



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Kyrgyzstan

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution and the law provide for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government restricts the activities of radical Islamic groups that it considers to be threats to stability and security.

The Constitution provides for a secular state and the separation of church/mosque and state. The Government does not support any religion.

On March 24, 2005, President Akayev and his family fled the country after opposition demonstrators overran the main government building in Bishkek. Prime Minister Tanaev resigned. On March 28, the Parliament confirmed Kurmanbek Bakiyev as the Prime Minister and Acting President. The new government so far has indicated that it has no plans to rescind any policies of the Akayev government regarding religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued steps to monitor and restrict Islamist groups that it considered a threat. In April 2004, then-Prime Minister Tanaev signed a decree and plan of action aimed at "combating religious extremism" for 2004 to 2005. The decree outlines efforts of various government agencies directed at detection and prevention of terrorism and religious extremism, including the creation of a database of foreign religious extremist organizations, conducting an information campaign, and preventing inter- and intra-faith conflicts. In April 2005, the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) confirmed that the decree and plan of action remain in force and are being followed by the SCRA and other government agencies.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Some tensions occurred between Muslims and former Muslims who had converted to other faiths.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as a part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy continued to monitor the progress of the draft law on religion and maintained contact with government officials with regard to religious affairs. At numerous times during the period covered by the report, Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups, and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 77,181 square miles and its population is approximately 5.1 million. The latest official data from the National Statistics Committee reflected the following ethnic breakdown of the population: Kyrgyz, 67.4 percent; Uzbeks, 14.2 percent; Russians, 10.3 percent; Dungans (ethnic Chinese Muslims), 1.1 percent; Uighurs (ethnic Turkic Muslims), 1 percent; and other ethnicities, 6.4 percent.

Islam is the most widely practiced faith. Official sources estimate that up to 80 percent of the inhabitants are Muslims. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, and there are only a few Shi'a in the country (approximately 1,000). According to the SCRA, as of May 2005, there were an estimated 1,611 mosques, of which 1,592 are registered. There also are seven institutes for higher Islamic teaching. According to recent official estimates, approximately 11 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, although some experts believe it could be as low as 8 percent. The country has 44 Russian Orthodox churches, 1 Russian Orthodox monastery for women, and 1 parochial school. The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates 20 churches throughout the country. Jews, Buddhists, and Roman Catholics account for approximately 3 percent of the population, and they practice their religions openly in one synagogue, one temple, and three churches. In addition there are 265 registered Protestant houses of worship and 12 registered Baha'i houses of worship. The small Jewish congregation in Bishkek organizes informal cultural studies and humanitarian services, chiefly food assistance for its elderly. There also are syncretistic religious practices. Most notably, there is a Baptist church in the Naryn region whose followers are predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz. While they worship as Christians, they have incorporated Muslim modes of prayer into their Christian rituals. In the past year the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) also registered the Church of Scientology, the "Concordia-2" Lutheran Church, the Messianic Jewish Community "Beyt Jeshua", the religious group "Chaplain Service" and the religious group "Logos International Central Aging."

There is no official estimate of the number of atheists.

Islam is practiced widely throughout the country in both urban and rural areas. Russian Orthodoxy typically is concentrated in the cities with a larger ethnic Russian population. The other faiths also are practiced more commonly in the cities where their smaller communities tend to be concentrated. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religion; ethnic Kyrgyz are primarily Muslims, while ethnic Russians usually belong to either the Russian Orthodox Church or one of the Protestant denominations. While the majority of the population claims to follow Islam, a significant number of Muslims appear to be only nominal believers and identify with the faith out of historical or ethnic allegiance. A significant number of Russian Orthodox adherents also appear to be only nominal believers.

A number of missionary groups operate. The SCRA has registered missionaries from the Republic of Korea, Great Britain, China, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. They represent an estimated 20 religions and denominations, including Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Korean Presbyterians. According to the SCRA, since 1996, the SCRA has registered approximately 1,103 missionaries, of whom approximately 851 were Christian and 252 were Muslim. During the period covered by this report, 145 missionaries conducted activities, of whom 113 are Christian and 32 are Muslim. According to official statistics, since independence, authorities ordered approximately 20 missionaries, who disseminated dogma inconsistent with the traditional customs of local Muslims, to leave the country. However, during the reporting period, no missionaries were expelled or asked to leave the country or denied registration. All of those missionaries expelled represented various "totalitarian sects," or groups the SCRA considers incompatible with the standard principles of traditional world religions.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution and the law provide for freedom of religion; however, the Government at times restricted this right in practice, in particular for Muslim groups it considered to be a threat. The Constitution provides for a secular state and for the separation of church/mosque and state, and the Government does not support any particular religion. Article 8 of the Constitution prohibits the formation of political parties on religious and ethnic grounds, as well as activities of religious organizations that jeopardize the State, constitutional system, or national security. Article 82 of the Constitution provides the Constitutional Court with the authority to determine the constitutionality of religious organizations.

The Government recognizes three Muslim holy days (Noorus; Kurman Ait or Eid al-Adha; and Orozo Ait or Eid al-Fitr) and one Russian Orthodox holy day (Christmas, which is observed on January 7 in accordance with the Russian Orthodox calendar) as national holidays. The President and the Government send greetings to the followers of the Muslim and Orthodox faiths on their major religious holy days, and the greetings are printed in the mass media.

The SCRA promotes religious tolerance, protects freedom of conscience, and oversees laws on religion. Members of the Commission are appointed by the Prime Minister. A 1997 Presidential Decree requires the registration of all religious organizations with the SCRA, which in turn must recognize the registrant as a religious organization. Unregistered religious organizations are prohibited from actions such as renting space and holding religious services, although many do hold regular services without government interference. Organizations applying for registration must have at least 10 members who are adult citizens and submit an application form, organizational charter, minutes of an institutional meeting, and a list of founding members. Each congregation of a religious group must register separately. A religious organization then must complete the registration process with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to obtain status as a legal entity, which is necessary to own property, open bank accounts, and otherwise engage in contractual activities. If a religious organization engages in commercial activity, it is required to pay taxes. In practice the MOJ has never registered a religious organization without prior registration by the SCRA. The registration process with the SCRA is often cumbersome, taking one month on average, but in the past sometimes took up to several years. According to SCRA regulations, registration is rejected if a religious organization does not comply with the law or is a threat to national security, social stability, interethnic and interdenominational harmony, public order, health, or morality. Applicants whose registration is rejected may re-apply and appeal to the courts. There are signs that the SCRA is improving the situation and over the past year has registered several new entities that had trouble registering previously. The Church of Jesus Christ (not to be confused with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – Mormon) reported that the SCRA registered all six affiliates that attempted to register during the reporting period.

The Government created a website in 2004 documenting the religious organizations currently operating. According to the SCRA, there are over 2,044 registered religious entities, including mosques, churches, foundations, NGOs of a religious nature, and religious educational institutions. Of these, 309 are Christian. The SCRA reported that its staff continued to travel around the country to help unregistered religious entities prepare applications for registration; according to the SCRA, 46 new religious entities (17 mosques and 29 Christian churches) were registered during the period covered by this report. Although there has been a history of several groups, including the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), having difficulties registering, almost all, including the RCC, were eventually registered, except for the Hare Krishnas.

The RCC has been registered since 2002. The RCC in Bishkek first attained legal status under Soviet law in 1969. The Holy See established the Catholic Mission in the country in 1997, and a representative from the Vatican visited in 2001 to discuss registration of the Church with the SCRA. In 2002, the SCRA approved the Catholic Mission's application for registration, and registration was finalized in October 2002.

The Church of Jesus Christ is the country's largest Protestant church with approximately 18 affiliates and an estimated 11,000 members, of whom 30 percent are ethnic Kyrgyz. At the end of the period covered in this report, the main church in Bishkek was registered, along with 13 of 18 affiliates. The remaining five affiliates were preparing applications for registration but had not submitted them at the end of the period covered in this report.

Members of registered religious groups may undergo alternative military service; it was reported in the press that about 3,000 persons annually apply.

Missionary groups of a variety of faiths operate freely, although they are required to register with the Government.

The Government expressly forbids the teaching of religion (or atheism) in public schools. In 2001, the Government instructed the SCRA to draw up programs for training clergy and to prepare methodologies for teaching about religions in public schools. These instructions came in response to concerns about the spread of Wahhabism and what the Government considers unconventional religious sects. The SCRA turned to a number of religious organizations for their ideas on introducing religious education. The reaction of the organizations generally was negative, as they preferred to retain responsibility for the religious education of their adherents. The SCRA indicates that it is still developing a curriculum to teach about religions, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and several academic institutions; however, the program has not yet been implemented because of lack of funding. Volunteers visited villages in the south to teach traditional Islamic values. In 2003, the SCRA and the State Muftiate granted the Islamic Institute the status of a university, which gave it authority over other Islamic institutes in the country and allowed it to develop a more standardized curriculum. In 2004, the Islamic University began a program to oversee all Islamic schools in the country, including madrassahs. As part of the program, the Islamic Institute oversees curriculum development and tries to maintain a more standardized curriculum among all Islamic schools. The Islamic Institute also said that one of its goals is to check the spread of extremist religious teaching. This program continued into the reporting period. The Government worked through the SCRA to promote interfaith dialogue and encourage religious tolerance. The SCRA hosted meetings of religious groups to bring the faiths together in open forums, and it assisted them in working together on programs for the protection of the poor and the elderly.

Since 2001 the Government has worked with representatives of various religious faiths and NGOs on a draft law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," which is ostensibly a response to concerns about terrorism and other illegal activities committed by groups disguised as religious organizations. The initial draft included compulsory registration of religious bodies, a prohibition against unregistered religious activity, and tight control over religious activity deemed "destructive." The Parliament worked with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to revise the draft law in an effort to ensure that it respected the Government's OSCE obligations and would allow the free practice of religion. In 2002, the Central Asian Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a statement strongly opposing the draft law, citing concerns that its passage would result in a flood of foreign missionaries. Parliament was still preparing the draft law.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to express public concern about groups that it viewed as extremist either because of radical religious or political agendas. The Government was particularly concerned about the threat of political Islam, whose followers (Islamists) it labels "Wahhabis." The Government perceives Islamists to be a threat to national stability, particularly in the south, and fears that Islamists seek to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic theocracy. Although they have not recurred, armed incursions in 1999 and 2000 by members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a terrorist organization, increased the Government's concern regarding political Islam and the actions of militant Islamic groups. In contrast to previous reporting periods, the Government expressed no concerns over the growing number of Christian groups. In December 2004, police raided houses in Osh and the Aravan and Nookat districts, areas of traditional Islamic beliefs, following a grenade blast in Osh in November 2004. In November 2004, police took four men into detention for failing to supply identity papers and one of the men allegedly threw a hand grenade to escape. Officials maintained the incident was perpetrated by Islamic extremists. Local human rights observers disputed these connections, and alleged that the incident was being used to discriminate against Muslims as well as the Uzbek minority.

In 2003, the Supreme Court sustained the verdict by the Lenin District Court of Bishkek, which banned four political organizations, which the Government termed "religious," for extremism and alleged ties to international terrorist organizations: Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the Organization for Freeing Eastern Turkestan, and the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party. In 2002 the Muftiat announced the formation of an expert commission to review and standardize Islamic educational literature printed and distributed in the country. During the period covered in this report, the commission continued to review prior to publication new books on Islamic themes.

The Church of Jesus Christ reported that a number of ongoing bureaucratic and legal problems remained unresolved as in the previous reporting year. Although the church had some success in obtaining registration of its affiliates, and on obtaining a favorable court ruling on the taxability of its membership donations, it continued to experience difficulties in obtaining from the SCRA and the Mayor's office the title to the land on which the main church in Bishkek is located.

In 2003, at the request of the Procurator General's office, the SCRA suspended the activities of the Unification Church, which had been registered as a social, rather than a religious organization, and had been granted semi-official status. According to the SCRA, the Procurator General's office requested suspension of the activity of the Unification Church because it had not, as the law requires, indicated in its registration papers to which world religion it adhered. Despite the suspension, which was upheld in

an appeal to the Bishkek city court, the church is still active.

In May 2003, Asan Erkinbayev, the head of the local administration, closed 7 of the 12 mosques in the Karadarya district of the Jalalabad region, claiming that they were on state-owned land and that their imams were preaching contradictory views. All of the closed mosques were converted into commercial or public buildings. However, in June 2005, both the SCRA and an official with the Jalalabad Oblast Kaziare confirmed that all of the mosques which were closed had been reopened and were functioning normally.

Although the Government monitored, including filming, both Protestant and Muslim religious groups in the past, there were no reports of such surveillance during the period covered by this report. There were unconfirmed reports that law enforcement officials monitored the activities of missionaries.

In April 2004, the Government signed a decree and plan of action instructing the National Security Service (SNB) to propose measures to "restrict and prevent the activities of missionaries who propagate religious fundamentalism and extremism as well as reactionary and Shi'ite ideas." Among the groups to be restricted were members of the Ahmadiyya community, a Muslim proselytizing movement, which is based in Pakistan, and is considered un-Islamic by many traditional Muslims. SCRA officials assured the Ahmadis that their inclusion on the list of extremist groups was a mistake and that the Government would not target the group. There were no subsequent reports of harassment. In April 2005, the SCRA confirmed that the Ahmadis were operating throughout the country and said that neither the SCRA nor the government had taken action to restrict their activities. In May 2005, the SCRA reported that the Ahmadis had been registered as a religious organization.

Although in June 2004, then-Prime Minister Tanaev announced that the Government would create a special board to review religious literature, the Government has taken no action to date.

Some conservative Muslims in Karasuu in the southern Osh region had objected to the presence of a male obstetrician in a local maternity hospital, but this is no longer a prominent community issue, as those who wish to see a female obstetrician may now do so.

The SCRA stated that students, who, for religious reasons, choose to wear clothing that would indicate adherence to a particular religion, may attend religious schools. In contrast to the previous year, there were no known cases of children being prohibited from wearing a hijab in school. There were no other reports of harassment of observant Muslim children by teachers in schools. In spring 2003, administrators in several schools in the Osh and Jalalabad regions prohibited pupils from wearing the hijab in school. However, when girls at two schools in Jalalabad Oblast ignored the order, no action was taken to stop them. No further cases of hijabs being banned or of harassment of observant believers in schools have been reported since 2003. There were no reports of further incidents of village elders calling for the expulsion of Christian converts as occurred in earlier years.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no reported abuses of religious freedom.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Members of the two major religions, Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, respect each other's major holidays and exchange holiday greetings.

There was no evidence of widespread societal discrimination or violence against members of different religious groups; however, there was evidence of periodic tension in rural areas between conservative Muslims and foreign Christian missionaries and individuals from traditionally Muslim ethnic groups who converted to other faiths. Both Muslim and Russian Orthodox spiritual leaders criticized the proselytizing activities of nontraditional Christian groups; however, the press reported in October 2004 that at least one Muslim spiritual leader of the Jalalabad region, Haji Dilmurod, intervened to prevent the stoning of a group of converts to Jehovah's Witnesses by local youths. According to Dilmurod, a group of local youths was discussing plans to stone a group of Jehovah's Witnesses who were driving around their village, proselytizing to villagers through loudspeakers on the roof of a truck. Dilmurod prevented the local youths from attacking the Jehovah's Witnesses, and asked the Jehovah's Witnesses to be more discreet in their proselytizing. No further incidents were reported between the two groups. During the period covered by this report, there were no acts of violence, harassment, or vandalism reported against Jewish people, community institutions, schools, synagogues or cemeteries.

In April 2005, a group of Islamic extremists attacked a rehabilitation center for former convicts near Bishkek. The group attacked the center after they mistakenly assumed that it was a front for Christian missionaries. Local police and SNB officials responded quickly to defend the center, which continues to operate normally.

According to the SCRA, Muslims made up 84 percent of the total population in 2001, and that figure had declined to 79.3 percent in 2004. There were reports in the past that individuals in some towns appealed to local leaders or circulated petitions calling for Protestant Christians to be expelled. In addition, a number of Kyrgyz television stations in the past broadcast programs disparaging Protestant churches and the Church of Jesus Christ, calling for the Government to ban such groups. However, no similar calls were made or programs aired during the period covered by this report.

In previous years, it was reported that Protestant missionaries working in the south aroused particular concern among some devout local Uzbeks, and that Muslims were angered that the authorities monitored and arrested alleged Islamic extremists but did not interfere in the work of Protestant groups. However, no similar incidents were reported during the period covered in this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy continued to monitor the progress of the draft law on religion and maintained contact with government officials with regard to religious affairs. Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups, and with NGOs monitoring religious freedom.

In November 2004, during Ramadan, the Ambassador again hosted the annual Iftar for Muslim leaders and government officials. On January 21, 2005, the Ambassador addressed, in the Kyrgyz language, thousands of Muslims who gathered to pray on the main square of Bishkek for Eid al-Adha. His speech, which highlighted the importance of respect for different religions, received positive coverage in the largest-circulation paper in the country.

The State Department gave a grant to a combined team from Purdue, Notre Dame, and Indiana Universities to conduct a \$150,000 (6,450,000 som) citizen exchange program to develop a religious tolerance program for Muslim youth in the Nookat region of Osh Oblast. The project also focuses on developing youth sports, which won the program's strong support from the Mufti, who grew up playing volleyball and soccer in Nookat.

The Embassy also provided grants to five local NGOs to conduct after-school religious tolerance programs for Muslim youth in the more conservative rural southern regions. These programs focus on after-school activities and involve parents, religious leaders, teachers, and local officials.

A U.S. government-funded institutional partnership continued between the Social Sciences Research Council and the Islamic University in Bishkek to supplement the religious curriculum with an international curriculum to include math, English, and a course on comparative world religions and establish exchange visits between university teachers in the two countries. Two professors from the Islamic University spent the fall 2004 semester studying at Indiana University, and two others studied at Harvard during the spring 2005 semester. They focused on Arabic language, Islamic history and comparative religions.

During the period covered by the report, the Embassy actively distributed publications about Muslim life in the United States. Interest was sparked by the February 2004, Osh TV broadcast of a 15-part documentary about Muslim life in America. Osh TV broadcast it again in March 2004 because of popular demand. In July 2004, a group of Muslim leaders from Batken province traveled to the United States to participate in an International Visitors' Program on religious tolerance and diversity. Batken contains a majority of the Muslim population in the country. The International Visitors met with Department of State officials, U.S. Muslim religious leaders, and leaders of other organizations to discuss the relationship between government and religion in the United States and to learn about the American Muslim community. The participants now are actively engaged in religious tolerance programs with school children.

The U.S.-sponsored Democracy Commission funded 53 grants to local NGOs, one of which organized courses on multicultural tolerance, comparative religious studies and prevention of radical Islam at the Islamic University of the Kyrgyz Republic.

In September 2004 the United States funded a special bus tour for religious leaders around Karakol and the Issykul Lake region. Many mosques have been built in this area in the last few years, and during the bus tour local Islamic leaders were familiarized with a number of the projects aimed at developing local communities funded by U.S. This tour was repeated after Islamic leaders had found very useful a similar tour in 2003.

Released on November 8, 2005

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51562.htm)