

Asia REF

Religious & Ethnic Freedom



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

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“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

INTRODUCTION

Asia is the largest and most diverse continent in the world in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The regions of South, Southeast, and Central Asia alone comprise 24 countries and account for about 35 percent of the world's population. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), these regions also have some of the highest levels of government restrictions on religion and have the most hostile incidents involving religion compared with other countries around the world. The Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (Asia REF) program, funded by USAID, was designed to support targeted in-country and cross-border efforts by local partners to expand the freedom of religion and conscience in Asia. It also aimed at improving the ability of local community partners to advance the freedom of religion and conscience within their countries, address their immediate needs, and develop and access resources to address deficits in self-reliance. To achieve these objectives, the program supports iterative projects and a learning agenda to respond to existing and emerging threats to the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

When the project was started, the Asia REF team identified seven key religious freedom issues, after consulting with international experts and advisory group members. These include: the rise of religious nationalism; anti-conversion, blasphemy and apostasy laws; a reform of educational curricula to support religious and ethnic freedom (REF); gender-based REF violations; hate speech and misinformation; legal, policy and governance reform to support REF; and capacity building for civil society organizations (CSOs) working on religious and ethnic freedom. The advisory group members recommended that these issues take top priority. They added that there is also a need to consider other laws used to target minorities, the narrowing of civic space, the responsibility of social media companies, the position of children and youth, and the role that local context plays in providing greater depth and nuances to the issues identified.

A situational analysis is one of the steps in identifying the needs and opportunities in the expansion of religious and ethnic freedom in the region. It involves the collection and study of REF violations in secondary data, country contextual information, and regional trends to identify and understand the specific issues to be addressed. It examines the status of REF issues, establishing a basis of shared understanding for Asia REF partners and USAID. It also assists Asia REF in identifying actionable intervention areas for projects and identifies the key priorities for the Asia REF learning agenda. The approach of Asia REF incorporates adaptive management and flexible programming of award funding to support local organizations that promote the recognition of religious freedoms across Asia. The research includes projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and the Philippines, based on project development needs. It also ensures diverse representation of countries in the region for comparative analysis.

To understand the REF context in the selected countries, Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle was used. The triangle helps to identify how physical violence, discriminatory structures in society and ideas about "the other" are interlinked. **Direct violence** is direct physical or psychological violence with clear specific victims and perpetrators. It can be carried out by states, groups in the society, or family. (Examples include security force attacks, torture, mob violence, sexual violence, and hate crimes.) **Structural violence** is harm done to people by injustice and discrimination in society leading to the denial of their basic rights. This injustice and discrimination can be found in the structures of society. It can be found in laws, policies, written and unwritten rules; the institutions and praxis of government authorities and civil society, and in the behavior of individuals. **Cultural violence** refers to the prevailing attitudes or beliefs used to legitimize violence – whether of a direct or structural nature. These include the prejudices or stereotypes existing in society that have been internalized by individuals. The stereotypes find expression in the interactions people have with each other.

Therefore, each country profile consists of a short background; an overview of its legal framework, describing constitutional norms and relevant legal religious freedom acts; an analysis through the

triangle of violence lens; and an analysis of the actors involved. The study was conducted between May and September 2022.

Key Questions of the Study:

- What are the most pressing concerns for different groups in the target area, including women, girls, men, boys, and minorities.? How are they linked to REF rights?
- Are there examples of direct violence related to REF in the country's context?
- What are examples of structural violence connected to REF in a country's context? How are men and women, boys and girls affected by these?
- Which attitudes make direct and structural violence seem acceptable to people? How are these attitudes and values being transmitted through a cultural context?
- Which actors/stakeholders are working on REF in the targeted countries and what types of programming are they doing now?
- What are the thematic priority/development challenges that Asia REF needs to address in each target area?

Limitations:

- *Secondary data and reliability:* The situational analysis is entirely desk research, with no expected key informant interviews. The study does not claim to be academically original. It is based on a literature review of sources provided by national and international human rights reports, as well media reports.
- *Language:* Most of the desk research consisted of a study of secondary sources available in English. For Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan resources in Russian language also were used.
- *Difficulty in identifying cultural narratives:* Reports on human rights and religious freedom provide little insight into the cultural narratives that underlie direct and structural violence. A feasible understanding of social perceptions of religious and ethnic diversity has been gathered, not intending to be comprehensive. A more in-depth study of the issue is needed.
- *Limitations of an actor analysis:* The situational analysis also includes a review of organizations working on religious freedom. However, an actor analysis is limited to those organizations mentioned in the resources covered in the literature review. Thus, the list is not exhaustive and does not identify the needs of these organizations. The identified list of organizations will be shared with REF partners, so it can be supplemented and evaluated in consultation with the Advisory Group and consortium partners.
- *Definition:* Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience directs and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is a core human right, international law and treaties recognize it as a vital element of national security that is crucial to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

KYRGYZSTAN

COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked country in Central Asia and a former republic of the USSR, gained independence in 1991. With limited but greater democratic development, Kyrgyzstan experienced power overthrows in 2005, 2010, and 2020, accompanied by changes in the government structure as well as the main law. Sadyr Japarov, who came to power following political unrest in October 2020, was elected president in January 2021 with 80 percent of the vote and pledged to tackle crime and corruption while establishing order in the country. As Freedom House reported, these elections were marred by significant irregularities, including the misuse of state resources, and were not considered competitive. A referendum held on the same day elected to return Kyrgyzstan to a super-presidential system¹. Both elections were characterized by historically low voter turnout. Throughout 2021, security services arrested opposition members and engaged in violent vigilante actions against potential opponents, ranging from politicians to protesters. The newly elected president also enacted a number of laws monitoring civil society organizations and the media.² In 2021, the government began rapidly changing 356 laws³ in a way that facilitated the violation of human rights, as Human Rights Watch and local human rights defenders reported⁴.

The national statistical committee estimates the total population of the country at 6.7 million.⁵ In 2020 ethnic Kyrgyz comprised 73.6 percent of the population, ethnic Uzbeks comprised another 15 percent, with ethnic Russians comprising 5.2 percent, and Dungan and Uighurs each comprising about one percent.⁶ According to government estimates, approximately 90 percent of the population is Muslim, the vast majority of whom are Sunni. Shia make up less than one percent of the Muslim population. There is also a small Ahmadi Muslim community not reflected in government figures and estimated by an international organization at 1,000 people. About seven percent of the population is Christian, of which an estimated 40 percent is Russian Orthodox. Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and unaffiliated groups together constitute about three percent of the population. Adherents of Tengrism, an indigenous religion, estimate there are 50,000 followers in the country. However, these calculate religious affiliation on the basis of ethnicity⁷, which excludes a large number of people who are atheists or have converted to other faiths.

According to the World Bank, the Kyrgyz Republic is a lower-middle-income country with an economy vulnerable to external shocks due to its heavy dependence on remittances from labor migrants, 90 percent of whom are from Russia, (30 percent of its GDP), and gold production (about 10 percent of its GDP and 35 percent of its exports).⁸ The economy was hit hard during the pandemic in 2020, with slower gold production and delays in service sector growth, but it grew in 2021 by 3.6 percent. After the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia, Kyrgyzstan's outlook worsened with a 33 percent projected decline in remittance flow and higher food prices due to lingering inflation, along with fewer job opportunities. However, it is expected to get better in 2023-2024, due to regional stabilization and better domestic policies.⁹

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution declares the Kyrgyz Republic a secular state (Part 1, Article 1). No religion may be established as the state religion or as obligatory. Religion and all cults are separated from the state (Article 9). The state guarantees the equality of human and civil rights and freedoms regardless of any attitude toward religion and prohibits any form of restrictions on the rights of citizens on the grounds of religion or other beliefs (Article 24). Article 34 of the constitution, guarantees everyone freedom of religion or belief, including the rights: to profess – individually or together with others – any religion, not to profess any religion, to freely choose and have religious and other beliefs, and not to be forced to express their religious and other beliefs or to deny them. The right to freedom of religion may be limited by the constitution and laws of the Kyrgyz Republic to protect national security, public order,

health and morals of the population and the rights and freedoms of others. It also prohibits the establishment of religiously based political parties and the pursuit of political goals by religious groups.

While the constitution complies with international standards on freedom of religion and belief, the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, “On the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic,” adopted in 2008, was judged negatively by international and national human rights organizations.¹⁰ According to the law, in order to carry out religious activities, any religious group must acquire the status of a religious organization and register with the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) and the Ministry of Justice. If a group fails to do so, its activity is considered illegal. Each congregation of a religious group must register separately and must have at least 200 founding citizens. Foreign religious organizations are required to renew their registrations with the SCRA annually. It prohibits “insistent attempts to convert followers of one religion to another” and “illegal missionary activity.” The law also prohibits the involvement of minors in organized, proselytizing religious groups unless a parent grants written consent. The SCRA is legally authorized to deny the registration of a religious group if it does not comply with the law or is considered a threat to national security, social stability, interethnic and interdenominational harmony, public order, health, or morality. The law provides for the right of religious groups to produce, import, export, and distribute religious literature and materials in accordance with established procedures. This may include examination by state experts. It prohibits the distribution of religious literature and materials in public locations or during visits to individual households, schools, and other institutions.

Human rights experts reviewed the law in 2021 and noted that throughout the text of the law there are various concepts that act as grounds for restricting freedom of religion.¹¹ Many of these provisions in the law do not meet the requirements for such restrictions, which are directly provided by international human rights standards. Strict requirements for the registration of religious organizations have been established, acting as a significant, almost insurmountable obstacle. The law has excessively vague and imprecise wording, which creates favorable conditions for arbitrary application, inconsistent interpretation, and impermissible deviations from the rights and freedoms protected by international human rights standards.

A new Violations Code and a new Criminal Code came into force on December 1, 2021, replacing earlier 2019 Codes. The new Criminal Code Article 330 punishes “incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious or inter-regional enmity (discord) conducted by a group of people in a prior conspiracy” with jail terms¹². It is similar to Article 313 of the old Criminal Code, which is being used in a long-running criminal case launched in December 2019 against Jehovah's Witnesses based on allegedly “extremist” religious materials.¹³ The new Violations Code Article 142 punishes violations of the religion law, including the conducting of unapproved religious education and interference of religious organizations in state affairs.¹⁴ Part 3 of Article 142 punishes “the distribution of literature, print, audio, and video materials of religious nature in public places, as well as by going round homes, state or municipal institutions.” Part 4 of Article 142 punishes “carrying out religious activities without registration at the executive state body for religious affairs’.”

The 2020 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report highlights the issues of respect for the right to freedom of religion, and interaction between state and religious communities that are becoming increasingly acute in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵ Despite the state’s efforts in building dialogue and interfaith interaction, the facts of intolerance and discrimination on the basis of religion are intensifying. In this regard, the lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation is a serious gap. In addition, one of the most pressing issues is the question of respect for the rights and freedoms of believers in the context of countering extremism.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Kyrgyzstan might be characterized as a relatively free country compared to other Central Asian countries. The most high-profile cases of direct violence are sporadic. However, they are the result of both deficiencies in legislative and law enforcement practices and society's perception of the country's emerging religious diversity.

Direct violence

Violence, intolerance, and discrimination are most often encountered by so-called Kyrgyz proselytes — ethnic Kyrgyz who have converted to Christianity or other “non-traditional” religions. This is reflected in some instances of direct violence, but is more systemic in intolerance and discrimination at the local level. Minorities face attacks on property, such as the destruction or desecration of places of worship and religious cemeteries.¹⁶ They also face bullying in schools and blocking access to water and electricity. However, direct incidents of violence are usually related to an intolerance toward the free choice of religious beliefs or the burial of followers of different religions in local cemeteries.

Assaults upon minority individuals and converts/apostates. At the local level, there are cases of intolerance related to respect for the free choice of religious beliefs and the responsibility of the authorities to ensure that every case of violence is properly investigated and the perpetrators are brought to justice. The case of a young man, a Kyrgyz Christian convert, being beaten by local youth in the Issyk-Kul region in 2018 has resonated in the country. Three people broke into the Christian convert's house and severely beat Mr. Eldos Satar uulu,¹⁷ demanding he recite a Muslim prayer. The police classified this incident as a domestic conflict and refused to launch an investigation. Only after his lawyer's constant appeals and publicity in the media was a criminal case initiated.¹⁸ The leaders of Protestant churches note that Kyrgyz Christians are constantly subjected to psychological pressure from community members, and society treats such pressure as normal. Very few cases of religious intolerance have received proper media coverage. Some Kyrgyz Christians said they are getting used to the broader social discontent with Kyrgyz Christianity, but the pressure from relatives is very hard to bear. It often ends in violence, but victims do not complain to the police because they get beaten by their own kin.¹⁹ Analysis of such conflicts shows that most of their participants are young people acting with the support of the local Muslim clergy. The declaration of apostasy by religious leadership has a great impact on the Muslim community and sets a precedent for ever-narrowing criteria for declaring others as an “out-group” even within the Muslim community. Apostasy was also a consistent theme in the radicalizing propaganda deployed by violent extremist organizations. It has also been used to justify a number of attacks on Ahmadi Muslims, including the 2015 terrorist assassination of an Ahmadi leader in southern Kyrgyzstan²⁰.

The burial of believers of different religious affiliations. The burial of Kyrgyz nationals who converted to Christianity in local cemeteries is one of the pressing issues causing problems locally. Cases when local residents did not allow relatives to bury the deceased in the local cemetery, arguing that the local cemetery is “Muslim” are not rare. There were cases when the body of the deceased was dug up and reburied in other places not designated for burial. The most publicized case was the three-time reburial of a Kyrgyz Christian woman, Ms. Kanygul Satybaldieva, in southern Kyrgyzstan²¹. These practices are usually accompanied by a mob, local administration, and police. Imams pressure relatives to renounce Christianity and return to Islam if they want to bury the body in the local cemetery. Despite land provided for cemeteries throughout the Kyrgyz Republic being state or municipal property, local communities consider these lands as burial places only for co-religionists. The burial of a person of non-Muslim faith is considered an encroachment on the sanctity of the area. Local police and the municipal administration usually don't do much because they are often related to the aggressors in one way or another. One of the police officers stated, “We live in this community. It is

small [and] everyone knows each other. Even if we oppose [them], they will not listen to us. Moreover, they will accuse us of becoming Baptists.”²²

Gender. There is a prevailing belief in Kyrgyz society that bride kidnapping, forced marriages, and other forms of domestic violence are family affairs. It is considered that outsiders, even police, should not meddle, even though the acts are criminal offenses.²³ Moreover, these patriarchal values and practices are often justified by religious and cultural traditions. Kidnapping women for marriage is a crime in Kyrgyzstan,²⁴ but men abduct women regularly and with impunity.²⁵ There are cases of brides being murdered for failing to submit or of the brides being driven to suicide. A young woman, Burulai Turdaly kyzy, was murdered by her two-time kidnapper in May 2018, after officers left them alone together in a room at the police station. On April 5, 2021, several men abducted 27-year-old Aizada Kanatbekova in broad daylight in the capital. Two days later, her body was found in a car outside the city. In both cases, there was blatant inaction by the police and they serve as an example of the disregard police exhibit when it comes to reports of the kidnapping of brides.²⁶ In 2018, 64 percent of police said that *ala-kachuu* is normal and 82 percent said if violence took place, the woman herself is to blame for it.

According to a local human rights organization, “Kylym Shamy,” there has been an increase in applications for assistance from religious women who face domestic violence. At the end of December 2021, there were two cases. In one, a 24-year-old woman who was five months pregnant committed suicide, because of being repeatedly subjected to domestic violence (physical and moral violence) by her husband. On December 20, 2021, another woman applied to the Kylym Shamy with a complaint that her husband (in a religious, unregistered marriage) committed domestic violence through aggressive behavior, banning her from leaving home, exerting moral pressure, using physical violence, and limiting the allocation of food, child care, and female needs. Kylym Shamy highlights that in most cases, religious women do not know or accept existing mechanisms to apply for protection due to religious norms. There are also stereotypes about gender organization and experts as translators of radical feminism and western values. On the other hand, gender organizations do not see religious women as their beneficiaries/clients.

Women from religious minority groups are subject to intersectional discrimination due to their religious affiliation, ethnicity, and gender; they are subject to constant verbal and physical harassment and forced conversion. As mentioned above, Kyrgyz proselytes most often face violence and discrimination. Kyrgyz women who have converted to Christianity are additionally under the pressure of patriarchal family norms and social stigma. There have been cases where relatives have put pressure on a convert to ‘return’ to Islam or the local community has forced a couple to divorce because of the wife’s religious affiliation.

Structural violations

Government favoritism toward so-called “traditional religions.” Since 2006, the state has focused on so-called “traditional” religions such as Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church in developing its policy on religion. This trend continued in subsequent years, highlighting the special role of traditional religions in the spiritual formation and development of the people of Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, this was aimed at reducing the influence of “non-traditional” religions, meaning new religious movements, Protestant denominations, and regional folk beliefs. On the other hand, in attempting to establish control over Muslim religious institutions, the state actively intervened in the appointment of key religious posts, the organization of pilgrimages (hajj), and the determination of content in religious education curricula.

The politicization of religion has led to an active Islamization of politics, which is reflected in the influence of religious values on the institution of state decision-making. This is manifested in providing public services and education, law enforcement and judiciary practice, and health care. Since 2014, as part of the state campaign to prevent and counter violent extremism, the theological department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has held informational meetings with the population to explain the

provisions of “traditional” Islam. Employees of this department, together with Muslim clergy, visited public schools and explained the norms of religion to students, which conflicts with the secular nature of education. According to the local research center, state agencies often referred to religious norms in their work and supported the religious mainstream, which contradicted the principle of public service neutrality. In addition, local governments noted that all major decisions at their level are not made without the participation of local clergy.

More than a decade of state promotion of “traditional” moderate Islam has led to a public acceptance of Islam as an alternative to a secular, corrupt government. After the political power change in 2020, several political parties with a clear pro-Islamic agenda participated in the election. Social media actively supported efforts by Islamic religious leaders regarding the removal of secular principles during the drafting of the constitution. Comments by some leading state officials promoted a return to Islamic values, creating confusion over the boundaries between the secular state and religion. A UN Common Country Analysis stated that the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) serves to regulate the conduct and practice of religious institutions. But the analysis found a lack of clarity on many issues contributed to disquiet in some sections of society about emerging state attitudes toward religion and the role of religion in governance.²⁷ Such issues include:

- The debate about the use of head scarves,
- The official tolerance of the conflation of civil rights of groups such as women with western values,
- Police tolerance of violent actions against peaceful events promoting gender equality and countering GBV, and
- A general rise in traditionalist views and sentiments and the active promotion of these views by state media.

All this contributes to polarization and growing value divisions in the country.

Registration of religious organizations. As mentioned above, the legislation establishes rather complicated procedures for registration. According to the Baptist Union, their adherents were sometimes pressured by those in their community opposing the establishment of Christian groups not to provide adherents’ signatures. Christian activists also said obtaining the formal approval of local governments remained an obstacle to registration, since local governments often rejected Christian organizations by claiming that area residents opposed the spread of Christianity to their communities.²⁸ For several years, Jehovah’s Witnesses failed in registering their centers in the regions. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said the SCRA and other government organizations continued to use spurious applications of the law to prevent them from registering new congregations. On July 14, 2021, the UN Human Rights Committee concluded that by refusing requests to register Jehovah’s Witnesses Centers in the Osh, Naryn, and Jalal-Abad regions, the country violated Jehovah’s Witnesses’ fundamental right to practice their religion.²⁹

Several organizations are making unsuccessful attempts to obtain state registration since, without it any activity of a religious group is considered illegal. In July 2011, the SCRA refused to re-register the Ahmadi Muslim community based on a decision of so-called “religious expertise” conducted by the Muslim Spiritual Board and a number of “experts,” stating that the Ahmadi Muslim community is a “dangerous movement and against traditional Islam.” There was even an attempt to recognize the organization’s religious materials as extremist in 2014. Ahmadi Muslims have been unable to legally meet since 2011 and are still unable to get registration due to official hostility toward them.³⁰ Adherents of another religious movement, Tegrinists, have been trying for many years to get state registration. In September 2021, a SCRA official explained that the SCRA continues to view Tengrinism as a collection of traditional beliefs rather than a religion.³¹ As Forum 18 states: the experience of communities seeking registration is that decisions are arbitrary.³² An association of the Falun Gong spiritual movement was registered in July 2004, but – under Chinese pressure – was liquidated as “extremist” in February 2005. On January 26, 2018, the Chui-Bishkek Justice Department in the capital

of Bishkek registered a Falun Gong association. However, on March 20, 2018, – less than eight weeks later – the Justice Department issued a decree cancelling the registration, according to the Justice Ministry register of legal entities.

Anti-extremist legislation. There is no anti-discrimination legislation in Kyrgyzstan. Any violations related to the incitement of inter-religious discord and hate speech are considered under anti-extremist legislation and have rather broad definitions. Anti-extremist legislation is widely used to ban or restrict the activities of religious organizations. For example, in 2017, the religious movement Yaikyn Inkar was recognized as extremist and its activities were banned in the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic. The main arguments used by the courts were the asocial nature of the organization, the refusal to participate in political elections, and a ban on secondary education for girls. Experts agree that the emergence of this movement is more indicative of a social crisis in society than of its violent extremist nature. Also, Jehovah's Witnesses constantly face attempts to have their organization or its materials recognized as extremist. In this case, the influence of Russian practice can be seen. On November 17, 2021, the general prosecutor's office sent a suit to Bishkek's court asking it to ban 13 Jehovah's Witness books and six videos as “extremist.” The suit – quoting word for word a claim by NSC secret police head Tashiyev – claims that Jehovah's Witness's teaching “is contradictory and oriented toward people who don't know the fundamentals of religion and the Bible,” and it is based on “the personal views of the founders of the organization who misinterpret the Bible.”³³ On December 2, 2021, the judge dismissed the case filed by the prosecutor “without consideration” after examining the objections by the Jehovah's Witnesses and an expert opinion countering the ones submitted by Kyrgyz experts.³⁴ In all cases, the court's decision is based on so-called “expert analysis.”

Gender. Despite having domestic laws to protect women's rights and maintain gender equality, the Kyrgyz state does not seem to have the capacity to sufficiently implement and enforce the legal norms on women's rights nationwide. Furthermore, it has become evident in the past several years that women's rights groups and feminist activists are being targeted by nationalist and conservative factions. It is also evident that religious groups are increasingly in favor of raising the issues of polygamy, discrimination against women, and reproductive rights in the country.³⁵ There are also religiously motivated family restrictions on the freedom of movement, life choices, and education for women and girls. Nationalistic groups and individual politicians, parliamentarians, and religious figures consistently promote conservative ideas, including the legalization of polygamy. At the same time, the legalization of polygamy is proposed as a means of providing protection for second and third wives. As polygamy marriages are not recognized by the law, the women and children from these marriages have virtually no legal power.³⁶ The women's crisis center “Sezim” reports on a growing number of polygamy victims. Despite the criminal liability for polygamy, no man in Kyrgyzstan has been punished for this crime. It is very difficult to prove polygamy in court. (Repeat marriages are not registered, and are covered by religious canons. Also, women do not write the applications because they are under heavy economic and/or psychological dependence on polygamous husbands.³⁷ Until recently, there were a number of cases related to the restrictions imposed by public school administrations on the wearing of religious paraphernalia. However, according to women's religious organizations, the number of complaints has dropped significantly in recent years.

In Kyrgyzstan, polygyny – a proposal to decriminalize polygamy – is connected to poverty and labor migration, and these two aspects are distinct from Kazakhstan. Many Kyrgyz migrants move to Russia, get married there, and do not come back, leaving many women without a husband. Since it is difficult for single women to make a living in Kyrgyzstan, they will enter into polygynous marriages. Another difference is the issue of shame and social pressure. The Kyrgyz case suggests that the cultural value of marriage and motherhood — traditions that grant women communal identities, power, and prestige — might lead a woman to consent to second-wife status.

Cultural narratives

In analyzing state policy in regard to religion, the related public discussion and community reaction to religious diversity, it's obvious that public perceptions of religion are dominated by a security perspective. In this still largely Soviet understanding, religion is directly related to ideology and everything ideological is a matter of security. This is especially true for state institutions dealing with religious issues and protecting "traditional" values from "non-traditional" beliefs. The more religious groups and beliefs there are in the country, the more divided the lines in society become. Therefore, religious diversity is perceived as a threat to security in the country. That is why the government feels all religions should be controlled by the state. These sentiments are inevitably reflected both in the activities of the state bodies responsible for ensuring rights and freedoms and in the overall attitude of the population toward religious groups.

In addition, the anti-cult movement in Russia, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, has become widespread in Kyrgyzstan thanks to the linguistic affinity and broadcasting of Russian TV channels in the country. The widespread narratives against non-traditional movements continue to follow Soviet narratives against religious organizations that are, on one hand, "foreign agents" and, on the other hand, "dispersive of contradictory Western influences." The media spreads false and misleading information about religious minorities, portraying them as "destructive sects" or "totalitarian cults" that destroy families and cheat by claiming private property. Moreover, there is a widespread idea that all Kyrgyz are supposed to be Muslims, and Kyrgyz proselytes are traitors to their homeland, their faith and the memory of their ancestors. Negative attitudes are common not only towards Kyrgyz converts to Christianity but also toward many Muslims, who openly revealed their religious identity through preaching or who gained their religious education in Islamic countries. Muslim communities perceive such attitudes as Islamophobic. This is very surprising when one considers that 90 percent of the population see themselves as Muslim.

The gap between conservative and liberal values and groups is widening within the country. Conservative and nationalist groups accuse liberal civil society groups and NGOs of venality and of acting against the interests of the country. "NGOchular" (NGO-ers), "buzukular" (distructers), "batyshchilar" (supporters of the West), "grantoedy" (grant-eaters) are some of the derogatory terms used. This is by no means a complete list of the names currently applied to NGOs in the information space.³⁸ Growing conservative groups pose risks, among others, to the advancement of women's rights, and clashes over values are likely to continue. The situation is also expected to exacerbate harmful gender stereotypes and expand the prism around conservative gender norms that hinder gender equality. This reflects the polarization over national values based on conservative and masculine images of society.

ACTOR ANALYSIS

Compared to other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has a well-developed NGO sector, including those in the areas of religious freedom and the promotion of interreligious dialogue. These actors include human rights, research, peacebuilding, and religious organizations, as well as several civic activists.

Human rights organizations are more focused on protecting victims of religious discrimination, intolerance, and hate speech. In addition to the protection of victims, organizations initiate actions and public speeches, employ local and international mechanisms to protect human rights, and submit reports to the UPR. The most active organizations working in the field of religious freedom are [Kylym Shamy](#), Open Viewpoint, and [Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan](#). However, according to a human rights defender, because of a constant interest in preventing violent extremism issues, donors do not allocate funds to protect victims of discrimination (especially Muslim women.) Therefore, the organization is forced to seek internal funds to pay for the services of a lawyer.

Research institutes – usually under an authorized state body or through universities – conduct general monitoring and analysis of the religious situation in the country and region. The most well-known organizations are the [Center for the Study of the Religious Situation at SCRA](#) and the [Research Center for Religious Studies](#) at KRSU. The latter, in addition to research, conducts educational programs for young people on tolerance, provides training for lawyers, and develops mechanisms to protect victims of discrimination.

[Search Kyrgyzstan](#) prioritizes a program on religious freedom, which has been implemented since 2015 with the support of the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. The program actively promotes legal reform, monitoring, the capacity building of judicial actors and civil society, and increases participation by youth and women. Another peacebuilding organization, [International Alert](#), has for several years implemented a project to increase the participation of religious leaders in peacebuilding and solving social problems.

One of the leading faith-based organizations working on Muslim women's issues is Mutkalim, an organization that operates throughout the country. However, some experts note the monopolization of this sphere by the organization and emphasize a need to develop other faith-based NGOs working with women to increase inclusivity.

There are also several inter-confessional councils in the country. [One](#) was created directly by religious organizations and is registered as an NGO but does not include the so-called traditional organizations. [The second](#) one functions under the state does not have a separate legal entity and is involved mainly in activities initiated by the state.

ENDNOTES

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