



Kyrgyz Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution and the law provide for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the Government restricted the activities of radical Islamic groups that it considered threats to stability and security and hampered or refused the registration of some Christian churches. The Constitution provides for the separation of religion and state, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or religious beliefs. The Government did not officially support any religion; however, a May 6, 2006 decree recognized Islam and Russian Orthodoxy as "traditional religious groups."

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to monitor and restrict Islamist groups that it considered to be threats to security. Some Christian groups continued to face delays in registration. The State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA), formerly called the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA), is responsible for promoting religious tolerance, protecting freedom of conscience, and overseeing laws on religion. All religious organizations, including schools, must apply for approval of registration from SARA.

Although most religious groups and sects operated with little interference from the Government or each other, there were several cases of societal abuse based on religious beliefs and practices. There was an increase in tensions between Muslims and former Muslims who had converted to other religious groups. In one case, a mob upset at a Baptist pastor's conversions of Muslims to Christianity publicly beat the pastor and burned his Bibles and religious literature (see section 3).

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 status of the draft law on religion and maintained contact with government officials regarding religious affairs. The U.S. Government sponsored lectures, discussions and exchanges to promote awareness of international religious freedom standards, religious tolerance, and the interaction between religious groups and the state. Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups, and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor religious freedom. The Ambassador frequently participated in outreach activities to various religious groups and promoted tolerance among the various religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 77,181 square miles, and a population of 5.2 million. Data from the National Statistics Committee indicated the following ethnic breakdown: Kyrgyz, 67 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 percent.

Islam is the most widely held faith. Official sources estimated that 80 percent of the population is Muslim. Almost all the Muslims are Sunni; there are few Shi'a in the country (approximately one thousand). According to SARA, as of May 2007 there were 1,650 mosques, of which 1,623 were registered. There also were seven institutes for higher Islamic teaching. According to recent official estimates, 11 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, although some experts believe the figure could be as low as 8 percent. The country has 44 Russian Orthodox churches, 1 Russian Orthodox monastery for women, and 1 parochial school.

Other religious groups account for a very small percentage of the population. The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates 30 churches throughout the country. The Roman Catholics hold services in three churches, located in Jalalabad, Talas, and Bishkek. The small Jewish community operates one synagogue in Bishkek, and it organizes internal cultural studies and humanitarian services, chiefly food assistance for the elderly and persons with disabilities regardless of faith. One Buddhist temple serves the small Buddhist community. There are 12 registered Baha'i houses of worship. In addition, there

are 240 registered Protestant houses of worship. The Church of Jesus Christ is the country's largest Protestant church with approximately 10 affiliates and an estimated 11 thousand members, of whom approximately 40 percent are ethnic Kyrgyz. Other Protestant congregations include Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, nondenominational Protestants, Presbyterians, and Charismatics. There also are syncretistic religious practices. 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 cities with a larger ethnic Russian population. Other religious groups more commonly practice 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. However, some Christian pastors noted that the number of ethnic Kyrgyz converts to Christianity grew significantly during the year covered by this report. While there are no data available on active participation in formal religious services, a significant number of Muslims and Russian Orthodox adherents appear to be nominal believers and do not practice their faith actively. Religious practice in the south of the country is more traditional and devout than in other regions.

Missionary groups operate freely in the country. SARA has registered missionaries from all over the world representing an estimated 20 religious groups and denominations. According to SARA, since 1996 it has registered 1,133 missionaries, of whom 263 were Muslim and the rest represented other, mostly Christian, religious groups. During the period covered by this report, there were 111 registered missionaries, of whom 80 were Christian and 31 were Muslim. Missionaries disseminating dogma inconsistent with the traditional customs of local Muslims are subject to expulsion. According to SARA, of the approximately 20 missionaries expelled since 1991, all represented various "totalitarian sects," groups the SCRA considered incompatible with the standard principles of traditional world religious groups.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution and the law provide for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted the activities of radical Islamic groups it considered to be threats to security. The Constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The new Constitution, adopted on December 30, 2006, defines the country as a sovereign, unitary, democratic social state based on the rule of law; the previous Constitution had also defined the country as "secular." A May 6, 2006 decree recognized Islam and Russian Orthodoxy as "traditional religious groups."

Article 5 of the "Law On Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations" affirms that "the State does not interfere with the activity of religious organizations that adhere to established laws; does not allow for establishing advantages or restrictions of one religion over another; does not finance the activity of religious organizations and activity of propagating atheism."

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 85 of the Constitution provides the Constitutional Court with the authority to determine the constitutionality of a religious organization's activities.

The Government recognizes two Muslim holy days (Kurman Ait or Eid al-Adha, and Orozo Ait or Eid al-Fitr) and one Russian Orthodox holy day (Orthodox Christmas) as national holidays. The President and the Government send greetings to Muslims and Orthodox adherents on their major holy days, and the greetings are printed in the mass media.

Established in 1993, the Muftiate (or Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan-SAMK) is the highest Islamic managing body in the country. The Muftiate oversees all Islamic entities, including institutes and madrassahs, mosques, and Islamic organizations. The Mufti is the official head of the Muftiate and is elected by the Council of Ulemas, which consists of 30 Islamic clerics and scholars. A Muftiate-established commission reviews and standardizes Islamic educational literature printed and distributed in the country and reviews new books on Islamic themes prior to publication. The Muftiate has the authority to ban publications that do not meet the established standards, an initiative it started and the Government supports.

SARA is responsible under the law for promoting religious tolerance, protecting freedom of conscience, and overseeing the application of laws on religion. The President appoints the Director, and the Prime Minister appoints the deputies of the agency. In June 2006 SARA moved its offices to the city of Osh in the south to be closer to the more religious part of the country.

A 1997 presidential decree requires the registration of all religious organizations with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), following approval from SARA. SARA can deny or postpone the certification of a particular religious group if SARA believes the proposed activities of that group are not religious in character. Unregistered religious organizations are

prohibited from actions such as renting space and holding religious services, although many hold regular services without government interference.

Organizations applying for registration must have at least 10 members who are adult citizens and must submit an application form, organizational charter, minutes of an institutional meeting, and a list of founding members to SARA for review. SARA then provides a recommendation to the MOJ for approval or rejection of the registration application. Recommendation for rejection occurs when 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. An applicant whose registration is denied may reapply and may appeal to the courts. The registration process with SARA is often cumbersome, taking a month to several years for completion. Each congregation must register separately.

If approved, a religious organization then must complete the registration process with the 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 approval by SARA. SARA reported that its staff continued to travel around the country to help unregistered religious entities prepare applications for registration.

According to SARA, there were 2,113 registered religious entities, including mosques, churches, foundations, NGOs of a religious nature, and religious educational institutions. SARA identified 1,742 Islamic entities, 46 entities of the Russian Orthodox Church, and 304 other "nontraditional" houses of worship, including 2 Russian churches of "Old Belief," 3 Catholic churches, 1 synagogue, 1 Buddhist temple, and 297 Protestant churches (48 Baptist, 21 Lutheran, 49 Pentecostal, 30 Adventist, 35 Presbyterian, 43 "Charismatic," 49 Jehovah's Witnesses, and 22 "other" Protestant churches). According to SARA, there are 21 "other religious entities" including 12 Baha'i centers, 21 religious centers of "other foreign confessions," 13 religious schools, and 7 religious foundations and unions.

Members of registered religious groups may fulfill alternative military service; it was reported in the press in 2005 that approximately three thousand persons apply annually.

Missionaries of various religious groups operate freely, although they are required to register. Since 1996 SARA has registered more than 1,133 foreign citizens as religious missionaries. All religious entities founded by a foreigner must re-register each year with SARA, although the process is much less cumbersome than the initial registration. Missionaries are only required to register with SARA once.

The 1997 Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations 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 religious groups in public schools. These instructions came in response to concerns about the spread of Wahhabism and what the Government considered unconventional religious sects. The SCRA turned to a number of religious organizations for their ideas on introducing religious education; their reaction generally was negative, as they preferred to retain responsibility for the religious education of their adherents. SARA indicated that it was still developing a curriculum to teach about religious groups, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and several academic institutions. An August 9, 2006 press report indicated that the Government planned to introduce religious education into the secondary school curriculum; however, there had been no implementation of this plan by the end of the reporting period. Under the auspices of the Muftiate, volunteers called Davatchi visited villages in the south to teach traditional Islamic values.

The Islamic University oversees all Islamic schools, including madrassahs, to develop a standardized curriculum and curb the spread of extremist religious teaching. This program continued during the reporting period.

Since 2001 the Government has worked with representatives of various religious groups and NGOs on a draft law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," ostensibly in response to concerns about terrorism and other illegal activities committed by groups disguised as religious organizations. In May 2006, a group of parliamentary deputies proposed a different draft bill. Work on the new draft bill continued at the end of the reporting period.

The August 2005 law on "Countering Extremist Activity" seeks to "halt extremist activities by religious organizations or groups." Law enforcement officials have acted under this law to detain members of banned organizations, such as Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT), for distributing leaflets and other materials deemed to be of an extremist nature.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to express concern publicly about groups that it viewed as extremist because of either radical religious or political agendas. The Government was particularly concerned about the threat of political Islam, whose

followers (Islamists) it labels "Wahhabists." The Government perceives radical Islamists to be a threat to national stability, particularly in the south, and fears that they seek to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic theocracy. Armed incursions in 1999 and 2000 by members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a terrorist organization, and more recent incursions by unidentified terrorists in May 2006 increased the Government's concern regarding political Islam and the actions of militant Islamic groups.

In 2003 the Supreme Court sustained the ban on four political organizations, imposed because of extremism and alleged ties to international terrorist organizations: Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the Organization for Freeing Eastern Turkestan, and the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party.

Several religious groups had difficulties registering. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which initially applied for registration with SARA in August 2004, was still not registered at the end of the reporting period. Leaders of the Hare Krishna temple in Bishkek, after attempting unsuccessfully to register several times in the last 2 years, planned to resubmit the application for registration once the location of their new temple was confirmed.

According to the Union of Baptist Churches of Kyrgyzstan, several churches in Tash-Kumyr, At-Bashi, Osh, and Jalalabad continue to wait for registration, despite numerous meetings with SARA officials and submissions of applications. Church leaders attributed previous delays to the submission of improper documentation and information during the application process. On December 1, 2006, SARA refused registration of the Baptist Church in Karakulja, citing the local population's petition to SARA to prevent the church from staying open (see section 3).

According to church officials, the local community and government officials attempted to pressure Dzhanybek Zhakipov, the pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ in Jalalabad, to close down his church in July 2006. Local law enforcement officials reportedly "tormented" the pastor after receiving complaints by relatives of Christian converts who belonged to his church. SARA officials showed the pastor a petition with 500 signatures requesting that the church be shut down. After court proceedings, a Jalalabad judge ordered SARA to register the church. The church continued to operate, and there were no reports of further pressure.

The Unification Church remained active, despite the SCRA suspension of its activities in 2003 for registration irregularities, a ruling upheld in an appeal to the Bishkek City Court.

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

A Baptist pastor reported several cases of their foreign missionaries being denied visas or facing visa delays when attempting to visit the country. No missionaries were expelled, asked to leave the country, or denied registration during the reporting period.

On February 21, 2007, news agency Ferghana.ru reported that school administrators and teachers at the Kyzyljar School of the Jalalabad Oblast prohibited two female students from attending class because the students refused to remove their hijabs. A similar incident occurred in a neighboring village. Parents at both schools protested the prohibition of hijabs but the dispute continued as of the end of the reporting period. In December 2005 the Jalalabad city education department banned the wearing of hijabs in that city's schools. Several parents protested the move and demanded that the ban be lifted. SARA's stated position was that students, who for religious reasons choose to wear clothing that would indicate adherence to a particular religion, may attend religious schools.

According to news agency RFE/RL, Mutakalim, a Muslim women's NGO, requested a change in the legislation that bans females from wearing Islamic headscarves in official passport photos. The Government defended the current law as being a national security measure and rejected a petition from the group for lacking a sufficient number of signatures.

On March 10, 2007, State National Safety Committee (GKNB) officers in Jalalabad seized a warehouse containing Bibles owned by a Baptist church. The authorities told church administrators that the seizure was for the purpose of "expert examination." The GKNB refused to release the warehouse as of the end of the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On August 6, 2006, the special forces of the National Security Service (SNB) shot and killed three persons, including Mukhammadrafiq Kamalov, imam of the largest mosque in Karasuu. Immediately following the incident, government officials stated that the three were affiliated with the banned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and were killed in the course of an antiterrorism operation. Kamalov's family and observers, including the ombudsman for human rights, denied

security officials' allegations about the possible involvement of the imam in religious extremist groups. Security officials later conceded that Kamalov might not have been part of the group but instead may have been kidnapped by the suspected terrorists and thus killed accidentally in the raid. On May 24, 2006, security forces had detained Kamalov and searched his house on suspicion of his involvement in HT activities.

On several occasions during the period covered by this report, police arrested or fined members of the Islamic political organization HT for distributing leaflets. On February 21, 2007, local media reported that police detained a resident of Osh after discovering HT booklets and a hand grenade in his home. As of the end of the reporting period, the investigation continued.

Of the 12 men arrested in April 2006 for alleged links to a November 2004 grenade incident blamed on Islamic extremists, 4 remained in custody. It was unclear whether their detention was linked to their religious beliefs or practice.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2006 the Church of Jesus Christ signed a 49 year lease for land upon which its church is located after resolving favorably an ongoing dispute with the Bishkek mayor's office.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 had converted to other religious groups. There were several reports that tensions between Muslims and Muslim converts continued. Both Muslim and Russian Orthodox spiritual leaders criticized the proselytizing activities of nontraditional Christian groups.

Several media outlets reported incidents of aggression against Baptist Pastor Zulumbek Sarygulov in Osh Oblast. According to Forum 18, the first incident occurred on July 28, 2006 when a crowd of 80 local Muslims broke into the Karakulja village Baptist Church in the Osh Oblast. The mob physically abused the pastor and burned his Bibles and other religious materials. Church leaders reported that local police on the scene made no efforts to stop the attack. Soon after the event, local police opened a criminal investigation, questioning Sarygulov and others for detailed accounts of the incident. After the initial inquiries, there were no further reports from the local authorities regarding developments in the investigation.

In a second incident on November 12, 2006, perpetrators threw Molotov cocktails at Sarygulov's church facilities, but church staff quickly extinguished the flames, and the fire caused little damage. Local authorities investigated the event but made no arrests. The investigation continued as of the end of the reporting period.

On December 1, 2006, according to Forum 18, SARA notified Aleksandr Nikitin, pastor of the Baptist church in Osh and regional coordinator for Baptist churches in the south, that the Karakulja church had been officially denied registration on the grounds that it operated for several years without having official registration. On March 5, 2007, a law enforcement official showed Forum 18 reporters a letter from SARA requesting that the police end the Karakulja Baptist church activities. The authorities took no further action as of the end of the reporting period.

On February 15, 2007, independently operated Channel 5 TV broadcast a program that portrayed the Church of Jesus Christ as being possibly associated with devil worshippers. The pastor provided a rebuttal to the program, but producers never aired it. Channel 5 producers aired opinions in support of the program's message presented by representatives of the "traditional religious groups" (Islam and Russian Orthodoxy).

Several Protestant pastors complained of difficulties interring deceased parishioners who converted from Islam to Christianity. Local Islamic and community leaders opposed the burial of converts in Islamic cemeteries. Officially, the cemetery plots are under government control, but usually local Islamic figures oversee them. The Government resolved the problem by allotting new plots of land for Protestant cemeteries. However, the scarcity of such cemeteries forces

Christians to travel great distances to bury their deceased.

There were no acts of violence, harassment, or vandalism reported against Jewish persons, community institutions, schools, synagogues, or cemeteries during the reporting period.

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 status of the draft law on religion and maintained contact with government officials regarding religious affairs. Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups, and with NGOs monitoring religious freedom.

On October 24, 2006, the Deputy Chief of Mission addressed, in the Kyrgyz language, an estimated crowd of 50,000 Muslims who had gathered to pray in the main square of Bishkek for Eid al-Fitr, an Islamic holiday to commemorate the end of the holy month of Ramadan. His speech, which highlighted the importance of respect for different religious groups, received positive coverage in numerous local newspapers and news websites in the country.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsored a series of events to promote awareness of religious freedom. USAID's Legal Education program conducted a series of informational trainings for male and female students in the Islamic Institute in Osh, as well as training on basic rights for madrassah instructors in Jalalabad. In June 2006 USAID also sponsored five religious leaders and a representative of SARA to attend the "Role of Religion in Promoting Peace and Social Partnerships" regional conference of Central Asian Islamic religious leaders in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

In May and July 2006, USAID organized a series of eight focus group discussions that brought together Muslim, Russian Orthodox, and minority religious leaders, government officials, and representatives of civil society to discuss international religious freedom standards and local legislation on religion in collaboration with SARA. As a complementary activity, a U.S. expert conducted 3 one-day trainings for law students, lawyers, law professors, parliamentarians, civil society activists, and members of political parties on international religious freedom standards.

USAID's regional Religion, State, and Society Specialist also delivered a series of six lectures and held discussions with students and religious leaders in Osh and Jalalabad on the history of religious freedom in the United States during the period covered by this report.

Through the USAID-funded Community Connections program, 39 religious leaders representing a variety of denominations and government officials who have a supervisory role over religious affairs traveled to the United States. Participants learned how religion and the state interact and which mechanisms serve to protect religious rights in the U.S. Participants also learned how the free practice of religion can serve as a positive social force in the lives of modern nations without constituting a security concern for the state.

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 religious groups, and to establish exchange visits between university teachers in the two countries. In 2006 the council purchased computer equipment for the Islamic University. American professors were scheduled to visit the Islamic University in September 2007.

During the period covered by the report, the Embassy conducted several presentations on religious freedom, diversity, and tolerance in the United States for students of theology departments in Bishkek and southern provinces and distributed publications in Russian and Kyrgyz about Muslim life in the United States. In July and August 2006 two female Muslim leaders, the President of Progressive Public Union of Women "Hadiyya" and a lecturer at the Islamic University, participated in an International Visitors Program designed for women in Islam titled, "Religious Tolerance with a Focus on Islam." The International Visitors traveled to California, Iowa, New York, North Carolina and Washington, D.C. and met with U.S. Department of State officials, American 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. After their return, the participants actively engaged in religious tolerance programs for youth.

In September 2006 the Embassy organized a Citizen Dialogue Tour with two U.S. female Muslim youth leaders who traveled to Bishkek and spoke about Muslims in America, particularly the role of women in Islam. The speakers gave interviews with local journalists, visited mosques, madrassahs, and universities to participate in roundtable discussions

with students, and met with Muslim leaders and government officials to discuss the role of women in Islam, religious tolerance, Islamic education, and gender issues.

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