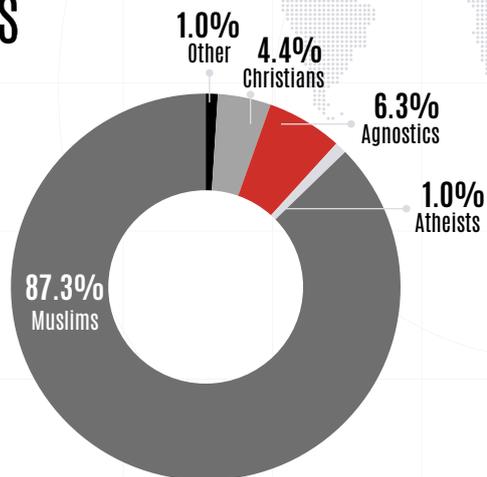




# KYRGYZSTAN

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Kyrgyzstan guarantees and protects religious freedom (Article 32,2 and 3);<sup>1</sup> however, the Religion Law of January 2009 restricts free religious practice. Among other things, it requires religious groups to register with the authorities and imposes limits on missionary activity and religious education. Proselytising is banned, but the right to conscientious objection is recognised.<sup>2</sup>

A number of restrictive amendments to the Religion Law proposed by the State Commission on Religious Affairs in 2017 were put on hold for greater review by the same Commission.<sup>3</sup>

On a positive note, a new penal code came into effect in January 2019, which reduced the penalties for several crimes related to terrorism. In particular, possession of extremist literature and/or audio and video material can be treated as a crime only if there is intent to distribute it.<sup>4</sup> Before the law was changed, police could arrest suspects for mere possession under the guise that the materials were used for practicing more conservative, or fundamentalist, forms of Islam.

International organisations have criticised Kyrgyzstan several times for excessive use of this accusation of extremism. Hundreds of people were sent to prison for the simple possession of unauthorised literature, even if it did not contain explicit references to violence.<sup>5</sup> With the new legislation, fewer people are being arrested.<sup>6</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Given the country's relative openness in religious matters, various religious groups can meet, worship and engage in evangelisation with a certain degree of freedom.

The life of Kyrgyzstan's small Catholic community - about 600 to 1,500 members scattered across the country composed of mainly ethnic Germans, Poles and other Europeans<sup>7</sup> - is largely untroubled, with fruitful relations with other religious communities.

For Kyrgyz Catholics 2019 marked two important occasions, namely the 50th anniversary of the official registration of the Bishkek community by the Soviet government and the consecration of a new church in the city of Talas. The latter is the first newly constructed Catholic place of worship, not a repurposed old building.<sup>8</sup> The

Catholic Church is engaged in pastoral outreach and humanitarian works, the latter in close cooperation with Caritas.<sup>9</sup>

Some positive developments were reported in terms of freedom of worship thanks to a changed approach by the State Commission for Religious Affairs. Between December 2018 and June 2019 alone more than 60 groups, mostly Protestant communities,<sup>10</sup> were able to register, including Jehovah's Witnesses in Osh who were able to obtain state recognition after ten years.

Nonetheless, religious practice still faces some obstacles; for example, it is still difficult to hold religious meetings outside the sites registered for that purpose. Importing and distributing religious literature still faces censorship.<sup>11</sup> In rural areas and smaller communities, Christians also meet strong social opposition amid the inaction of local authorities. This is even more so in the cases of Christian converts from Islam.<sup>12</sup>

An example is that of what happened in October 2018 to Eldos Sattar, a young Christian convert in Tamchi, a village in the Issyk-Kul region. He suffered a concussion, a fractured jaw and an eye injury after three Muslim men brutally assaulted him because they wanted him to go back to Islam.<sup>13</sup> In the following months, he, his friends and fellow Christians were subjected to more violent attacks and threats. In one of the latest incidents, a Muslim from the village was beaten by ten fellow Muslims because he was a good friend of Eldos. Sattar then chose to leave Kyrgyzstan, along with his uncle Nurbek Esenaly, for fear of further violence.<sup>14</sup>

Those responsible for these acts were charged with hooliganism, but the court refused to acknowledge that religion was the cause of the attacks; instead, the culprits were placed under house arrest, which was never fully enforced.<sup>15</sup>

About 80% of Kyrgyzstan's population is Muslim. With large pockets of poverty and widespread unemployment fears of religious radicalisation in the population remain strong. Government policies on religious matters have sought to create the conditions for the development of a more "traditional Islam" based on the Hanafi school, limiting outside influences and preventing the impact of globalisation on religious life.<sup>16</sup> Some 21 religious groups deemed extremist have been banned in the country.<sup>17</sup>

As in previous years, a number of suspected Islamic

extremists have been arrested and put on trial, especially alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a banned movement.<sup>18</sup> Other arrests involved people suspected of carrying out terrorist actions or taking part in the activities of the Islamic State group in Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Following a disputed parliamentary election held on 4th October 2020 that sparked public protests, President Jeenbekov resigned on 15th October.<sup>20</sup> Newly appointed Prime Minister Sadyr Japarov took over as acting head of state. New elections are scheduled to take place on 20th December.<sup>21</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Despite being one of the poorest republics of the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has managed to reach levels of democracy higher than those of other Central Asian countries.

During his time in office, President Sooronbai Jeenbekov stressed the importance of boosting interfaith harmony, while at the same time fighting those who use "Islam for their own selfish purposes, to turn it into an instrument of violence and extremism."<sup>22</sup> As long as the struggle against extremist or alleged extremist groups does not impinge upon the right to free religious practice, there is hope for positive developments regarding freedom of religion in this Central Asian nation.

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