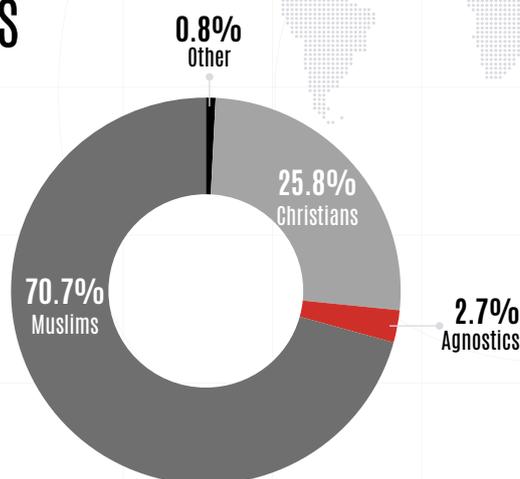




KAZAKHSTAN

RELIGIONS



Population

18,777,139

GDP per capita

24,056 US\$

Area

2,724,902 Km²

GINI INDEX*

27.5

*Economic Inequality

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Kazakhstan¹ recognises freedom of conscience (Article 22, 1), and bans discrimination on religious grounds (Article 14, 1). Calling for violence in the name of religion is also outlawed (Article 20, 3). Foreign religious groups must coordinate their activities with Kazakh authorities (Article 5, 5).

Religious activity in the country is mainly governed by a 2011 law on religion, which imposes strict registration requirements and bans unregistered religious activities.²

Nevertheless, some improvements have been reported in recent years, most notably after the Kazakh parliament decided, after a year and half of debate, to drop amendments to the law on religion that would have made it more restrictive.³

On 29th January 2020, Information and Social Development Minister Dauren Abayev signed a “religious freedom road-map” that would soften the law on religion. This would address censorship, introduce warnings, and lower fines imposed for exercising the right to religious freedom.⁴

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

According to the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), Kazakhstan had 3,770 registered religious associations as of September 2019, up from 3,715 in 2018.⁵

Although small in number (around 1% of the total population),⁶ the Catholic Church operates without particular restrictions. In 2019, it published its first Kazakh-language religious book.⁷ Through Caritas, the Church is also involved in important social projects.⁸ The Church remained active during the COVID-19 lockdown. Although Mass and spiritual services were provided mainly online, Catholics could still confess and receive the Eucharist.⁹

In May 2019, the Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran communities signed a memorandum establishing the Council of Traditional Christian Confessions, the aim of which is to help Kazakh authorities engage in dialogue with Christian groups.¹⁰

Non-traditional communities, like the Union of Baptist Churches, Hare Krishna and Jehovah’s Witnesses also saw improvements in 2019.¹¹

Nonetheless, problems remain. Although down from 171 cases reported in 2018, and 280 in 2017, there were still

161 administrative proceedings launched against individuals and religious communities for the free exercise of freedom of religion in 2019.¹²

Sanctions tended to be imposed mostly on meetings by unregistered religious communities or meetings in non-designated locations. For example, members of the unregistered Protestant Karaganda Revival Church were fined for celebrating a birthday in November 2018.¹³

Between November 2018 and March 2019, police raided four meetings of unregistered Baptist congregations, once in Almaty¹⁴ and three times in the city of Taraz,¹⁵ imposing fines on some members. In May, Jehovah's Witness Sergey Nurmanov was penalised in Taranovsk for holding religious meetings at his organisation's registered address without first obtaining permission from his neighbours.¹⁶

Sanctions continued into 2020, especially after controls intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pastor Isak Neiman received a warning for violating anti-Coronavirus measures when he led a community meeting on 29th March in Pavlodar. At the same time, he was fined the equivalent of almost two months salary for leading an unregistered religious meeting.¹⁷

The three leaders of the registered New Life Church in Almaty - Maxim Maximov, his wife Larisa, and Sergei Zaikin - were convicted in absentia in July 2019 for exerting psychological influence on the faithful, and were sentenced to prison terms of up to five years. All three currently live in the United States. The two buildings owned by the Church were seized and a restraining order was placed on three others.¹⁸

On 14th February 2020, Nur-Sultan municipal authorities ordered the confiscation of a building belonging to the Grace Presbyterian Church, citing the need to build a new public kindergarten. They also seized a building under construction for the Agape Pentecostal Church, planned for use as a place of worship, on the same plot of land.¹⁹

Kazakhstan closely censors religious literature. In some cases, courts have ordered the destruction of religious texts despite an apparent lack of extremist content. This happened in May 2019, when a court in Kyzylorda ordered the destruction of 29 Muslim books seized from a bookseller, Aruzhan Omirbai, who was fined an amount equal to three weeks average salary.²⁰

Askarbak Sarsenov, also in Kyzylorda, received the same penalty in September 2018 for putting 85 Islamic brochures on sale without state permission. Likewise, in

Kalbatau, Zairash Amanova was similarly punished for trying to sell two books with religious content online, one of which, Bible Stories, was ordered to be destroyed in December 2018.²¹

Muslims tend to be subjected to even harsher government controls, especially for those who belong to groups which practice a version of Islam that is different from the officially sanctioned Hanafi school. Various Islamic groups belong to the Sunni Hanafi Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SAMK), which regulates their activities, from the appointment of imams to directives for Friday sermons.²²

Administrative sanctions are still imposed for praying in ways banned by the Muslim Board. This is what happened, for example, on 12th February 2019 to Nariman Bagirov in Almaty, who was fined the equivalent of a month's salary for saying the word Amen too loudly.²³

Speaking about religious issues online or via WhatsApp has also become dangerous for Muslims. In August 2019, eight Salafi Muslims went to prison after a court in Almaty convicted them of "propaganda of terrorism" and inciting "hatred" by taking part in a WhatsApp discussion group on Islam. Their prison terms ranged from five and a half years, to eight years.²⁴ In January 2020, a ninth member of the group, Zhuldzybek Taurbekov, was sentenced to seven years in prison despite his poor health conditions.²⁵

Kazakh secret services brought Dilmurat Makhmatov, a Muslim man, back to Kazakhstan where he was sentenced in May 2019 to eight years in prison on charges of illegal preaching to fellow Kazakhs via the Internet from Saudi Arabia, where he had been living with his family for 20 years.²⁶ In late 2018, two other people, Dadash Mazhenov and Galymzhan Abilkairov, were sentenced to more than seven years in prison for posting Kuanysh Bashpayev's talks about Islam online.²⁷

Among non-traditional Islamic groups, Tabligh Jamaat, a missionary movement banned in February 2013, is still the most affected by repression. As of April 2020, 24 Muslims are still in prison for their religious beliefs, most of them members of this movement.²⁸

The vagueness of terms such as "extremism" and "terrorism" has been criticised at international level because they are often used to limit and violate human rights, including freedom of religion, expression and association.²⁹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Human rights in Kazakhstan might improve in the future. In a surprise move, President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 after almost 30 years in power. His successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is well known internationally and many expect him to take decisive steps towards granting more rights. Tokayev has publicly expressed support for freedom of worship and peaceful co-existence between different religions. However, more than a year after he became president, there is little sign that the expected transition is coming, but hope for change remains.³⁰

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