



KYRGYZSTAN

Quick Facts

Population: 5,789,122 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 199,951 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kyrgyz 73.2%, Uzbek 14.6%, Russian 5.8%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.3% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, German) (2017 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$7.061 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

After 74 years of official atheism, during which the Soviet ideological and political system pushed the Islamic faith out of social and political life, the past two-and-a-half decades have seen a religious revival in the Kyrgyz Republic. The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a return to Islam among the country's population, complete with a renaissance of religio-cultural values and traditions. These religious freedoms are protected by the national Constitution, but have nonetheless come under fire from Kyrgyz political leaders, who fear the political challenge posed by Muslim religious leaders and Islam. This opposition has entailed a reestablishment of governmental control over religious organizations and progressively more restrictive regulations on religious practices.

Official concerns are not without merit. The opening of Kyrgyzstan to the world resulted in an influx of foreign influence in the form of funds (used for the construction and reconstruction of mosques and religious schools), and an upsurge in missionaries from Muslim countries and the publication or importation of religious literature. While this activity has been by and large benign, there are nonetheless troubling signs that Islamist elements—most prominently the radical grassroots movement Hizb-ut Tahrir—have expanded their influence in the former Soviet republic, capitalizing upon the religious renaissance now underway there.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Radical Islam boasts a long and checkered history in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Its roots stretch back to the days after the fall of USSR, when a number of former communist leaders (including Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, and its subsequent leaders) gravitated to Muslim theology and Islamic discourse. Their ideological about-face was by and large tactical; most opted to abandon Soviet dogma and embrace Islamic revivalism as a pragmatic way of staying in power.

To burnish their credentials as champions of Islam, local leaders opened their doors to Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi Islam. Riyadh, for its part, took advantage of the invitation, expanding its financial and political

foothold in the post-Soviet space. Thus, in the early 1990s, Saudi influence came to the newly independent states of Central Asia in the form of new mosques and religious education.¹

The scope of this outreach was staggering. Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov, a veteran Kyrgyz expert on religious affairs, estimates that after 1990, ten new mosques were constructed with the help of Saudi Arabia in the Kyrgyz city of Osh alone.² The Saudi effort, Zakirov says, also included the provision of Wahhabi literature in local languages for these new mosques.³ This entrenchment of influence was replicated many times over in other corners of the former Soviet Union.

Though initially appreciative of Saudi largesse, Kyrgyz leaders quickly felt its destabilizing potential. Saudi money and educational materials were intended to promote the Kingdom's intolerant, puritan strain of Islam, which encouraged opposition forces to support the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, rather than reinforcing the rule of local post-Soviet governments. By the early 1990s, according to one official Kyrgyz government assessment:

Numbers of illegal private religious schools [had] increased ... and their contacts with foreign (Saudi) Muslim organizations expanded. As a result of such contacts not only the functioning character of these centers, but also their ideology, changed. Those schools of traditional Islamic education turned into independent radical religious centers, the programs of which, except for training, included the propagation of their own social and political views.⁴

The impact on civil society in Kyrgyzstan was profound. As experts have noted, the question was not one of "a trivial reshuffling of power, but rather a truly radical revolution" in which Wahhabi ideology confronted national secular elites. "National intelligentsia would undoubtedly fall prey to radical Islamization of public life. Secular, atheistic and 'Europeanized' elite would be unable to fit into an Islamic model of development. Iranian and Afghan examples leave no room for illusions."⁵

These fears were made all the more acute by the strategy employed by Kyrgyz Islamic radicals. At home, these people challenged the new "Islamic" ideology of local ruling elites and threatened their positions of power by encouraging Muslim clergy and members of fundamentalist groups to assume state power. Even more ominously, regional experts say that radicals also became active recruiters, encouraging hundreds of young Kyrgyz to venture abroad to study at Islamic educational institutions in nations throughout the Muslim world, often with the active support of radicals in those countries.⁶

Today, the most popular Islamist group in Kyrgyzstan is Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), a broad fundamentalist movement that seeks as a central component of its ideology the global unity of all Muslims. In Kyrgyzstan, HuT has evolved into a political opposition movement, styling itself as the Islamic alternative to regime corruption. Ideologically, however, the movement looks beyond the Kyrgyz state; the declared goal of its programs is "the restoration of Islamic way of life and dissemination of the call (da'vat) to Islam in the world."⁷ Officially, HuT renounces the use of violence to achieve this objective. However, there is a broad consensus among experts that the organization serves as an incubator for Islamic radicalism, priming adherents to subsequently take up arms against opponents.

Details about HuT's origins in Central Asia are incomplete. The organization's first cells in Kyrgyzstan, however, are known to have appeared in Jalal-Abad and Osh in 1997–1998. By 1999, the movement had evolved into well-developed structural units, and the number of adherents increased dramatically—driven in part by the repressive measures employed against the group across the border in neighboring Uzbekistan. Since then, HuT's ideas have found fertile ground among the socially disadvantaged Kyrgyz populations of the Kara-Suu, Bazar-Korgon, Suzak, Aravan, Uzgen districts, and within the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, especially among ethnic Uzbeks. Membership estimates vary widely, from a few thousand to as many as 40,000.⁸

Since its inception, HuT has boasted a vertical, tightly organized hierarchy. Local branches of the movement depend on the organization's central committee for financial support. Even so, the movement has developed unique strategies for each one of Kyrgyzstan's seven geographic regions, which consist of

Batken, Jalal-Abad, Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Osh, Talas, and Chui.⁹ It has paid special attention to social projects and outreach, including the provision of assistance to poor families, the distribution of food, and aid to the families of those who have been imprisoned by Kyrgyz authorities. Such charitable activities are aimed at expanding HuT's popularity among the Kyrgyz population. It has also stepped up its proselytization among prison inmates, with some success. Another innovation is the organization's efforts to place its own people in government agencies, including law enforcement units, even though such involvement ostensibly contradicts HuT principles.

With the political and ethnic violence of 2010, HuT's popularity in Kyrgyzstan rose considerably. This was particularly true in ethnic Uzbek communities in the southern regions of the country, as they had been targets of popular and officially-instigated violence in the summer of that year.¹⁰ HuT, on the other hand, offered the Uzbeks a vision of a caliphate that transcended ethnic divisions. Since then, HuT's presence has been steadily increasing, especially among women.¹¹ After the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EU, HuT has strengthened its anti-Russian rhetoric.

In addition to HuT, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been a constant fixation for Central Asian governments since its inception, and Kyrgyzstan is no exception. Reports indicate that somewhere around six hundred Kyrgyz are fighting with the Islamic State in Syria, and government officials fret over the possibility of their return.¹² However, ISIS has yet to carry out any attacks in Kyrgyzstan. The only organized attack in Kyrgyzstan in recent years, the August 2016 suicide bombing of the Chinese embassy, was carried out by Uighur extremists and not directed against Kyrgyzstan.¹³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The establishment of Kyrgyzstan as an independent state in 1991, and the creation of a new constitution enshrining religious freedoms within it, led to a new focus upon Islam in Kyrgyz society. With three quarters of the country's 5.7 million inhabitants identifying as Hanafi Muslim,¹⁴ Islam was indispensable for the development of Kyrgyz nationhood. In the years that followed, the construction of mosques and religious schools (madrassas) mushroomed, fueled by aid from Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Muslim world. With only 39 mosques in 1990, there were over 2,000 mosques as recently as 2015,¹⁵ along with 81 official madrassas.¹⁶ The number of Kyrgyz students in Islamic schools likewise surged. National religious traditions and holidays were reinstated after being abolished during the Soviet era.

Kyrgyzstan's religious revival attracted international attention. Missionaries from Muslim countries became involved in local religious activities, and a great deal of religious Islamic literature was published and imported. Muslim missionaries from Turkey and the Arab world found an especially receptive audience in the conservative south of the country. In addition to proselytism, Muslim missionaries built mosques and instituted educational programs and international student exchanges.¹⁷

This influx of Islamic activity has transformed Kyrgyz society. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, about 55 percent of ethnic Kyrgyz identified as Sunni Muslim; today, that number stands at 97 percent.¹⁸ However, most Islamic practice in Kyrgyzstan is moderate compared to the Arab world, with local traditions playing an outsized role in religious observance. As of 2013, only 54 percent of ethnic Kyrgyz identify religion as being "very important" in their lives. In addition, surveys in the last decade suggest that only 7 percent of Kyrgyz support HuT.¹⁹ Despite this, however, the growing number of believers is thought to have a shallow understanding of the faith, thus making them vulnerable to manipulation. The vacuum is often filled by an extremist interpretation of Salafi Islam.

There are growing anti-Shia sentiments that are fueled by informal and religious leaders across the country. As religious institutions are the most trusted entities in the country, according to the recent study by the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, the government has less influence on the population, especially in remote areas. Thus, 43% of surveyed respondents had full confidence in religious organizations and

their activities, followed by Kyrgyz armed forces (35.2%), mass media (24.7%), the President (23.5%) and international organizations (23.1%).²⁰

Activities online also present a unique challenge. Extremist leaders have issued fatwas justifying jihad in the Ferghana Valley and calling for jihad in the greater Central Asian region on various websites. Offline, it is impossible to ignore the role that prisons play as a channel of radicalization. Currently, there are 180 people individuals who are have been officially convicted for terrorism and religious extremism and are in prison.²¹

Apart from the approximately 500 Kyrgyz nationals fighting abroad,²² ISIS does not seem to have made significant inroads into Kyrgyz society. This is evidenced by the lack of terrorist activity connected or inspired by the group in Kyrgyzstan itself. Kyrgyz are also underrepresented in Syria (in terms of fighters as a percentage of Muslim population) when compared to many Western countries such as France and Australia.²³ While the Kyrgyz authorities occasionally claim to have conducted counter-ISIS operations, it is unclear whether their claims are true, or if they are meant to boost public support for the state's generally lackluster counterterrorism efforts.²⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Even after the Cold War ended, Central Asia's Soviet-trained political leaders preferred to keep the Soviet model of secularism, fearful of the potential political challenge from Islamic religious leaders. Kyrgyzstan was no different; in the 1990s Kyrgyz authorities re-established state control over religious organizations, and invited former employees of the country's Soviet-era Council for Religious Affairs to serve in its newly-founded State Commission on Religious Affairs. In 1993, the government established the country's highest spiritual governing body—known as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK)—which united the Kyrgyz Muslims, Islamic religious organizations, societies, religious educational institutions, mosques and other groups under its umbrella. Despite these increased controls, religious groups during the 90s and early 2000s enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy.

The government sought to curb Islamist influences during this period. Authorities were concerned about the ability of the state to counteract the spread of religious extremism, especially given its limited material, technological, and ideological resources. This was the motivation behind the Kyrgyz Attorney General's Office and the Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan's 2003 determination to outlaw four organizations: Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Turkistan Liberation Organization, the East Turkistan Islamic Party and the Islamic Party of Turkistan. All were recognized as sponsors or perpetrators of terrorism.

After President Kurmanbek Bakiyev came to power in 2005, official policy towards religion took a decidedly authoritarian turn. The first sign of this change was the killing of Rafiq Qori Kamalov in a joint raid by Kyrgyz and Uzbek police in 2006. Rafiq Qori, a popular preacher from Kara Suu in southern Kyrgyzstan, had been a sharp critic of the government's stance towards HuT. A further warning sign came in 2008, when the government arrested scores of Kyrgyz protesting restrictions on an Islamic holiday. The result was extended prison sentences for 32 people, despite a lack of evidence to support the prosecutions.²⁵ In January 2009, a new religion law went into effect that made religious observance conditional on state permission. In addition, more emphasis was placed on Kyrgyzstan's "traditional" religions—Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity—with many other groups, by extension, being increasingly stigmatized.

The rise of ISIS has led Kyrgyz authorities to further tighten control over Islamic religious practice. A new state concept on religion policy, adopted in 2015, elevates the role of Hanafi Sunni Islam in Kyrgyz religious life, for example, by only allowing Hanafi Sunni Muslims to be clergy members, religious judges, or muftis. These religious leaders have to submit to screening and accreditation tests which are heavily biased in favor of Hanafi belief. Religious education is also being expanded, naturally, with an emphasis on Hanafism.²⁶

The risk of radicalization remains high in the Kyrgyz Republic. According to the State Committee for

National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic, 17 terrorist attacks in the nation were prevented, 95 individuals were arrested and 27 religious extremist groups were banned in 2016.²⁷ Around 500 Kyrgyz citizens were recruited to become foreign fighters.²⁸ Kyrgyz law-enforcement agencies reported that they confiscated around 19,000 pieces of religious extremist literature on paper and digital devices in 2016, almost double the 2015 amount of about 10,000 pieces of contraband.²⁹ While it may be partially attributed to the stricter enforcement policies within the republic, the numbers, nevertheless, depict the general trend and demand for such materials in the republic.

At the same time, Kyrgyzstan lacks a coherent strategy for countering Islamic radicalism. Many of the measures proposed recently, such as those outlined above, could alienate devout Muslims as a secular state appropriates Islam for strategic ends. It also rests on the false assumption that a strong Hanafi majority will protect against radicalism (the Taliban, for example, is Hanafi, not Wahhabi). Such assertive proposals also preclude the development of an inclusive national identity that can accommodate the growing rift between secular and religious citizens.

However, some steps have been made recently. The Kyrgyz government developed the Program on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2017-2022. The program states the external and internal sources of radicalization as well as measures that have to be undertaken to tackle the issue. This program primarily targets recruiters of different terrorist and extremist organizations. It also aims at increasing religious literacy among condemned individuals. Kyrgyzstan is more democratic than other countries in the region, however, in terms of countering religious terrorism the current system creates more difficulties, as the government initiatives on any involvement in the religious sphere meets lots of resistance from the general public.

ENDNOTES

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