American Foreign Policy Council

Kyrgyzstan

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,548,042

Area: 199,951 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uyghur 1%, other 5.7%

Religions: Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): $6.473 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2013)

After seventy-four years of official atheism, during which the Soviet ideological and political system pushed the Islamic faith out of the social and political life, the past two decades have seen a religious revival of sorts in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. The revival process started at the time of "perestroika" (1985-1991). The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a "return to Islam" among the country's population, complete with a renaissance of religious-cultural values and traditions. The years since have seen an explosive growth in the role and importance of Islam in the life of the population of Kyrgyzstan. In 1960, Islam was practiced less than half of the population. As of 2012, however, adherence to Islam was professed by 90 percent of Kyrgyz.[1]

Kyrgyz governmental attitudes toward the religion have gradually evolved as well. The December 1991 law "On freedom of religion and religion organizations" put an end to strict governmental control and regulation of religious life in Kyrgyzstan. But, although religion freedoms are now protected by the national Constitution, they have come under fire from Kyrgyz leaders, who fear the polit-

ical challenge posed by Islam and by Muslim religious leaders. This 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 of 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 the USSR, when a number of former communist leaders (including former presidents Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev) gravitated to Muslim theology and Islamic discourse. Their ideological about-face was by and large tactical; these former Marxists were hardly true believers. Rather, most opted to abandon Soviet dogma and embrace Islamic revivalism as a pragmatic way of staying in power.

The results were profound. 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.[2]

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.[3] The Saudi effort, Zakirov says, also included the provision of Wahhabi literature in local languages for these new mosques.[4] 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 an official Kyrgyz government assessment, the "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."[5]

The impact on civil society in Kyrgyzstan was significant. 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."[6]

These fears were made all the more acute by the strategy employed by Kyrgyz Islamic radicals. At home, these elements 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 these forces also became active recruitment organs, seducing 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.[7]

The destabilizing potential of these activities goes a long way toward explaining why, time and again, Kyrgyz scholars, intellectuals and activists have tended to support local leaders, "whenever fundamentalist Islam reared its head."[8] At the same time, they have formulated a remarkably complex response to the inroads made by Islamic radicals, harnessing religious texts, state education, and public diplomacy in an effort to offer an alternative to the Wahhabi worldview.

Kyrgyzstan has always professed a moderate Islam, but today more and more young Kyrgyz people are interested in religious movements that preach extremism.

Far and away the most popular Islamist group in Kyrgyzstan, and the most dangerous for secular Kyrgyzstan, is *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HuT), a broad fundamentalist movement that seeks as a central component of its ideology the

"unity of Muslims all over the world." 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*) [sic] to Islam in the world."[9] 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 of sorts for Islamic radicalism, priming adherents to subsequently take up arms against opponents. In recent years, members of HuT have been found to be responsible for bombings in Bishkek, and the group's supporters have begun the targeting of individuals who disagree with its radical vision of Islam.[10]

Details about HuT's origins in Central Asia are sketchy. 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. In fact, the organization's second largest base of support can be found in Kyrgyzstan—a figure estimated as of 2009 to stand at some 3000 citizens.[11] The organization's regional headquarters is now located in Kyrgyzstan, where it serves as a communications hub for HuT activities throughout Central Asia.[12]

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. The Chairman of the group, as well as its regional leaders (*mutamad*) and local leaders (*naqib*) have appointed treasurers to collect donations. According to official estimates, approximately 5,000 of the organization's followers live in Kyrgyzstan, and more than 80 percent of them live in the south of the republic, where there are 93 district and regional cells. In the north of the republic, the majority of cells are located in the city of Bishkek and in the Chui region, as well as in the Issyk-Kul region.[13] Most recently, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has begun to attract new members in the Naryn and Talas oblasts.

Hizb ut-Tahrir has adapted its tactics in Kyrgyzstan in recent years in order to more adequately mold them to the country's current political situation. In doing so, the movement has developed unique strategies for each one of Kyrgyzstan's seven geographic regions. It has paid special attention to social proj-

ects 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. The group has also stepped up its proselytization among prison inmates, with some success. Official estimates indicate that the number of HuT supporters in local Kyrgyz jails has increased in recent years.[14] The cycle is thereby perpetuated, with those converted later becoming the organization's adherents and foot-soldiers. 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.

The level of Islamist activism in Kyrgyzstan is a subject of some dispute. In its most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the U.S. State Department reported that 2012 "was a year of relative stability" in Kyrgyzstan, during which no terrorist incidents or large-scale ethnic disturbances were reported.[15] According to this view, the lull was largely attributable to new, pluralistic elections in the country that took place in December of 2011.[16] This assessment, however, is contradicted by Kyrgyz authorities, who say that more than 150 extremism-related incidents took place in the country during the year in question.[17] Moreover, according to Kyrgyz authorities, HuT is adapting its tactics. It has increased its recruitment of women (which now comprise some 7.4% of the organization) and is "actively coercing Kyrgyz women to carry out its radical agenda."[18]

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. 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. The number of Kyrgyz students in Islamic schools 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. Clergy and internationally known theologians began to educate local communities on religious matters, taking into account the historical traditions and mentality of local people.

This revival, however, has by and large not been radical. The majority of Kyrgyz Muslims do not support the activities of extremist religious organizations, including HuT. Many citizens understand the organization's origins, its foreign links, and its ultimate goal of creating a global Islamic Caliphate, and reject it for those reasons. Rather, *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* support comes mainly from the disadvantaged sectors of the population.

Most mosques are located in southern Kyrgyzstan, where religious traditions run deeper. There are a total of 2,200 mosques currently operating in Kyrgyzstan,[19] including 601 in the Osh region, 450 in the Jalal-Abad region, and 247 in the Batken region. Forty-nine mosques currently exist in the city of Osh. In the north of the republic, there are 587 mosques. Foreign sponsors, who generally provide some 70 percent of project costs, mainly carry out construction of new mosques in Kyrgyzstan. Foreign financial support of state-sanctioned Muslim activities is almost negligible, and is mainly provided by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran.[20]

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 religious institutions of Islam in Kyrgyzstan underwent significant structural changes. The government established the country's highest spiritual governing body—known as the *Muftiyat*—which in 1996 was transformed into the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK). SAMK has regional, district and rural branches that unite Kyrgyz Muslims, Islamic religious organizations, societies, religious educational institutions, mosques and other groups under its umbrella. The activities of these organizations are based on the Koran and the religious tenets of Islam, as well as the works of prominent Muslim leaders and internationally recognized experts.

The growing influx of religious literature into Kyrgyzstan has heightened interest in Islam among the local population. In response, in recent years SAMK has initiated the publication of many religious brochures that explain Muslim prayers and ceremonial sites and tell people about the peculiarities of fasting and Muslim holidays. It also published collections of religious scriptures and brief biographies of the Prophet Muhammad. Supplementing this

education effort, foreign Muslim countries have sent a substantial number of editions of the Koran and other religious literature to the Republic.

The Kyrgyz government has established a national religious newspaper, *Islam Madaniyaty*, which is today published in the city of Bishkek in both Russian and Kyrgyz. Regional religious papers also exist in the Jalal-Abad and Osh regions.

SAMK continues to operate as the governing religious body of Kyrgyzstan. It is comprised of seven regional offices, one Islamic university, eight institutes, sixty-five *madrassas* and about 60 classes to study the Koran.[21] Its job is to fulfill the religious and spiritual needs of the republic's Muslims and to train clergy in the Koran and *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad, *akyyda* (creed) sciences, and *Fiqh*.

It should be mentioned that at the beginning of Islam revival in Kyrgyzstan Muslim clerics in the country were mainly self-taught *imams*, and only a few of them possessed a religious education. The training of Muslim clerics in the Soviet period was conducted exclusively in the *Mir-Arab madrassa* in Bukhara, and in the Tashkent Islamic Institute. Today there are 45 *madrassas* and Koran study classes, six institutes, one university, and 26 different Islamic centers, foundations and associations.[22] However, the traditional method of teaching in Central Asian Islamic educational institutes delivers only narrow religious education, instilling in students a conservative attitude towards society and the government, and developing conservative religious thinking. This traditional religious education has turned out to be unable to meet the challenges of modern life and make them fit within Islam. In fact, the traditional Islamic religious education in the country cannot "intellectually" resist radical ideologies from within Islam. And these institutions cannot deliver enough staff for the 1,619 officially registered mosques in Kyrgyzstan.[23]

"Staff shortages" in Kyrgyz mosques have been ameliorated gradually, mainly due to young *imams* who studied in the Near and Middle East. Very often, however, these foreign-trained scholars had a negative impact on local mosques, bringing home with them a radical dogmatic ideology that lowered the quality of the teaching of the basics of Islam and increased factionalism.

SAMK serves as the main point of national liaison with various foreign religious organizations and centers; participates in international conferences on theological issues; engages in the construction of Islamic religious sites, and organizes and holds festive prayers during the holidays of Ramadan and Eid. In addition, it organizes and coordinates the activities of mosques and

madrassas, and is engaged in charity.

Between 2000 and 2001, signs of a stricter governmental policy toward *Hizb ut-Tahrir* began to emerge. 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 Turkestan. All were recognized as sponsors or perpetrators of terrorism.

Measures taken since by law enforcement agencies to combat religious extremism in the region have had little effect, however. Fueled by popular discontent with regime repression, HuT's membership base has steadily grown.

The year 2007 saw a national debate over the drafting of a new constitution of Kyrgyzstan, with a number of Muslim leaders attempting to present their own alternative draft of a basic law of the country. In due course, the country's parliament adopted a new constitution which erased the characteristics of Kyrgyzstan as a "secular" state. It was only after further political struggle and the effort of secularist opponents that Kyrgyzstan's "secular" character was officially restored.

Since that time, experts say, "the use of Islamic factor by Kyrgyz politicians began to decline." With the exception of political elections, when some politicians and parties attempted to harness Muslim sentiment to cull votes, national politics in Kyrgyzstan has generally steered clear of the use of Islam.[24]

ENDNOTES

[1] "Islam in Kyrgyzstan," Wikipedia.ru, n.d., http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/islaminkyrgyztan.
[2 Zeyno Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 2004), 71.
[3] Author's interview with Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, August 2004.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Islam in Kyrgyzstan: Tendencies of Development*, Official Report of the State Commission on Religious Affairs (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2004), 35.
[6] Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds., *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change* (Washington, DC: The Eisenhower Institute, 1995), 175.
[7] Author's interview with Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov.
[8] Sagdeev and Eisenhower, Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change, 175.
[9] http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org.
[10] "Radical Islam in Kyrgyzstan," *Mir*, May 1, 2011.
[11] Author's interview with police officers, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, June 21, 2009.
[12] Author's interview with Kyrgyz State Commission on Religious Affairs official, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan August 10, 2009.
[13] Author's interview with Ministry of Internal Affairs official, August 12, 2009.
[14] Ibid.
[15] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, May 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209983.htm.
[16] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, May 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209983.htm.
[17] Asker Sultanov, "Kyrgyz Hold Ground on Terrorism," *Central Asia Online*, January 24, 2013, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/01/24/feature-01.
[18] Asker Sultanov, "Hizb ut-Tahrir Steps Up Recruitment of Kyrgyz Women," *Central Asia Online*, May 13, 2013, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/05/13/feature-01.
[19] "Islam in Kyrgyzstan," Wikipedia.ru, n.d., http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/islaminkyrgyztan.
[20] Author's interview with Kyrgyz State Commission on Religious Affairs Deputy Chairman, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, August 27, 2004.

[21] "Islam in Kyrgyzstan," Wikipedia.ru, n.d., http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/islaminkyrgyzstan.
[22] American University of Central Asia, "Muslim Community in Kyrgyzstan: Social Activity at the Present Stage: A Brief Overview," 2010.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Roman Veytsel, "Revival of Islam in Kyrgyzstan," Islam in the CIS, January 11, 2011.