



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Kyrgyzstan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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. The constitution provides for a secular state and the separation of religion and state. The Government does not support any religion.

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. In April 2004, then Prime Minister Nikolai Tanaev signed a decree and plan of action aimed at "combating religious extremism" from 2004 to 2005. The decree outlined responsibilities of various government agencies directed at detection and prevention of terrorism and religious extremism, including creating a database of foreign religious extremist organizations, conducting an information campaign, and preventing inter- and intra-faith conflicts. According to the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA)--called the State Commission on Religious Affairs, or SCRA, until November 2005--the decree expired in April 2005 and was no longer enforced.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups 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 progress 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 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor religious freedom. The ambassador frequently participated in outreach activities to various religious groups and promoted tolerance among the various faiths.

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 indicated the following ethnic breakdown: 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 held faith. Official sources estimate that up to 80 percent of inhabitants are Muslim. The majority of Muslims are Sunni; there are few Shi'a in the country (approximately one thousand). According to the SARA, as of May 2006 there were an estimated 1,643 mosques, of which 1,623 were registered. There also were seven institutes for higher Islamic teaching. According to recent official estimates, approximately 11 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, although some experts believe the figure could be as low as 8 percent. The country has forty-four Russian Orthodox churches, one Russian Orthodox monastery for women, and one parochial school. The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates thirty churches throughout the country. Jews, Buddhists, and Roman Catholics account for an estimated 3 percent of the population, and they practice their religions openly in one synagogue, one temple, and three churches, respectively. In addition, there are 265 registered Protestant houses of worship. Protestant congregations include Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, nondenominational Protestants, Presbyterians, and Charismatics. There are twelve 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 rituals. 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 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 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 SARA has registered missionaries from the Republic of Korea, Great Britain, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, India, Kazakhstan, Taiwan, Tajikistan, and Russia. They represent an estimated twenty religious groups and denominations, including Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Korean Presbyterians. According to the SARA, since 1996 it has registered approximately 1,133 missionaries, of whom an estimated 870 were Christian and 263 were Muslim. During the period covered by this report, eighty-five missionaries, of whom sixty-two were Christian and twenty-three were Muslim, conducted activities. According to official statistics, since independence, authorities ordered approximately twenty 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, asked to leave the country, or denied registration. All missionaries previously expelled represented various "totalitarian sects," groups the SCRA considered 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 threats. The constitution provides for a secular state and for the separation of religion 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 whether a religious organization should be prohibited.

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 (Orthodox Christmas, which is observed on January 7) 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.

The SARA promotes religious tolerance, protects freedom of conscience, and oversees the application of laws on religion. Members of the agency are appointed by the prime minister. A 1997 presidential decree requires the registration of all religious organizations with the SARA, following approval from the Constitutional Court. While SARA is the only government agency that has the right to register a religious entity within Kyrgyzstan, it has no authority to declare a religious group unqualified. It can, however, 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 do hold regular services without government interference.

Organizations applying for registration must have at least ten members who are adult citizens and must submit an application form, organizational charter, minutes of an institutional meeting, and a list of founding members. Each congregation must register separately. A religious organization then must complete a 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 SARA. The registration process with the SARA is often cumbersome, taking one month on average, but in the past it sometimes took up to several years. According to SARA 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. An applicant whose registration is denied may reapply, and may appeal to the courts.

In 2004 the Government created a website that documented the religious organizations operating in the country. According to the SARA, there were more than 2,081 registered religious entities, including mosques, churches, foundations, NGOs of a religious nature, and religious educational institutions. Of these, 347 were Christian. The SARA reported that its staff continued to travel around the country to help unregistered religious entities prepare applications for registration. The most recent registration information provided by SARA identified 1,725 Islamic entities (including 1 university), 46 entities belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, more than 300 "nontraditional" Christian churches, 2 Russian churches of "Old Belief," 3 Catholic churches, 1 synagogue, 1 Buddhist church, and 292 Protestant churches (48 Baptist, 20 Lutheran, 45 Pentecostal, 30 Adventist, 18 Presbyterian, 16 "Charismatic" churches, 41 Jehovah's Witnesses, and 22 "other" Protestant churches). In addition, SARA states that, in Kyrgyzstan, there are twenty-one "other religious entities," including twelve Baha'i centers, plus twenty-one religious centers of "other foreign confessions," thirteen religious schools, and seven religious foundations and unions. Although there has been a history of several groups, including the Catholic Church (RCC), having difficulties registering, all, including the RCC, were eventually registered, except for the Hare Krishnas, who continued to have difficulties. Since 1996 SARA has registered more than 1,137 foreign citizens as religious missionaries.

In December 2005 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported ongoing problems in its efforts to register with the SARA; problems which remained unresolved at the end of the reporting period. The church initially submitted its application for registration in August 2004.

The Church of Jesus Christ is the country's largest Protestant church with approximately ten affiliates and an estimated eleven thousand members, of whom approximately 40 percent are ethnic Kyrgyz. At the end of the period covered by this report, the main church in Bishkek was registered, along with ten affiliates. The church reported that over the past year, ten other affiliates

decided to become independent congregations and not be affiliated with the church.

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

Missionary groups of various religious groups operate freely, although they are required to register with the Government.

The Government 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 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. The SARA indicated that it was still developing a curriculum to teach about religions, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and several academic institutions; however, the program had not 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 (previously called the Islamic Institute) began a program to oversee all Islamic schools, including madrassahs. As part of the program, the Islamic University oversees curriculum development and tries to maintain a more standardized curriculum among all Islamic schools. It also declared that one of its goals is to check the spread of extremist religious teaching. This program continued during the reporting period. The Government worked through the SARA to promote interfaith dialogue and encourage religious tolerance. The SARA hosted meetings of religious groups to bring different 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 groups 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. In May 2006 a different draft bill was initiated by another group of deputies. Work on the new draft bill continued at the end of the reporting period.

In August 2005 President Bakiyev signed into law legislation designed to "halt extremist activities by religious organizations or groups." However, government officials, including at the SARA, were unable to provide any details on how the law was being enforced or what actions had been taken under the law.

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 "Wahhabis." The Government perceives Islamists to be a threat to national stability, particularly in the south, and fears that they seek to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic theocracy. 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 concern 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 November 2004 incident in which a suspect threw a grenade at police while trying to escape. Officials maintained the November incident was perpetrated by Islamic extremists. Local human rights observers disputed these claims, and alleged that the incident was being used to discriminate against Muslims as well as the Uzbek minority. In April 2006 police in Osh Oblast arrested twelve men, allegedly for links to the 2004 grenade incident. Eight men arrested were released within days, but the four others remain in custody and are awaiting trial.

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, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the Organization for Freeing Eastern Turkestan, and the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party.

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 Church of Jesus Christ reported that it had resolved favorably an ongoing dispute with the Bishkek mayor's office over the land on which the main church in the city is located. In 2006 the church signed a forty-nine-year lease for use of the land.

The Unification Church remains active, despite the SCRA suspension of its activities in 2003 for registration irregularities, which was 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.

In 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." However, the decree period ended in April 2005, and was thereafter no longer in effect.

Despite announcing in 2004 that the Government would create a special board to review religious literature, it took no further action. The SARA confirmed in June 2006 that no board had been created.

The SARA stated that students, who for religious reasons choose to wear clothing that would indicate adherence to a particular religion, may attend religious schools. Conversely, according to press reports, local officials in the Jalalabad Oblast town of Distuk tried to prevent girls from wearing hijabs to school.

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. As of the end of the reporting period, the dispute continued.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Members of the two major religious groups, Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, respect each other's major holy days and exchange holy day 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 had converted to other faiths. The U.S. embassy was unable to confirm the Forum 18 online news report that Saktinbai Usmanov was killed for having converted from Islam to Christianity. Police reportedly had no leads in the case but were continuing their investigation. Both Muslim and Russian Orthodox spiritual leaders criticized the proselytizing activities of nontraditional Christian groups; however, in 2004 the press reported 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. During the period covered by this report, there were no acts of violence, harassment, or vandalism reported against Jewish persons, 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 mistook it as a front for Christian missionaries. Local police and SNB officials responded quickly to defend the center, which thereafter continued to operate normally.

Despite appeals in the past for the expulsion of Protestants, and Kyrgyz TV broadcasts that disparaged Protestants, there were no similar appeals 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 with 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 legislative progress 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 January 10, 2006, the deputy chief of mission addressed, in the Kyrgyz language, thousands of Muslims who had gathered to pray in the main square of Bishkek for Eid al-Adha. His speech, which highlighted the importance of respect for different religious groups, received positive coverage in the largest-circulation newspaper in the country.

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 to establish exchange visits between university teachers in the two countries. In 2006 the council purchased computer equipment for the Islamic University. American professors are scheduled to visit the

Islamic University. In June 2005 the Social Sciences Research Council organized a three-week summer institute in Kazan, Russia, where four theology professors from the Islamic University, American University in Central Asia, and Osh State University were invited to participate.

During the period covered by the report, the embassy distributed publications in Russian and Kyrgyz about Muslim life in the United States and conducted several presentations for students of theology departments in Bishkek and Southern provinces. In July 2005 a group of Muslim leaders from Batken, Naryn, and Bishkek 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 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.

The U.S.-sponsored Democracy Commission funded forty-nine grants to local NGOs, one of which produced a documentary film in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek about religious extremism in Central Asia. The film was broadcast on the "Mir" TV channel, and distributed through Internews, a U.S. government grantee.

In April 2006 the embassy organized a U.S. Speaker Program with Ahmed Younis from the U.S.-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, who spoke about Muslims in America during his five-day stay in the country. Younis visited mosques, madrassahs, and universities and met with Muslim leaders and government officials to discuss religious tolerance, interfaith peace, rights of Muslims, and the need to battle extremist interpretations of Islam.

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