCRA) to censor religious materials—increased under 2012 amendments to the religion law—seems to apply particularly to non-traditional Muslim, Protestant, and minority

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF continues to recommend that the U.S. government (1) urge Kyrgyzstan to seek expert advice from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and relevant Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) entities on the still-pending draft religion law amendments, and (2) publicly raise Kyrgyzstan's religious freedom violations at appropriate international fora, such as the OSCE and the UN.

religions. In 2015, draft religion law amendments were discussed that would have resulted in major new official restrictions on religious communities; as of February 2017, the amendments were still under consideration.

Registration Issues

According to the KSCRA, there are 3,003 registered religious groups, including 2,429 mosques, and 380 Christian organizations, among them Catholics, Protestants, and 41 Jehovah's Witnesses centers. The Forum 18 News Service reports, however, that no new Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness or Ahmadi communities have been able to register since the passage of the 2009 religion law. Some 700 of the country's unregistered mosques have been deemed "illegal." In recent years, some religious groups were denied registration, including the Church of Scientology. In 2014, a Supreme Court ruling removed two major obstacles to registration: that a religious group can only conduct activity at its registered address, and that local councils must approve 200 founders of a religious group before it can apply for registration. Kyrgyz officials, however, refuse to follow the ruling, and the draft religion law amendments also ignore it. In February 2016, the Kyrgyz Supreme Court rejected an appeal by Jehovah's Witnesses against registration denials in four cities. In October 2015, two Jehovah's Witnesses, Nadezhda Sergienko and Oksana Koriakina, were freed from 31 months of house arrest on charges of witchcraft, in apparent reprisal for their community's registration application. There are conflicting reports as to whether the case against them was closed. In 2016, Forum 18 also reported that smaller Protestant churches cannot register either because they cannot meet the required 200-member threshold or because they fear official retaliation.

Increased State Control of Muslims

Countries in Central Asia face genuine security threats from individuals and groups using violence in the name of religion, including an estimated 500 Kyrgyz who allegedly have joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Yet the overly restrictive religion laws and repressive anti-extremism measures adopted by the Kyrgyz and other Central Asian governments run the risk of radicalizing or entrapping peaceful religious adherents. In Kyrgyzstan, the state exercises control over the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam—the largest Kyrgyz Islamic denomination and the only one officially recognized as “traditional”—through a Muslim Board that appoints all clergy and religious educators.

In October 2016, Radio Azattyk, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Kyrgyz Service, reported that Arsen Baizakov, a theologian and civil rights activist, was attacked in Bishkek and suffered a concussion, several days before a planned protest against the KSCRA issuing “expert opinions” on “extremist” religious texts. In May 2016, police reportedly had searched his home for religious texts as a pretext for banning his nongovernmental organization.

Southern Kyrgyzstan, with its ethnic Uzbek population—many of whom are devout and traditional Hanafi Muslims—has seen several dramatic examples of official religious repression of local Muslim leaders. In 2010, southern Kyrgyzstan was rocked by ethnic violence; almost all the 450 victims were ethnic Uzbeks. Even though local imam Rashot Kamalov blamed neither Kyrgyz nor Uzbeks for the 2010 clashes, in November 2015 a local court sentenced him to a 10-year prison term for “inciting religious hatred”; his current status in prison is unknown. Kamalov is the son of a famous local imam, Rafik Kamalov, who was killed by Kyrgyz security forces in 2006 during a special counterterrorist operation. In January 2016, a Kyrgyz court reinstated a sentence of life imprisonment for Uzbek rights defender Azimjan Askarov for his alleged role in the 2010 Osh clashes, sparking an international outcry, including from the UN.

To its credit, Kyrgyzstan is the only post-Soviet state that has not banned Tabligh Jamaat, a major Muslim missionary movement with roots in South Asia; reportedly the movement is influential with some Kyrgyz officials. However, in May 2016, Radio Azattyk reported that authorities briefly had detained over 100 members of Yakyn Inkar, a Tabligh Jamaat splinter group, for unauthorized proselytism. All detainees were released after being fined or receiving an official warning. In February 2017, the KSCRA said that it may ban three Tabligh Jamaat splinter groups, including Yakyn Inkar, for alleged terrorism. Lists of prohibited religious organizations reportedly are coordinated with such intergovernmental regional security organizations as

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In 2014, the Kyrgyz government banned the Uzbek Islamic religious movement Akromiya (which many Uzbeks deny is a formal movement) as an extremist organization.

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Other Issues for Religious Minorities

Local human rights activists report that Kyrgyz officials ignore hate speech, including comments by imams and the Muslim Board, against religious and ethnic minorities. In addition, the Kyrgyz government has not resolved a long standing issue: the denial of burials of members of religious minorities in municipal cemeteries run by the Muslim Board. In October 2016, the body of Baptist Kanygul Satybaldiyeva was twice exhumed by a crowd of 70 (including imams and local officials) who objected to her interment in Jalal-Abad cemeteries. In January 2017, three men (not including officials or imams) went on trial and were given suspended jail sentences, despite Criminal Code requirements of deprivation of liberty for such a crime. As of January 2017, Satybaldiyeva’s family had not been informed of what was done with her remains.