

# Religion and the Secular State in Kyrgyzstan

Johan Engvall

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# **Religion and the Secular State in Kyrgyzstan**

**Johan Engvall**

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American Foreign Policy Council, 509 C St NE, Washington D.C.

Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden

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E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

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Institute for Security and Development Policy

Västra Finnbadsvägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm-Nacka

E-mail: [info@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:info@silkroadstudies.org)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to the European offices of the Joint Center (preferably by e-mail.)

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## Preface

This Silk Road Paper is part of the ongoing research effort on secular governance, religion and politics at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. We issue this paper as a contribution to the meager research that exists on secular governance in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While there is considerable opinion expressed by Western governments and NGOs on policies toward religion in Central Asia and the Caucasus, there is little analysis of what those policies actually are, what their intellectual antecedents may be, and what they intend to achieve. Indeed, until the publication in 2016 in this series of *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood*, there had been no case study of what secular governance actually means in this regional context – let alone a comparative study of the similarities and differences among the Muslim-majority states of the region, who constitute half the secular states in the Muslim world.

That study was followed in 2018 by *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, authored by Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Julian Tucker; and later that year by *Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan*, by Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn.

This study of Kyrgyzstan's experience by Johan Engvall is particularly timely given that country's experience, which differs considerably from the rest of Central Asia as it has had a more liberal and permissive atmosphere – while gradually aligning itself with policies in the rest of the region.

Building on these and other case studies, the Joint Center will eventually produce a comparative study of secular governance in the region as a whole.

## **Executive Summary**

Since independence, religion has become ever more important as an identity marker in Kyrgyzstan, with increased practical relevance in the everyday lives of many citizens. This religious revival poses challenges for a state that, like the other Central Asian states, has remained secular after the fall of communism. For this Muslim-majority state, the challenge has been to sustain the secularism of the state that was instituted during Soviet times, while replacing the anti-religious prejudice that characterized the militantly atheist socialist system with tolerance and respect for all religions. How has this played out in the past three decades?

In the early years of independence, the government took a liberal approach to religion, and the number of mosques and religious schools expanded rapidly. Foreign sources of religious influences, including ideological and financial, met few restrictions and could flow into the country from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Indian Subcontinent. By its fifth anniversary of independence, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan had already grown to more than 1,000, and the burst of mosque-building has continued unabated since then, standing at 2,669 officially registered mosques by 2016. Kyrgyzstan counts far more Islamic educational institutions than its larger neighbors Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, many Evangelical missionaries arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s in order to attract converts to various Christian churches. Protestant denominations from Europe, North America and South Korea played a particularly active role and thrived under the liberal religious environment

of the 1990s. Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, foreign missionaries became subject of stricter controls effectively halting their expansion.

While Kyrgyzstan's first decade of independence was characterized by a liberal approach to the sphere of religion, measures have thereafter been taken to strengthen the government's regulatory powers and take a less neutral and more proactive approach to religious matters. First, Kyrgyzstani laws and policies separate between what is referred to as traditional faiths, on the one hand, and non-traditional faiths on the other. The former – Hanafi Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church – are prioritized and given preferential treatment due to their historical influence on the development of Kyrgyz statehood. In particular, support of official Hanafism has attracted increasing policy attention. The government has taken upon itself the task to promote and safeguard the traditions and principles of Hanafism in order to stem the influence of international Salafist movements in the country and to ensure the cohesion of society. The distinction between beneficial religious traditions and allegedly harmful versions of religion has become an increasingly central part of the relationship between the secular state and religious communities.

Second, the government has instructed the chief religious institutions – the nominally independent Muftiate and the State Commission for Religious Affairs – to provide better control and monitoring of religious organizations, but also to engage in closer cooperation with them. State intervention into the activities of religious institutions is mainly justified on the grounds of preventing religious extremism. For example, the hardened legislation introduced in the religious sphere in 2008 was intended to restrict the activities of extremist foreign religious organizations, such as the banned global Islamist movement Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

The Islamic extremist threat first emerged on Kyrgyzstan's political agenda in the late 1990s among growing fears that radical Islamic groups had

established a presence in the religiously more conscious southern part of Kyrgyzstan. The threat became real in the summers of 1999 and 2000 when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan carried out armed incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan. Isolated terrorist incidents inside the country as well as radicalized citizens from Kyrgyzstan travelling to fight for the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in Syria have ensured that religious extremism and terrorism remain central factors in forming government policy in the religious field.

Kyrgyzstan's political project of secularism has had to confront and adjust to an increasingly diversified religious situation. The country's first president, Askar Akayev, initially took a rather laissez-faire approach to religion, while eventually driving state policy more in the direction of sheltering state and society from unwanted religious influences. His successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, continued and strengthened these policies as he mostly paid attention to Islam as a potential threat. While the third president, Almazbek Atambayev, was highly suspicious of foreign Islamic traditions, he endorsed traditional Kyrgyz Islam in public in a much more pronounced manner than his predecessors. Current president Sooronbai Jeenbekov appears intent on taking this rapprochement further by fostering a partnership between political and religious leaders.

In simple terms, three main attitudes can be identified in contemporary Kyrgyz society. First, there is the predominantly secular political, economic and intellectual elite in Bishkek. This once dominant group is gradually losing its position in a less secular society. Second, there is a large group of nationalist-minded Kyrgyz citizens who increasingly embrace moderate Hanafi Islam as part of that identity. Third, there are Islamic currents whose representatives try to convert existing Muslims to more conservative versions of Islam. It can be assumed that the relatively strong support for

Sharia in Kyrgyzstan, reported in certain survey data, is located chiefly among this group.

Despite the fact that religious organizations are prohibited from interfering in the government of the state, Islam has become an increasingly potent factor in politics. As society has become more religious, Islam has become an important source of legitimization for politicians and a resource for the mobilization of voters. In the early years of independence, the rapid increase of mosques was largely the result of foreign investments, the continued proliferation is now mainly secured through the financial prowess of local sponsors, including members of parliament. This is a reciprocal relationship. Clerics use their political connections to build up their own power bases. Politicians, in turn, enjoying clerical support strengthen their local electoral base.

In this light, Kyrgyzstan stands at a crossroads; sooner or later there will be a power shift away from the Soviet generation that has governed the country since independence. The question is, what comes with a new generation in power, and whether a post-Soviet generation of leaders will maintain the separation between politics and religion. Much depends on which of the three above-mentioned groups will constitute the backbone of future decision-makers.

## Introduction

Kyrgyzstan stands out in Central Asia, with its competitive political system and a vibrant civil society unmatched elsewhere in the region. This plurality also applies to the religious sphere, where many religious orientations, in particular different interpretations of Islam, compete for the souls and minds of the population. Over the past three decades, the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan has been constantly evolving as part of an ongoing search for Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet ideological identity.

Since independence, Islam has become ever more important as an identity marker in the Muslim-majority state, with increased practical relevance in the everyday life of many citizens.<sup>1</sup> This religious revival poses intricate challenges for a state that has remained secular after the fall of communism. For Kyrgyzstan, the challenge has been to sustain the secularism of the state that was instituted during Soviet times, while replacing the anti-religious prejudice that characterized the militantly atheist socialist system with tolerance and respect for all religions, and official neutrality towards them. The purpose of this paper is to analyze this task: How has the state managed the relationship with religious movements in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan?

The paper starts with an overview of religious developments in the country from a historical and contemporary perspective. It then discusses the major external influences in the sphere of religion since independence, including

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<sup>1</sup> The evolution of Islam in Kyrgyzstan since independence has been the subject of several rich ethnographic studies, including Julie McBrien, *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017; David W. Montgomery, *Practicing Islam: Knowledge, Experience, and Social Navigation in Kyrgyzstan*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

the emergence of religious extremism and terrorist movements in the country. The subsequent section turns to Kyrgyzstan's model of secularism, focusing on the major ideas, institutions, laws, and policies underpinning it. The penultimate section includes a comparison of the religious policies of Kyrgyzstan's different presidents, followed by a discussion on the ever more delicate relationship between political power and religion. The final section presents some principal conclusions on the nature and direction of the relationship between state and religion in Kyrgyzstan at a time when it is approaching three decades as an independent state.

# **Religious Traditions in Kyrgyzstan EU-Central Asia Relations**

Kyrgyzstan is a country of complex and an unusually wide variety of religious traditions. From a historical perspective, what truly characterized the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan was the co-existence of such diverse beliefs as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Shamanism, as well as different sects of Christianity and Islam. While Islam has been the dominant religion in the Central Asian region for nearly 1,300 years, it developed its stronghold in the sedentary oases in the southern parts of the region. In the mountainous territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan, Islam first arrived to the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley. The nomadic Kyrgyz people established a dominant presence on the territory from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. They were exposed to Islam through missionary activities carried out by settled people in East Turkestan and Fergana, not least due to the diligent work of the mystical and esoteric Sufi communities.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the Sufi Naqshbandi and Yasawi orders became widespread in Kyrgyzstan. Compared to the Uzbeks that had settled in southern Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz nomads developed a lighter attachment to Islam, preferring to retain many of the pre-Islamic beliefs and rejecting dogmatic Islamic rituals.<sup>3</sup> This was particularly the case with Tengrism, the erstwhile belief of the Kyrgyz, with its strong focus on ritual pertaining to the cult of the sky.<sup>4</sup> The worship of sacred places and

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<sup>2</sup> V. M. Ploskikh and D. D. Dzhunushaliev, *Istoriya kyrgyzov i Kyrgyzstana*, Bishkek: Raritet, 2009, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Askar Akayev, *Kyrgyzskaya gosudarstvennost' i narodnyi epos Manas*, Bishkek: Uckun, 2002, p. 83.

ancestral spirits likewise remained widespread. Gradually, in the process of Islamization, many customs and ancient beliefs took Islamized forms.<sup>5</sup>

By the time of the incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian empire in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic expressions were markedly different among the Kyrgyz nomads than among the sedentary Uzbeks, Uighurs and Tajiks. The latter had since long developed formal Islamic institutions, such as mosques, madrasas and a clerical establishment, while the Kyrgyz had no such things.<sup>6</sup> To this day, Islam is more strongly anchored in the south of the country, where a more orthodox form of Islam was established not least among the large ethnic Uzbek population, than in its northern parts.

During the Soviet transformation of Central Asia, the secular and militantly atheistic state banned all religious activities outside the strictly controlled official channels. For Kyrgyzstan and the other socialist republics in Central Asia, the prime state body in control of Islamic affairs was the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) established in 1943 and seated in Tashkent.<sup>7</sup> Seven decades of Soviet socialist rule, preached in schools and workplaces, left Kyrgyzstan isolated from the world's Muslim community as well as from religious training, religious texts and scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Religious people were largely forced to conduct their

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<sup>5</sup> Anvar Bugazov, *Socio-Cultural Characteristics of Civil Society Formation in Kyrgyzstan*.

Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, July 2013, pp. 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> "Kak sozdavalsya muftiyat: pervye sovetskie kazy," *Prevention*, March 5, 2019, <http://prevention.kg/?p=1937>.

<sup>8</sup> Elmurat Ashiraliev, "Kyrgyzstan Attempts to Isolate Local Islam," *The Diplomat*, August 28, 2019; Martha Brill Olcott, "Religion and State Policy in Central Asia," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 12, no. 4 (2014), p. 6.

spiritual rites in secret.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet policy of distancing Muslims in Central Asia from the scripture of Islam created a vacuum that was filled by traditional practices associated with folkloric Islam, more unorthodox, everyday religious practices.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1980s during the more liberal perestroika era, Kyrgyzstan displayed the first signs of an Islamic revival, with portions of the traditionally Muslim peoples becoming active worshippers.<sup>11</sup> Still, by the time of independence, there were no Islamic schools in Kyrgyzstan and the new state counted 39 officially registered mosques and 25 churches and parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup>

The process of re-Islamization played out against the backdrop of chaos, unemployment, poverty and moral disillusion in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Literally overnight people in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of the post-Soviet world had to come to terms with a new reality, in which rules, norms and beliefs enforced through seven decades of Soviet socialism no longer applied. In the words of Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akayev, this represented perhaps "the greatest social, political and economic transformation of the twentieth century".<sup>13</sup> To grapple with the new realities and find some moral direction in times of uncertainty, people in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia became more interested in religion, its doctrines, traditions and norms of behavior.

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<sup>9</sup> Timur Kozukulov, "Searching for Solutions to the Problems of Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan," in *Kyrgyzstan Today*, edited by John Couper, Bishkek: Social research Center, American University – Central Asia, 2008, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (2001): 453.

<sup>11</sup> Shirin Akiner, *Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context*, Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2016, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Kontseptsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikii*, Ukaz No. 324, May 6, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, p. 2.

In the early years of independence, Kyrgyzstan's authorities, led by President Akayev, took a liberal approach to religion, and the number of mosques and religious schools expanded rapidly on a flourishing religious market. Foreign sources of religious influences, including ideological and financial, flowed into the country from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Indian subcontinent. By its fifth anniversary of independence, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan had already grown to more than 1,000, and the burst of mosque-building has continued unabated since then. By 2016, Kyrgyzstan sported 2,669 officially registered mosques to cater the 6 million Kyrgyzstani citizens. In fact, the number of mosques has outgrown the number of secondary schools in the country. At the time, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan In comparison, Kazakhstan had 2,516 registered mosques in 2016, while the figures for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were 3,930 and 2,065, respectively.<sup>14</sup> The rapid growth of mosques posed a serious staffing problem since they needed to be filled with a corresponding number of trained Imams. In 2016, Kyrgyzstan had a total of 2,500 Imams. According to the deputy director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), only 20 percent of them have a basic religious education.<sup>15</sup>

The religious situation in Kyrgyzstan is versatile and constantly changing. There are many divisions inside the country on how Islam should be interpreted and practiced. Some Islamic currents are tolerant, others much stricter. Notwithstanding the growing influence of strict conservative preaching, overall Islam is predominantly seen as a way of life rather than a

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<sup>14</sup> "Islam i gosudarstva Tsentral'noi Azii: Ritorika i praktika otnoshenii," *Fergana.ru*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/9618>; Elmira Nogoibaeva (ed.), *Tsentral'naya Aziya: Prostranstvo 'shelkovoi demokratii'*. *Islam i gosudarstvo*, Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> "Budushchee religioznogo obrazovaniya v Kyrgyzstane," *K-News*, September 8, 2016, <https://knews.kg/2016/08/09/budushhee-religioznogo-obrazovaniya-v-kyrgyzstane/>.

dogmatic religious system.<sup>16</sup> The traditional co-existence between the Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School and certain elements of pre-Islamic forms of belief, such as worship of nature and deceased ancestors, remain widespread in Kyrgyzstan. Orthodoxy is still the second most practiced faith in the country and referred to as a traditional religion due to its impact on the history of Kyrgyz statehood. However, due to mass emigration, the Russian minority in Kyrgyzstan has decreased from 21.5 percent of the population in 1989 to 5.6 percent in 2018.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the relative weight of the Russian Orthodox Church has declined since the 1990s.

A 2013 global Pew survey of Muslims' attitudes provides data of what being Muslim actually means in Kyrgyzstan compared both to other Central Asian states as well as other areas of the world. Somewhat surprisingly, Kyrgyzstan's Muslims show the strongest support for Sharia law in Central Asia with 35 percent of responding Muslims supporting it. This high level of support for Sharia differs markedly from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, where 8 and 10 percent of Muslim respondents, respectively, expressed support for Islamic law. In Central Asia, only Tajikistan comes close with roughly a quarter of Muslim respondents expressing support for Sharia law.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a survey-based study on radicalization among young people in Kyrgyzstan reported that one-third of Muslim respondents supported the introduction of Sharia law.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Wolters, "The State and Islam in Central Asia: Administering the Religious Threat or Engaging Muslim Communities?" Private Hochschule Göttingen, Research Paper No. 2014/03, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> In numbers, this means a reduction from over 900,000 in 1989 to about 350,000 in 2018. The biggest emigration took place in the 1990s, but continued also in the 2000s.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, Washington, DC, 2013, p. 15. Neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan were included in the study.

<sup>19</sup> Emil Nasritdinov, et al., "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young people in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism: Analysis across Five Domains," CAP paper, no. 213, January 2019, p. 21.

Kyrgyzstan is also the only state in Central Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe where more than half of the Muslims support corporal punishments. Among Kyrgyzstan's Muslims who support Sharia, 14 percent approve of the death penalty for leaving Islam – higher than among Kazakh Muslims where the figure is only four percent, but low in comparison to 86 percent of pro-Sharia Egyptians and 76 percent of Pakistanis.<sup>20</sup> Ten percent supported a large role for religious leaders in politics, with 36 percent supporting "some" role for them, higher than in Kazakhstan where 3 percent supported a strong role and 20 percent wished to see some role of religious leaders in politics.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the idea of secular statehood is weaker among Kyrgyzstan's Muslims compared to other post-Soviet Muslim-dominated states, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, where Muslims strongly support secularism and have more tolerant views on religion, including in the private sphere.

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<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims*, p. 52-55.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

## External Influences

In the 1990s, the Kyrgyz government paid little attention to regulating religious matters; because of this liberal approach, religious movements and organizations were allowed to operate with a considerable degree of freedom. Some foreign countries and Islamic organizations lend their helping hand to the Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan. The main sources of influx of diverse Islamic influences in Kyrgyzstan were Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Each of these currents merit a closer discussion.

The Turkish state, through its powerful Directorate for Religious Affairs, Diyanet, has been active in providing religious training as well as funding the construction of schools, mosques and madrasas across Kyrgyzstan. Diyanet established a faculty of theology at Osh State University already in 1993, and in 2011 it also opened a faculty of theology at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University.<sup>22</sup> The purpose is to prepare professionals in the fields of Islamic theology, history, law, language and Islamic economics. The faculty at Manas University enrolls over 250 students.<sup>23</sup> In the fall of 2018, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan joined his Kyrgyz counterpart Sooronbay Jeenbekov in the opening of the much-awaited Diyanet-financed Central Mosque of Imam Sarakshi built in Bishkek.<sup>24</sup> The mosque has the capacity to accommodate 30,000 people and is the biggest in Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> During

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<sup>22</sup> Kanybek Kudayarov, "Religious influence of Turkey in Kyrgyzstan," undated, pp. 12-13.

<sup>23</sup> Faculty of Theology, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, <http://intl.manas.edu.kg/en/theology>.

<sup>24</sup> Imam Sarakshi was a prominent eleventh century Hanafi scholar born near the border of present-day Iran and Turkmenistan.

<sup>25</sup> "Erdogan inaugurates Central Asia's largest mosque in Kyrgyzstan," *Daily Sabah*, September 2, 2018.

its construction, the Director General of Diyanet described the mosque as “a great gift of the Turkish people to the Kyrgyz people.”<sup>26</sup>

Besides religious efforts officially sponsored by the Turkish state, several other Islamic movements and organizations of Turkish origin operate in Kyrgyzstan. Since the 1990s, Hizmet, popularly known as the Gülen movement after its spiritual leader, cleric Fethullah Gülen, has played a particularly prominent role. Starting in the 1990s, it opened several private schools, student residences, and a university.<sup>27</sup> The movement became renowned for its high quality of education, a scarcity in the country’s crumbling school system, and quickly became popular with the elites.<sup>28</sup> After the failed coup in Turkey of 2016, attributed to the Gülen movement, the Turkish authorities have put immense pressure on their Kyrgyz counterparts to close down these schools, but to no avail.<sup>29</sup> Other noteworthy movements include the Süleymancilar (an offshoot of the Naqshbandi movement), which runs several educational institutions in the country, and the Turkish Nurcu movement (followers of the Kurdish theologian Said Nursi).<sup>30</sup>

The Turkish organizations have been particularly successful in the educational market and the various institutions have successfully targeted the educated strata of the population. They have cultivated a reputation as progressive advocates of modern interpretations of Hanafi Islam, while not

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<sup>26</sup> Kudayarov, “Religious influence of Turkey in Kyrgyzstan,” p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> For details, see official website of Fethullah Gülen, “Contributions of the Gülen schools in Kyrgyzstan”, <https://fgulen.com/en/home/1341-fgulen-com-english/conference-papers/contributions-of-the-gulen-movement/25836-contributions-of-the-gulen-schools-in-kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>28</sup> Bayram Balci, “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam,” *Religion, State & Society*, 31, no. 2 (2003), pp. 151-177.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, “Kyrgyzstan and Turkey: There’s no getting past Gülen,” *Eurasianet*, September 11, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-and-turkey-theres-no-getting-past-gulen>.

<sup>30</sup> The Gülen movement had its origins in the Nurcu brotherhood, but established as an independent movement in the late 1970s.

focusing on issues that tend to make secularly oriented political elites uneasy, such as Islamic dress codes and appearances.

Salafi currents, initially referred to as Wahhabi, came to Kyrgyzstan primarily from the Gulf. Saudi Arabia in particular but also Kuwait and Qatar provided sponsorship for the construction of mosques, typically channeled through Islamic charitable funds. Salafism emphasizes strict adherence to the original texts of early Muslims and thus seeks to purify Islam from the folk practices that are popular in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz students also travelled to these countries to conduct their religious education. Kyrgyz graduates of Islamic institutions in Saudi Arabia and Egypt often spread Salafi ideas after returning home.<sup>31</sup> Most Salafis maintain an apolitical profile, but over time the government has banned several jihadist and takfirist Salafi groups.<sup>32</sup> A survey-based study of religion among youth found out that Salafi sympathizers derive their information from the Internet to a much higher extent than other religiously active groups.<sup>33</sup> This makes Salafi currents more difficult to control.

Devotion to conservative forms of Islam is especially strong in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley, which is home to a large but alienated Uzbek minority.<sup>34</sup> It was here that Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a global Islamist movement originating in the Middle East but now based in Western Europe, developed

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<sup>31</sup> Nasridinov, et al., "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People", p. 13. See also Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr and Julian Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, April 2018, pp. 50-51.

<sup>32</sup> Takfirist groups engage in the highly controversial practice of declaring other Muslims to be non-believers. Nasridinov, et al., "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People", p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> In June 2010, deadly inter-ethnic riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan took the lives of some 470 people, according to the report of the independent international commission investigating the violence. While there has been no repeat of the violence, tensions between the two communities remain as the judicial system has failed to hold the main perpetrators accountable.

its stronghold. The movement refrains from violence but has the declared aim to re-create a Caliphate uniting all Muslims and, therefore, preaches the overthrow of secular governments. It started to spread among ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, but subsequently spread among ethnic Kyrgyz as well, both in the north and in the south.<sup>35</sup> In August 2003, the Kyrgyz Supreme Court banned the movement.<sup>36</sup> While there was much debate on the organization's proliferation in the country in the mid-2000s, it appears to have plateaued since then, but estimates still put its clandestine membership in the thousands. Its disproportionate receptivity among ethnic Uzbeks has partly been explained by the pan-Islamic movement's vision of a society that does not emphasize ethnic divisions, and partly by the traditionally stronger Muslim identity of the Uzbeks compared to the Kyrgyz.<sup>37</sup>

The Osh province and the city of Osh became a hub for conservative Islamic preaching. A prominent role was played by the Kamalov family, especially Sadykzhan Kamalov – the last Kyrgyz Soviet Mufti between 1987 and 1990. An ethnic Uzbek and Salafi-bent theologian, he received part of his religious training in Libya in the early 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Kamalov and his family members have over the decades criticized the Kyrgyz Muftiate for its subservient stance to the state. They have been equally critical of local folkloric Islam, which they see as a distortion of pure Islam. A younger Kamalov brother, Muhammadrafik, served as the Imam of the mosque in the town of Kara-Suu on the border with Uzbekistan for two decades until security forces killed him in mysterious circumstances during an anti-terrorism operation

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<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, New York: Routledge, 2010, 66–70.

<sup>36</sup> N. Esenemanova and R. Veitsel, *Zapreschennaya Hizb ut Tahrir v Kyrgyzstane: Nachalo i zakat*, Bishkek, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 355, October 2014, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Akbarzadeh, "Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan," p. 460.

in 2006. After the killing, his son Rashod Kamalov took over as the mosque's cleric.<sup>39</sup> However, in late 2015 a court sentenced him to ten years in a maximum-security prison under the criminal articles of "inciting religious hatred" and "possessing extremist materials".<sup>40</sup> The Kamalov family's sources of funding have included Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, Tablighi Jamaat – a globally active proselytizing Islamic movement founded in India in 1927 as a spin-off from the Deobandi movement – has steadily expanded its presence in Kyrgyzstan. It is neither officially registered nor banned in Kyrgyzstan. The movement is governed from its offices abroad and is not considered to have any cells in Kyrgyzstan, only followers.<sup>42</sup> Tablighi Jamaat began its missionary activities in the 1990s. Initially, Pakistani missionaries spearheaded the call to join the movement, but since then local citizens have taken over as proselytizers. So successful has the movement been that Kyrgyzstan has become one of its centers with a membership base that is growing every year. At the heart of this grassroots movement is the concept of *dawat* (call) with the meaning that missionaries (*dawachi*) travel the country to educate fellow Muslims about their faith. Today, Tablighi Jamaat is the most active mass Muslim movement in the country, with a particularly strong appeal among young people.<sup>43</sup> Worth

<sup>39</sup> Eric McGlinchey, "Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56, no. 3 (2009), pp. 16-28.

<sup>40</sup> Viktoriya Prediger, "Rashod Kamalov sidit, i eto tochno," *Vesti.kg*, August 15, 2017.

<https://vesti.kg/politika/item/47414-rashod-kamalov-sidit-i-eto-tochno.html>. Others argue that the real reason for the arrest was the cleric's criticism of Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies. See David Trilling, "Kyrgyzstan: Extremism Charges, Vague and Secretive, Open Door to Abuses," *Eurasianet*, June 209, 2015, [www.eurasinaet.org/node/74061](http://www.eurasinaet.org/node/74061).

<sup>41</sup> Akbarzadeh, "Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan", p. 462.

<sup>42</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane net yacheek 'Tabligi Dzhamaata', no est' posledovatel'i organizatsii," *24.kg*, February 14, 2019, [https://24.kg/obschestvo/109219\\_vkyirgyzstane\\_net\\_yacheek\\_tabligi\\_djamaata\\_noest\\_posledovatel\\_i\\_organizatsii/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/109219_vkyirgyzstane_net_yacheek_tabligi_djamaata_noest_posledovatel_i_organizatsii/).

<sup>43</sup> Roza Duisheeva, "Should Tablighi Jamaat be banned in Kyrgyzstan?" *CABAR*, undated. See also Nasritdinov et al., "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People", p. 24.

noting is that the members of the movement almost exclusively are found among ethnic Kyrgyz, while it has found much less traction among the ethnic Uzbek minority. Recruitment to Tablighi Jamaat has a bottom-up dynamic and targets the popular levels of society, while being comparatively less active at the top echelons of the religious establishment.<sup>44</sup>

Tablighi Jamaat is banned in other Central Asian countries, but Kyrgyz authorities have concluded that the movement's apolitical nature leads them to allow it to continue its activities throughout the country. Some government representatives and experts also see the movement as a counterbalance to the spread of much feared Salafi ideas and practices in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the relationship between Tablighi Jamaat and official structures are uneasy and characterized by mistrust. Intermittently, some Kyrgyz politicians raise the issue of banning the movement, arguing that Kyrgyzstan should conform to the decisions taken in the other regional states as well as Russia and China.<sup>46</sup>

In some corners, the movement is seen as blurring the lines between traditional and non-traditional Islam since Tablighi Jamaat, while technically Hanafi, incorporates elements of Salafi ideology. The Muftiate holds the opposite view, arguing that Tablighi Jamaat is an organization that professes traditional Islam and contributes to the spread of the Hanafi madhab. This is not surprising since Kyrgyzstan's Grand Mufti from 2014 has been Maksatbek Toktomushev, who is known for his close association with Tablighi Jamaat. Born in the Osh province, he spent a decade (1996-2005) studying at the Madrasa Arabia Raiwind in Lahore, Pakistan – the

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<sup>44</sup> Bayram Balci, "Reviving Central Asia's Religious Ties with the Indian Subcontinent? The Jamaat al Tabligh," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 19, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Duisheeva, "Should Tablighi Jamaat be banned in Kyrgyzstan?"

<sup>46</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane deputat predlozhil zapretit' organizatsiyu 'Tabligi Dzhamaat,'" *Radio Azattyk*, September 13, 2018, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/29487261.html>. Yakan Inkar – a splinter group of Tablighi Jamaat – is banned in Kyrgyzstan.

center of Tablighi Jamaat in Pakistan – receiving a degree in Islamic law. After his education, he taught at the Abdulla ibn Masud madrasa in Bishkek, was elected kazi of Bishkek city and in 2013 deputy Mufti of Kyrgyzstan. In 2017, he was re-elected as Grand Mufti of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>47</sup> In the words of the Grand Mufti:

Such a community is not registered with us. In Kyrgyzstan, there is no Tablighi Jamaat organization. “Dawat” means a call, “tabligh” means bringing (in the sense of bringing information about Islam to the people). If they benevolently and patiently preach the Hanafi madhab, one cannot perceive them as a separate group, to be expelled from society. To the contrary, the call for prayer is the same duty of a Muslim as the performance of the prayer itself. Dawat is a call for people to suppress sinful impulses in themselves and others.<sup>48</sup>

Under Toktomushev’s leadership, the Muftiate has created a special department to support Tablighi Jamaat preachers (*dawatists*) despite the fact that it is not a registered religious organization.<sup>49</sup> To make their appearances less “foreign” and aligned more with Kyrgyz culture, the Muftiate has received sponsorship to produce special attire for *dawatists* that corresponds to local traditions.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, even though suspicion remains, especially in secular political and intellectual circles, the growing appeal of Tablighi Jamaat means that its followers are increasingly present in religious bodies and in the state apparatus. The long-term challenge posed by this movement pertains to the

<sup>47</sup> “Maksatbek Toktomushev,” *Centrasia.org*, <https://centrasia.org/person.php>.

<sup>48</sup> Samat Dzhumakadyrov, “V KR predlagayut zapretit’ deyatel’nost’ ‘Tabligi dzhamaat’,” *Radio Azattyk*, November 26, 2015, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27389035.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Alikbek Mamataev, “Tikhii legion: V Kyrgyzstane razrastaetsya religioznoe dvizhenie ‘Tabligi Dzhamaat’,” *Fergana.ru*, July 2, 2016, <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/9015>.

<sup>50</sup> See interview with the Grand Mufti in Asel Shabdanova, “Muftii: V Kyrgyzstane budem rasprostranyat’ tol’ko hanafizm,” *Vechernii Bishkek*, April 9, 2014, [https://www.vb.kg/doc/268326\\_myftiy\\_v\\_kyrgyzstane\\_bydem\\_rasprostraniat\\_tolko\\_hanafizm.html](https://www.vb.kg/doc/268326_myftiy_v_kyrgyzstane_bydem_rasprostraniat_tolko_hanafizm.html).

fact that it seeks to Islamize the broad masses of the population and the potential impact that would have on the secular nature of the Kyrgyz state.

Apart from Islamic movements, many Evangelical missionaries arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s in order to attract converts to various Christian churches. Protestant denominations from Europe, North America and South Korea played a particularly active role and thrived under the liberal religious environment of the 1990s. There was a great diversity of Protestant missionaries, including Presbyterians, Mennonites, and Pentecostals, among others. Each of them had their own theology and distinct missionary approach. By the early 2000s, some scholars estimated the total number of Kyrgyz converts to Christianity to about 25,000.<sup>51</sup> The openness in the religious field turned Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek into a regional missionary center, including for Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais and other groups unable to operate in the rest of Central Asia.<sup>52</sup> Besides urbanized ethnic Kyrgyz, the prime target for conversion were the Russian Orthodox community, and many protestant movements gained followers from the Slavic population. Displeased with the combination of mass emigration and conversion among Slavs, the Russian Orthodox Church in Kyrgyzstan joined forces with the Muftiate in pushing for stricter policies on proselytism.<sup>53</sup>

Christian missionaries bolstered their appeal among the younger generation by arranging summer camps as well as English, computer and sports

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<sup>51</sup> By the early 2000s, about 1,000 missionaries were active in Kyrgyzstan, of which 700 were Protestant Christians (Mathijs Pelkmans, "Missionary Encounters in Kyrgyzstan: Challenging the National Ideal," *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2005), pp. 13-14).

<sup>52</sup> John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of democracy*, Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "The Partnership between Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia," *Religion, State & Society*, 36, no. 4 (2008), pp. 393-405.

classes.<sup>54</sup> They found an especially curious target group among the generation who had been initially steeped in the Soviet system, but had to come to terms with the fact that “they were no longer going to be Pioneers or Komsomols”, as described by a Kyrgyz Christian born in the late 1970s. According to the same source, “Among my friends and acquaintances at the time of studying at the university, almost everyone had out of curiosity attended Bible studies groups at least once. Those who denied it probably lied.”<sup>55</sup>

Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, foreign missionary activities became *de facto* subject of stricter controls. Kyrgyz media also reported about Christian missionaries in increasingly unfavorable terms arguing that these “alien” churches may have a destabilizing impact on Kyrgyz society.<sup>56</sup> Their room for maneuver shrank *de jure* when the government introduced the new law on religion at the end of 2008. Moreover, as Kyrgyz national identity, including the Islamic element, has grown stronger, those contemplating converting today face harder obstacles in terms of social exclusion than was the case a decade ago.

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<sup>54</sup> International Crisis Group, “Central Asia: Islam and the State,” *ICG Asia Report No 59*, Osh/Brussels, July 10, 2003, p. 23.

<sup>55</sup> Author discussion with Kyrgyz citizen.

<sup>56</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans, “‘Culture’ as a tool and an obstacle: missionary encounters in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007), p. 895.

## **Religious Extremism and Terrorism**

The Islamic extremist threat emerged on Kyrgyzstan's political agenda in the late 1990s. Radical "foreign" Islamic influences found fertile ground in the religiously more conscious southern part of Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, central governmental control was always weaker in the south than in the north. Already in 1998, Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov claimed that Osh had become the "capital" of Wahhabism.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, to some extent the growth in radical religious movements in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s and onwards seems to have been at least partly imported from Uzbekistan following the Uzbek authorities' heavy-handed purging of radical Islamist individuals and groups from the country.

Kyrgyzstan's first real experience with Islamic terrorism came in the summer of 1999, when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) carried out armed attacks in southwestern Kyrgyzstan and took a mayor and three officials' hostage in Osh. The incursion caught the Kyrgyz authorities off guard, but eventually the hostages were released in exchange for a 50,000 USD ransom and transportation of the militants by helicopter to Afghanistan. Only two weeks later, a new incursion took place in the southernmost Batken region where further hostages were taken, including four Japanese geologists. The geologists were finally released to the Japanese government after two months, at a reported price of 2 million USD. The next summer, IMU militants were back in Batken attacking areas near

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<sup>57</sup> "Worries about Islam," *The Economist*, February 19, 1998,  
<https://www.economist.com/asia/1998/02/19/worries-about-islam>.

the Uzbek exclave Sokh and the Tajik exclave Vorukh.<sup>58</sup> In 2002 and 2003, the IMU masterminded explosions in public places in Bishkek and Osh killing 10 people.<sup>59</sup> IMU militant incursion into southern Kyrgyzstan, and the growing presence of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the country, made the Kyrgyz leadership a willing ally in the global war on terror following 9/11. In 2003, Akayev allowed the U.S. government to lease the Manas airbase near Bishkek to support its military campaign in Afghanistan.

A decade later, the civil war in Syria and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State (IS) brought terrorism back to the political agenda. As of the end of 2016, the government had registered that 863 citizens from Kyrgyzstan had travelled to foreign fighting zones, most of them to join IS and other jihadist groups in Syria. According to government figures, most recruits (more than three-quarters) hailed from southern Kyrgyzstan, with an overrepresentation of ethnic minorities.<sup>60</sup>

Terrorist incidents inside Kyrgyzstan have been relatively rare occurrences, but notable exceptions include a violent prison break in 2015 by convicted extremists as well as an ethnic Uighur suicide bomber's attempt to blow up the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in 2016. According to the Kyrgyz security services, the real mastermind behind the attack on the Chinese embassy was an ethnic Uzbek from Osh province connected to the al-Qaeda-aligned al-

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<sup>58</sup> Johan Engvall, "The State under Siege: The Drug Trade and Organised Crime in Tajikistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 6 (2006), p. 838.

<sup>59</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/entity/islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan).

<sup>60</sup> Anna Matveeva, "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 1 (2018), pp. 30-46.

Nusra Front in Syria.<sup>61</sup> Kyrgyz security structures have also reported several cases of detecting and neutralizing small extremist groups plotting attacks.<sup>62</sup>

According to Kyrgyz law, extremism pertains to a broad set of activities aiming for example to overthrow the existing constitutional order; undermine the state's integrity and security; incite social, racial, national, religious, class and tribal hatred; destroy "human personality" and threaten human health and life.<sup>63</sup> According to official statistics, law enforcement agencies list approximately 2,000 individuals as extremists or terrorists. In the past years, the government has maintained bans on approximately 20 religious groups considered extremist.<sup>64</sup> Half of them are known to have a presence in the country while the others were banned after pressure from neighboring states, not least Russia.<sup>65</sup> A group that stands out is Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In Kyrgyzstan, there are reportedly more Hizb-ut-Tahrir sympathizers imprisoned or placed on the security watch list than from any other organization. The government fears that the group may serve as a stepping-stone to violent extremism.<sup>66</sup>

Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan is a complex phenomenon, driven by a combination of factors. Survey-based research on youth has observed that the risk of radicalization is higher among certain religious groups as well as

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<sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation," *Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 83*, Osh/Bishkek/Brussels, October 3, 2016, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Matveeva, "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism", p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, "O protivodeistvii ekstremistskoi deyatel'nosti," No. 150, August 17, 2005. The law on countering extremist activities has been amended in several rounds, most recently in 2016.

<sup>64</sup> These include al-Qaida, the Taliban, Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkistan, Kurdish Peoples' Congress, Organization for the Release of Eastern Turkistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Islamic Jihad Union, Islamic Party of Turkistan, Unification (Mun San Men) Church, Takfir Jihadist, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Jund al-Khilafah, Ansarullah, Takfir Wal-Hijra, Akromiya, ISIS, Jabhat Al-Nusra, Katibat al-Imam al-Buhari, Jannat Oshiqlari, Yakan Inkar and the Jama'at al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad.

<sup>65</sup> Matveeva, "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism", p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

in certain geographic parts of the country. Sympathizers of Salafi groups have higher potential for radicalization than those sympathizing with modernist Turkish groups, such as Hizmet and Nurcu. Meanwhile, young people from the southern regions of the Batken province and Osh city are particularly vulnerable to radicalization. Both areas have a recent history of highly conflictual interethnic relations. In contrast, young people in northern Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Naryn, Issyk-Kul and Chui provinces, are more resilient to radical religious ideas.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Nasritdinov, et al., "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People", p. 43.

## Kyrgyzstan's Model of Secularism

The separation of religion from the state is enshrined in the constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. Besides designating the state as secular, the constitution declares that no religion can be established as the state religion or be mandatory, and guarantees that religious institutions are separated from the state.<sup>68</sup> Involvement of religious organizations and clergymen in the government of the state are forbidden, and no faith-based political parties are allowed.<sup>69</sup> The constitution guarantees the right for freedom of belief and religion, and specifies that limitations can only be invoked by the parliament in order to protect national security, public order, health and morale of citizens and the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.<sup>70</sup>

At the same time, Kyrgyzstani laws and policies separate between what is referred to as traditional faiths, on the one hand, and non-traditional faiths on the other. The former – Hanafi Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church – are prioritized and given preferential treatment due to their historical influence on “the establishment and development of Kyrgyz statehood.”<sup>71</sup> Following demographic changes, the official attention paid to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church has decreased, and today the main traditional religion emphasized is Hanafi Islam. In contrast, forms of Islam that are not traditionally Kyrgyz in nature are perceived as a potential threat to the state and its institutions. Therefore, the government has taken upon itself the task to promote and safeguard the traditions and principles of Hanafism, to

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<sup>68</sup> *Konstitutsiya Kyrgyzskoi Respublikii*, Articles 1 and 7.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, Articles 4 and 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, Articles 20 and 32.

<sup>71</sup> *Kontsepsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikii*, May 6, 2006.

block the alien practices of international Salafist movements and to ensure the cohesion of society.<sup>72</sup> The distinction between beneficial religious traditions and allegedly harmful versions of religion has become an increasingly central part of the relationship between the secular state and religious communities. Consequently, more and more governmental thinking focuses on how to create the conditions for strengthening the development of official Hanafi Islam. But attempts to implement a coherent long-term policy to strengthen official Islam have remained patchy, as acknowledged by current president Jeenbekov.<sup>73</sup>

From a secular point of view, the relationship between the state and religious education has proven a major challenge. In Kyrgyzstan, the state education system is secular, meaning that the state shall not impose a certain religion on students, nor shall it discriminate on religious grounds.<sup>74</sup> Private religious institutions of general education are obliged to comply with state education standards that are mandatory for all types of educational organizations, irrespective of their form.<sup>75</sup>

In past decades, there has been a sharp deterioration in the quality of many secular schools. Meanwhile, popular demand for religious education has increased among the more religious segment of society. The market for tolerant religious education in Kyrgyzstan is striking in comparison with the other Central Asian states. As of 2016, the official registry counted 112

<sup>72</sup> *Kontseptsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikи na 2014–2020 gody.* Ukazom Prezidenta Kyrgyzskoi Respublikи No 203, November 14, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> "Prezident Sooronbai Zheenbekov: Neobkhodimo vsyacheski ukrepyat' mezhkonfessional'noe soglasie, vzaimoponimanie i vzaimouvazhenie mezhdu veruyuschimi i temi grazhdanami, kto schitaet sebya vne religii," *President.kg*, November 15, 2018, [http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/12855\\_foto\\_\\_president\\_sooronbay\\_gheenbekov\\_neobhodi\\_mo\\_vsyacheski\\_ukrepyat\\_meghkonfessionalnoe\\_soglasie\\_vzaimoponimanie\\_ivzaimouvaghenie\\_meghdu\\_veruyushimi\\_itemi\\_graghdanami\\_kto\\_schitaet\\_sebya\\_vne\\_religii](http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/12855_foto__president_sooronbay_gheenbekov_neobhodi_mo_vsyacheski_ukrepyat_meghkonfessionalnoe_soglasie_vzaimoponimanie_ivzaimouvaghenie_meghdu_veruyushimi_itemi_graghdanami_kto_schitaet_sebya_vne_religii).

<sup>74</sup> Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respublikи, "O svobode verospovedaniya i religioznykh organizatsiyakh v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike," No. 282, December 31, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Islamic educational institutions, including an Islamic university, nine Islamic institutes and 102 madrasas (of which 84 were active). Meanwhile, Kazakhstan had 13 Islamic educational institutions, Uzbekistan 11 and in Tajikistan there was only one registered Islamic institute in the entire country.<sup>76</sup> Thus, Kyrgyzstan counted four times more registered Islamic educational institutions than Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan combined. To put this number into perspective, Kyrgyzstan's population is just 6 million compared with the other three countries combined population of almost 60 million.

Officially, there are approximately 6,000 pupils registered in various madrasas. The real numbers are likely to be significantly higher since several religious schools operate without registration. Reporting has noted that these unregistered schools suffer from poor infrastructure and low quality of education.<sup>77</sup> There is an ongoing political debate on whether the growth of madrasas pose a threat to the quality of education in the country.<sup>78</sup> To bring order in this chaotic field and to better integrate religious schools into the general education system, there have been attempts made to introduce laws that regulate and streamline studies at those schools. However, thus far these initiatives have been unsuccessful.<sup>79</sup>

In 2017, the government handed the country's only Islamic university – the Hazreti Umar Islamic University – a state license to grant state diplomas. The rationale behind the decision was to boost the occupational and educational opportunities for the university's students.<sup>80</sup> Besides the Islamic

<sup>76</sup> Nogoibaeva (ed.), *Islam i gosudarstvo*, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> See Munara Borombaeva, "Kyrgyzstan: A Taste of Secularism in Religious Schools," IWPR, July 23, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> "Kolichestvo medrese ugrozhaet kachestvu obrazovaniya?" *Radio Azattyk*, March 29, 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-religion-bulan-madrasah/29132424.html>.

<sup>79</sup> The SCRA initiated a first legislative attempt in 2009; in 2013, a second attempt to pass a law on religious education and institutions failed to pass the second parliamentary hearing.

<sup>80</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*.

University, faculties at Turkish-Kyrgyz Manas University, Osh State University and the Humanitarian Institute of the Arabayev State University provide for theology education. Turkey finances the theology faculties at the Manas University and Osh State University, while the Kyrgyz government finances the Arabayev State University's institute, which has as its task to prepare staff for the Muftiate.

## Institutions

The institution with the most uninterrupted presence in the religious sphere in Kyrgyzstan is the Muslim Spiritual Administration, or Muftiate – the national inheritor of the Soviet era Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in Tashkent. The overarching task of the Muftiate is to promote Hanafi Sunni Islam as the traditional form of Islam practiced in the country. It is also responsible for exercising control over mosques, madrasas and Islamic organizations operating in the country as well as supervising the sphere of religious education. On paper, the Muftiate is responsible for the examination and registration of Muslim clerics in order to ensure their level of competency. Each of Kyrgyzstan's seven provinces (oblasts) as well as the cities of Bishkek and Osh have their own provincial offices, called kazyats, which are controlled by the republican Muftiate.<sup>81</sup>

Although *de jure* autonomous from the political leadership, the Muftiate in practice represents an extended arm of the state in the attempt to ensure that Islam is compatible with the state interest. Put differently, it is a semi-official body partly intended to be an intermediary between the state and the Muslim communities. A Grand Mufti, who is elected by the Council of Ulema, leads the Muftiate. The Mufti appoints provincial religious leaders

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<sup>81</sup> See the official webpage of the Muftiate at <https://muftiyat.kg/>.

(*kazi*). The Muftiate's reputation has suffered from several scandals. A high-profiled case related to the selling of seats for the hajj reserved on an annual basis for pilgrims from Kyrgyzstan. While in theory, the Muftiate distribute tickets by a lottery, in practice bribing officials in the Muftiate became standard practice in order to go to Mecca.<sup>82</sup> The position of Grand Mufti has also been the subject of much controversy in the last decade. In the period 2010-2014 no less than six different Grand Muftis were elected and quickly replaced due to different controversies, scandals and religious as well as political power struggles. However, the current Grand Mufti, Maksatbek Toktomushev, has remained in charge since 2014. His background in Tablighi Jamaat has been the source of some controversy.<sup>83</sup> However, in interviews he does not see any potential tension between the Hanafi tradition in Kyrgyzstan and the Hanafi style represented by Tablighi Jamaat, arguing that the call to Islam (*dawat*) practiced by followers of Tablighi Jamaat represents one of the most effective tools to spread and strengthen Hanafi Islam.<sup>84</sup>

In parallel to the Muftiate, the government relies on the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) to enable the authorities to exercise control over religious organizations and to oversee the implementation of the law's provisions on religion. As with the Muftiate, the institutional origins of the

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<sup>82</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Hajj Questions Highlight Opaque Nature of Muftiate," *Eurasianet*, January 14, 2013, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-hajj-questions-highlight-opaque-nature-of-muftiate>.

<sup>83</sup> Bayram Balci, "The rise of the Jama'at al Tabligh in Kyrgyzstan: the revival of Islamic ties between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia?" *Central Asian Survey*, 31, no. 1 (2012), pp. 61-76; Madina Sheralieva, "I. o muftiya Kyrgyzstana Maksatbek azhy Toktomushev yavlyatsya posledovatelem islamskogo techeniya 'Tabligi Dzhamaat' – initsiativnaya gruppa musul'man," *K-News*, January 30, 2014, <https://knews.kg/2014/01/30/i-o-muftiya-kyrgyzstana-maksatbek-ajyitoktomushev-yavlyatsya-posledovatelem-islamskogo-techeniya-tabligi-djamaat-initsiativnaya-gruppa-musulman/>.

<sup>84</sup> Shabdanova, "Muftii".

SCRA dates back to the Soviet Union, namely the Soviet State Committee for Religious Affairs. The SCRA is subordinated to the president who also appoints its director.<sup>85</sup> According to the law “On freedom of religion and religious organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic”, no religious communities or religious educational institutions are allowed to operate without registering with the SCRA.<sup>86</sup> Thus, officially, the right to practice one’s religion and beliefs is conditional on doing so within the framework of a registered organization. In practice, however, as the case with the non-registered but freely acting Tablighi Jamaat shows, this condition is not carved in stone.<sup>87</sup>

The SCRA is authorized to reject registration of religious groups if they are considered a threat to national security, social stability, interethnic and interdenominational harmony, public order, health or morality.<sup>88</sup> The SCRA has also adopted a decree that sets out the standards for how religious organizations report on their institution, staff and activities. It is authorized to abolish and initiate legal proceedings against an organization that systematically fails to provide its reporting in a timely manner.<sup>89</sup> Consistent with the official emphasis on strengthening the position of Hanafi tradition, the SCRA has become increasingly restrictive in the approval of various other religious denominations and their organizations.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> On the history of the SCRA, see <http://old.religion.gov.kg/ru/>.

<sup>86</sup> “O svobode verospovedaniya i religioznykh organizatsiyakh”, Article 8, part 2-5.

<sup>87</sup> The SCRA has indicated that the government may have to step in to regulate the *dawat* process of Tablighi Jamaat, see Duisheeva, “Should Tablighi Jamaat be banned in Kyrgyzstan?”

<sup>88</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*.

<sup>89</sup> Dmitry Kabak and Gulshaiyr Abdirasulova, “About the realization of the right for religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan,” in *Open Viewpoint, Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Kyrgyz Republic: an overview*, Bishkek, 2013, p. 24.

<sup>90</sup> Those denied registration include the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Church of the Seventh-day Adventist and Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Since 2014, there is also an additional formally non-governmental institution involved in spiritual matters – the Yiman Fund for spiritual and cultural development. Created by an executive order of then-president Atambayev, it is a legal entity with the mandate to “pursue social, charitable, cultural, educational and other socially useful non-commercial goals”.<sup>91</sup> Much of its work has been devoted to religious matters. For example, it sponsors educational activities for Imams and provides monthly stipends to the Muftiate’s highest representatives and to clerics. Since the fund is officially not part of the state apparatus, the financial support it provides to religious organizations does not violate Kyrgyz legislation.<sup>92</sup>

## Laws and Policies

Kyrgyzstan adopted a first law on freedom of religion and religious organizations already in December 1991. This marked the first time that “freedom of religion was legally proclaimed and enshrined in law.”<sup>93</sup> The adoption of the first constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic in 1993 established some basic principles for the regulation of the state policy on religion and religious organizations. However, it was not until the adoption of a Presidential Decree on Measures Exercising the Rights of Kyrgyz Citizens to Freedom of Conscience and Religion in late 1996 that a legal document was in place that stressed a more active role of the state in regulating the religious sphere.<sup>94</sup> Eventually, discussions also intensified over the need to replace the liberal law on freedom of religion and religious organizations

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<sup>91</sup> See the official website of the Yiman Fund, <http://ru.iyman.kg/>.

<sup>92</sup> Nogoibaeva (ed.), *Islam i gosudarstvo*, p. 44.

<sup>93</sup> *Konseptsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikii*. Postanovleniem Pravitel’stva Kyrgyzskoi Respublikii No 324, May 6 2006, Part 4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

with a new law on religion that would hand greater controlling powers to the state.

However, it took until the end of 2008 and a new president to adopt the new law on freedom of religion and religious organizations.<sup>95</sup> The law hardened the requirements for registration and emphasized the state's obligation to guarantee "spiritual security". It also banned the distribution of religious materials in public places and later added restrictions on the import of religious materials and gave the state enhanced powers to censor religious materials.<sup>96</sup> A major incentive behind the law was to restrict the activities of foreign religious organizations that had established a secret presence and threatened intra- and inter-religious peace and harmony in the country. Since then, the parliament has approved several amendments to the law, including an expansive ban on proselytizing and an increase in the number of members required to register as a religious organization.<sup>97</sup>

While the new constitution adopted by referendum in 2010 emphasized the right of freedom of religion for all Kyrgyzstani citizens, amendments to the subordinate law on religion and religious organizations have confirmed its constraining and policing spirit rather than align with the liberal baseline of the constitution.<sup>98</sup> Thus, Kyrgyzstan's legislative challenge in the religious sphere has been to strike a balance between the emphasis on the right to freedom of religion, on the one hand, and legally restricting the activities of religious extremist groups perceived as a national security threat on the other. International experts, for example from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), have criticized the stricter government policies for encroaching upon the rights and freedoms

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<sup>95</sup> "O svobode verospovedaniya i religioznykh organizatsiyakh",

<sup>96</sup> Olcott, "Religion and State Policy in Central Asia," p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> *Kyrgyz Republic 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*.

<sup>98</sup> Kabak and Abdirasulova, "About the realization of the right for religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan," p. 39.

of individuals.<sup>99</sup> In turn, the government has pointed to the dangers of a situation where the religious sphere is left unattended. In an economically, politically and socially divided state, there is some merit to this argument.

Attempting to specify the nature of Kyrgyzstan's model of secularism, the authorities have adopted two concept papers on state policy in the sphere of religion. The first was produced in 2006, during Kurmanbek Bakiyev's presidency.<sup>100</sup> Deemed poorly implemented and insufficient for coping with the quick and multifaceted religious developments, it was replaced by a new concept in 2014, during Almazbek Atambayev's presidential term.<sup>101</sup> The explicit purpose of the 2014 concept, or strategy, was to make official control in the religious sphere more effective. It sets out the main directions of state policy regarding three principal issues: cooperation with religious organizations; religious education; and prevention of religious extremism.<sup>102</sup> Atambayev argued that the concept would serve as a counterbalance to the religious laxness enshrined in the constitution, which had "allowed the religious sphere to take its own course".<sup>103</sup> The concept was accompanied by an implementation plan that runs until 2020.<sup>104</sup>

To summarize, Kyrgyzstan's evolving model of the relationship between the government and religion is primarily driven by three main aspects – support of official Hanafism; the need for state intervention into the activities of religious institutions; and the prevention of religious extremism. Overall, the institutions tasked with handling religious organizations are

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<sup>99</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, "Comments on 'The Concept on State Policy in the Sphere of Religion of the Kyrgyz Republic,'" March 27, 2014.

<sup>100</sup> *Kontseptsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikи*, May 6, 2006.

<sup>101</sup> *Kontseptsiya gosudarstvennoi politiki v religioznoi sfere Kyrgyzskoi Respublikи na 2014-2020 gody.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Felix Corley, "Kyrgyzstan: freeing belief communities from state interference 'a mistake,'" *Forum 18*, February 27, 2014, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/531452694.pdf>.

<sup>104</sup> There is little public information available indicating the extent to which the concept has been implemented.

united in their focus on monitoring and controlling them rather than seeking engagement and dialogue with them.<sup>105</sup> However, in comparison with its neighbors, weaker administrative capacity has made the state in Kyrgyzstan less able to implement control and deploy policing measures in the religious sphere. Thus, to some extent, a more pluralistic religious context lingers on by default.

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<sup>105</sup> Wolters, "The State and Islam in Central Asia", p. 7.

# Kyrgyzstan's Presidents in a Comparative Perspective

In comparison to the other Central Asian states, each of which are into only their second presidencies since independence, Kyrgyzstan is already experiencing its fifth president.<sup>106</sup> A closer look at the different presidencies reveal certain changes in religious policies.

First president Askar Akayev (1990-2005) performed some early symbolic religious acts, such as swearing his oath when first taking up the office as president on the Koran, as well as visiting Saudi Arabia on a kind of semi-official hajj in 1992. However, overall, Islam did not feature prominently in his projects to develop national ideology, as he preferred other sources to provide moral and spiritual guidance. To fill the ideological void left by the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Akayev developed the national concept "Kyrgyzstan – Our Common Home", which focused on developing an inter-ethnic accord in the multinational state. In the mid-1990s, the president shifted emphasis to developing a Kyrgyz identity around the Epic of Manas. In the summer of 1995, the government organized celebrations commemorating the 1,000th anniversary of the epic.<sup>107</sup> In his 2001 memoirs, Akayev devoted special chapters to both projects, while briefly discussing the role of religion in a sub-section to the chapter on "Kyrgyzstan – our common home", with particular emphasis placed on describing his deep admiration for Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow and All Russia.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Including the one-and-a-half-year interim presidency of Roza Otunbayeva (2010-11).

<sup>107</sup> Erica Marat, "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55, no. 1 (2008), pp. 14-17.

<sup>108</sup> Askar Akayev, *Pamyatnoe desyatiletie*, Bishkek: 2001, pp. 200-203.

Indeed, Akayev did not single out Islam as particularly important in relation to other religions. When addressing the role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, he emphasized its folkloric anatomy, and contrasted the moderate nature of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and its intertwined relationship with Kyrgyz cultural traditions with ideological and fanatical expressions of Islam found elsewhere in the world.<sup>109</sup> Confining Islam to the private sphere, Akayev did not pray in public or engage in any other symbolic religious acts.

There were both strengths and weaknesses to Akayev's approach. On the one hand, he did not politicize religion; on the other, his apparent disinterest left Islamic currents largely to their own devices. In fact, it can be argued that the lack of top-level attention opened the door to foreign Muslim donors playing a decisive role in forming Kyrgyzstan's religious awakening. This was particularly the case in the Fergana Valley. According to Eric McGlinchey, the growing supply of – and demand for – the services of Islamic associations emerged as a response to a weak and ineffective state apparatus. As such, Islamic organizations function as a substitute for a corrupt, ineffective state unable to perform its basic duties in providing public goods and services.<sup>110</sup> This was prominently clear at the local level, where mosques have become the main sites for a sense of community and social interaction.

If Akayev, the physicist, was a product of the Soviet intelligentsia, his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005-10), a factory manager, or a so-called red director, was a product of the Soviet industrialization of Kyrgyzstan. They both shared a lack of personal affinity to Islam. Bakiyev did not present any ideological narratives of how to develop Islam or integrate it into the nation-building process, limiting his ambitions to contrasting the Muftiate,

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<sup>109</sup> Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelkmans, "Turning Marx on his Head: Missionaries, 'Extremists' and Archaic Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Critique of Anthropology*, 28, no. 1 (2008), p. 91.

<sup>110</sup> McGlinchey, "Islamic Revivalism."

and the tolerant and peaceful Islam it represented, with religious extremism imposed on Kyrgyzstan from the outside.

That said, compared to his predecessor, Bakiyev paid closer attention to Islam as a potential threat. Bakiyev quickly strengthened policies and laws in the religious sphere, first by adopting the previously mentioned first state concept in the religious sphere in 2006, and subsequently by introducing a new law on religion. His policies signaled an increased securitization of Islam: stricter laws, policies and expanding powers of law enforcement agencies in dealing with religious issues were justified in terms of maintaining national security and eliminating terrorism. Bakiyev viewed all forms of Islam not controlled by the state with deep suspicion. Uzbek neighborhoods were particularly vulnerable to the activities of the state security services in hunting down radicals. In attempting to strengthen Kyrgyzstan's partnership with the U.S. in the war on terror, Bakiyev promoted the idea of a U.S.-built anti-terrorism training center in the Fergana Valley.<sup>111</sup> However, the center failed to materialize due to Bakiyev's sudden fall from power in April 2010.

Almazbek Atambayev represented another typical post-Soviet elite category: the opportunistic and charismatic businessman-turned-politician. In comparison with Akayev and Bakiyev's rather firm distancing from religion, Atambayev's presidency (2010-17) provided a less straightforward separation between religion and secularism.<sup>112</sup> In public speeches and interviews, Atambayev frequently invoked references to the Koran and

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<sup>111</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Petraeus Visits Kyrgyzstan Amid U.S. Plans for Counterterror Center," RFE/RL, March 10, 2010,

[https://www.rferl.org/a/Petraeus\\_Visits\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_Amid\\_US\\_Plans\\_For\\_Antiterror\\_Center/1979680.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Petraeus_Visits_Kyrgyzstan_Amid_US_Plans_For_Antiterror_Center/1979680.html).

<sup>112</sup> Roza Otunbayeva's year and a half long stint as interim president in 2010-11 were largely overshadowed by the inter-ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan. She introduced some attempts to strengthen interfaith dialogue as part of post-conflict rehabilitation. Overall, however, her short presidency stands as a parenthesis in the history of modern Kyrgyzstan.

Islamic principles. Keen on emphasizing his own knowledge of the religious script, he did not shy away from diving into discussions on the relationship between religion, identity and security.

Concomitantly, Atambayev was even more vocal than his predecessors in criticizing the spread of forms of Islam considered alien to Kyrgyzstan. He repeatedly lashed out against foreign Islamic culture gaining traction at the expense of the domestic culture. He was particularly worried about what he saw as a growing trend in the country to associate Islam with dress codes, such as men wearing long beards and women covering their faces.<sup>113</sup> A recurring theme in his speeches was the need to make sure that religious norms did not undermine the national spiritual values of the Kyrgyz. In order to ensure that religious organizations would not “tear the country apart”, Atambayev’s policy initiatives called for establishing stronger state regulations in the religious sphere. He also continued the practice of securitizing religious extremism, devoting several sessions in the Defense Security Council on how to address it. In the end, while acknowledging the religious aspect to a greater extent than his predecessors, Atambayev’s confrontational style stymied the development of long-term policies on how to foster a productive relationship between the state and religion. Nonetheless, he left a few noticeable marks in terms of concrete policy initiatives, in particular the mid-term State Concept of 2014-2020, the Yiman Fund and a greater focus on issues pertaining to religious education.

Current president Sooronbay Jeenbekov is the product of yet another special feature of the Soviet system, that of agricultural collectivization, with his father being a collective farm (*kolkhoz*) manager. Thus far, he appears as the most religious of Kyrgyz presidents. He is openly supporting the building

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<sup>113</sup> Makhinur Niyazova, “Almazbek Atambaev: Chelovek dolzen svoim povedeniem pokazyvat’, chto on veruyushchii, a ne odezhdoi,” 24.kg, November 3, 2014, [https://24.kg/obschestvo/878\\_almazbek\\_atambaev\\_chelovek\\_doljen\\_svoim\\_povedeniem\\_pokazyvat\\_chto\\_on\\_veruyuschiy\\_a\\_ne\\_odejdoi/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/878_almazbek_atambaev_chelovek_doljen_svoim_povedeniem_pokazyvat_chto_on_veruyuschiy_a_ne_odejdoi/).

of new mosques, arguing that it is beneficial for society when people follow religious mores and values.<sup>114</sup> During the 2017 presidential election campaign, he actively positioned himself as a reliable Muslim.<sup>115</sup> A conservative and uncommunicative leader, Jeenbekov's policies are risk-averse and cautious, and it is not his style to introduce new ideas or major reforms.

However, he offered some rather straightforward opinions on Islam and politics in his introductory speech to the international conference "Islam in a modern secular state" arranged in Bishkek in November 2018. Acknowledging that many problems have accumulated in the relationship between the state and religion in Kyrgyzstan over the years, he set forth four future priorities. First, only the state is strong enough to ensure religious freedom in a manner that is beneficial for the whole of society within the framework of a secular system. Therefore, the role of the state in the sphere of religion needs to be stronger than it presently is. Second, the partnership between the state and traditional religions in society needs to expand both in form and in content. Third, religious educational institutions must be integrated into a single educational system, and, in the future, there is a need to create a state-controlled Islamic Academy of Kyrgyzstan. Fourth, there is no tension between traditional Islam in Kyrgyzstan and a secular state. Promoting traditional Islamic values is necessary in order to counter radical movements and strengthen the unity of the people.<sup>116</sup>

In short, Jeenbekov's reflections on the future path of state-religion relations confirm past policies but emphasize that more effort must be put into refining these policies as well as ensuring their implementation. The ambition to establish an Islamic Academy appears inspired by Uzbek

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<sup>114</sup> Author's interview with Kyrgyz journalist, July 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Nogoibaeva (ed.), *Islam i gosudarstvo*, p. 45.

<sup>116</sup> "Prezident Sooronbai Zheenbekov".

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's December 2017 resolution on establishing the Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan.<sup>117</sup> Such an academy would likely serve the purpose of addressing the lingering lack of qualified teachers in Kyrgyzstan's religious educational institutions.

In a follow-up to the international conference on "Islam in a modern secular state", Bishkek hosted a similar gathering on the theme "Orthodoxy and Islam – religions of the world" in November 2019. In his speech, President Jeenbekov took a step further in addressing the partnership between the state and religion by stressing that they share the same goals: to educate moral citizens who contribute to peace and stability in society. The formation and development of spiritual values require the active participation of religious leaders. Thus, there is a need to form an alliance between the state and traditional religions.<sup>118</sup>

To summarize, the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's secularism under its various presidents can be illustrated with the help of Starr and Cornell's continuum of five distinct models, or ideal types, of interaction between the state and religion detailed in a previous publication in this series:

On one end is "Fusion", a merger of political and spiritual realms. The next step is "Dominant Religion", in which religious minorities are tolerated, but the state endorses one particular religion. In the middle of the continuum is the "State Neutrality" model exemplified by the United States; it is followed by what we call the "Skeptical/Insulating" model, as in France, which seeks to regulate and control religious influence on the

<sup>117</sup> See Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn, *Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan*, Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, June 2018, pp. 33-34.

<sup>118</sup> "Prezident Sooronbai Zheenbekov: U gosudarstva i religii, imeyutsya obshie tseli – vospitanie vysokonravstvennogo cheloveka, lyubyashchego svoego blizhnego, svoyu stranu, a takzhe podderzhanie mira i stabil'nosti v obshchestve," *President.kg*, November 21, 2019, [http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/15506\\_president\\_sooronbay\\_gheenbekov\\_ugosudarstva\\_ir eligii\\_imeyutsya\\_obshie\\_celi\\_vospitanie\\_visokonravstvennogo\\_cheloveka\\_lyubyashchego\\_svoego\\_blihnego\\_svoyu\\_stranu\\_atakghe\\_podderghanie\\_mira\\_istabilnosti\\_vobshestve](http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/15506_president_sooronbay_gheenbekov_ugosudarstva_ir eligii_imeyutsya_obshie_celi_vospitanie_visokonravstvennogo_cheloveka_lyubyashchego_svoego_blihnego_svoyu_stranu_atakghe_podderghanie_mira_istabilnosti_vobshestve).

state and society. Finally, the last model is the “Hostile” model, to which Soviet atheism can be counted.<sup>119</sup>

Kyrgyzstan quickly departed from the “hostile” model of Soviet atheism. During Akayev’s laissez-faire approach to religion, secular governance swiftly moved to a position rather close to the state neutrality model: new religious movements from abroad could compete on relatively equal terms with the traditional religions. The second half of Akayev’s tenure witnessed the state’s more active involvement in the religious sphere, exemplified by stricter constraints on the registration and activities of foreign missionaries. The rise of extremism further contributed to religion being increasingly looked upon as a potential threat to the official secular state. This drove state policy in a direction that corresponds to the skeptical/insulating model’s preoccupation with sheltering state and society from unwanted religious influences. In tandem, elements of the dominant religion model strengthened due to the perceived need to counter radical currents, which threaten stability as well as inter-confessional and inter-ethnic accord in society. These policy tendencies strengthened further under Bakiyev and Atambayev. Bakiyev codified the skeptical/insular thinking in law and official policy. He also elevated the special place for traditional religions more explicitly than Akayev had done. Atambayev, in turn, continued to strengthen state control to protect state and society from alien and potentially harmful Islamic traditions imported from abroad. At the same time, he endorsed traditional Islam in public and thus incorporated elements of the Dominant Religion model in a manner that set him apart from both Akayev and Bakiyev. Jeenbekov’s declarations confirm the need for a state that stands as the guarantor for harmony and stability in the religious sphere. He also continues Atambayev’s active and public facilitation of traditional Islam, albeit in a more subdued manner. The main

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<sup>119</sup> Cornell, et al, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, p. 7.

difference appears to be that he seeks a political-religious relationship based more on dialogue as well as an emphasis on the need for a social partnership between political and religious leaders.

## **Islam's Growing Political Significance**

On paper, religious organizations are prohibited from interfering in the government of the state. Nor are religious organizations allowed to participate in the activities of political parties or provide them with material or any other kind of support. While remaining a secular state, Islam in Kyrgyzstan has become an increasingly potent factor in politics, particularly during election campaigns. Thus, as society has become more religious, Islam has become an important source of legitimization for politicians and a resource for the mobilization of voters.<sup>120</sup> In particular, this has led political candidates to openly display their religiosity during election campaigns in attempts to bolster their reputation and win votes. That said, politicians need to strike a balance as portraying oneself as too conservative is likely to alienate many voters.

In the early years of independence, the rapid increase of mosques was largely the result of foreign investments, the continued proliferation is now mainly secured through the financial prowess of local sponsors, including members of parliament.<sup>121</sup> The political capital of Islam in the political process started to gain prominence in the highly contested 2005 parliamentary election campaign. While the Muftiate called on representatives of Islamic organizations to stay away from politics and prevent the politicization of Islam, many spiritual leaders saw the election as an opportunity to back candidates that promised support for their local mosques. In the run-up to the elections, several new mosques were

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<sup>120</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Election Campaigning Co-opts Islam," *IWPR*, June 26, 2017, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-election-campaigning-co-opts-islam>.

<sup>121</sup> Author interviews, Bishkek, June 2018 and July 2019.

registered in the country with the help of parliamentary candidates.<sup>122</sup> At times, unholy alliances emerged where local strongmen, often with links to organized crime, delivered services, built mosques and distributed some welfare, and in return enjoyed significant popularity among the local population.<sup>123</sup>

This is a reciprocal relationship. Clerics use their political connections to build up their own power bases. Politicians, in turn, enjoying clerical support strengthen their local electoral base. Thus, while it has long been true that politicians need economic capital to be successful in Kyrgyz politics, they increasingly must have their own mosque and Imam to display.

For political parties, the formation of party lists has become the subject of careful balancing between candidates with varying backgrounds that can broaden the party's appeal among voters. Parties have to factor in members that can cater towards a broad spectrum of the population, from the urban and often pro-Russian population in Bishkek to moderate Muslim Kyrgyz nationalists as well as candidates that can appeal to those conservative Islamic constituencies that pay relatively greater attention to religious identity than ethnic belonging.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Alisher Khamidov, "Religion plays growing role in Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary election campaign," *Eurasianet*, February 24, 2005, <https://eurasianet.org/religion-plays-growing-role-in-kyrgyzstans-parliamentary-election-campaign>.

<sup>123</sup> Johan Engvall, "Kyrgyzstan: Anatomy of a State," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 54, no. 4 (2007), pp. 33-45.

<sup>124</sup> The example of the political party Ar Namys in the 2010 parliamentary elections illustrates the point: The party's leader Felix Kulov, a secular urban Russian-speaking individual appealing to for example the Russian minority, headed the list. Akylbek Japarov, a former minister from the Issyk-kul region with more of a typical national Kyrgyz appeal placed second on the list. The third spot was occupied by Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, one of the country's best-known Islamic conservatives. Bakir Uulu, a former MP of several convocations and Kyrgyzstan's first Ombudsman (2002-08), is perhaps the staunchest proponent of loosening the boundaries between politics and Islam in Kyrgyzstan. He has propagated for legalizing polygamy and lifting

As with most things political in Kyrgyzstan, the parliament represents a barometer of trends and dynamics in society, including religion. In 2011, an Islamic prayer room opened amidst some controversy inside the parliament.<sup>125</sup> Just a few years later, a larger parliamentary prayer room was approved and constructed with the help of funding from Saudi Arabia.<sup>126</sup> Lively political debates also followed proposals to introduce a longer break in all state agencies for Friday prayers.<sup>127</sup> Some lawmakers have even raised the issue of changing the day of rest from Sunday to Friday in order to conform to Muslim custom. Secular opponents in the parliament rejected the proposal, arguing that it put the secular state in peril. More political debates along these lines are to be expected.

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the ban on Hizb-ul-Tahrir. When taking up his parliamentary mandate in 2010, he swore his oath on the Koran instead of the brand-new constitution. When running for president in 2017, he did not conceal his Islamic ideology.

<sup>125</sup> "Islamic Prayer Room Opened in Kyrgyz Parliament," *RFE/RL*, June 24, 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic\\_prayer\\_room\\_opened\\_in\\_kyrgyz\\_parliament/24245721.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic_prayer_room_opened_in_kyrgyz_parliament/24245721.html) "Kyrgyz Ombudsman Opposes Prayer Room in Parliament," *RFE/RL*, January 15, 2011, [https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz\\_ombudsman\\_opposes\\_prayer\\_room\\_parliament/2277242.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyz_ombudsman_opposes_prayer_room_parliament/2277242.html).

<sup>126</sup> Mariya Zozulya, "Kyrgyzstan: Islam and Secularism Clash Again," *IWPR*, June 21, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Mamataev, "Tikhii legion".

## Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan's political project of secularism has had to confront and adjust to an increasingly diversified religious situation. Three main attitudes can be identified in contemporary Kyrgyz society. First, there is the predominantly secular political, economic, and intellectual elite in Bishkek. This once dominant group is gradually losing its position in a less secular society. Second, there is a large group of nationalist-minded Kyrgyz citizens who increasingly embrace moderate Hanafi Islam as part of that identity. Third, there are Islamic currents whose representatives try to convert existing Muslims to more conservative versions of Islam. It can be assumed that it is in this group that the bulk of Kyrgyzstan's relatively strong support for Sharia as an alternative to state secularism is located.

Tensions between secularists, moderate Muslims and conservatives are mostly latent, but flare up with some regularity. To illustrate, in 2015 a heated debate erupted in the country when conservatives propagated for cancelling the celebration of the New Year in Kyrgyzstan, an initiative that provoked a highly negative response from secularists and moderate Muslims alike.

Kyrgyzstan's model of secularism, if there is such a thing, draws on what at times is an uneasy mix of the country's pre-Soviet traditions, the Soviet atheist period as well as the search for a post-Soviet national identity. While Kyrgyzstan's first decade of independence was characterized by a liberal approach to the sphere of religion, measures have thereafter been taken to strengthen the government's regulatory powers and take a more proactive approach to religious matters. Since the trend is that the role of Islam is

growing stronger, the secular power is increasingly forced to engage in a dialogue with Islam and try to find some common understanding, particularly with the growing section of nationalist minded Muslims. The chosen path is to underline the compatibility of the Hanafi tradition and secular statehood. Notwithstanding, the stricter state approach that the state is gradually introducing, in comparison to other post-Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan's religious space remains unmatched in its openness.

A generational gap has increasingly opened-up in the religious sphere. Conservative Islamic ideologies, whether political as in the case of Hizb-ut-Tahir or apolitical as with Tablighi Jamaat, are particularly attractive among the youth, who also dominate the composition of these movements.

Kyrgyzstan stands at a crossroads. Jeenbekov may be the last of the Kyrgyz presidents from the Soviet generation. The question is, what comes with a new generation in power, and whether a post-Soviet generation of leaders will maintain the separation between politics and religion. Much depends on which of the three above-mentioned groups will constitute the backbone of future decision-makers.

In addition to the generational factor, there is a geographical component to the religious divide in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's north-south divide, whether politically manipulated or not, continues to hang over politics, society and religion. While regional stereotypes are widespread in Kyrgyzstan, there is little doubt that on a general level, people in the south tend to be more religious than the people in the north.

Besides the cataclysmic disruption that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has been through several upheavals since independence, including two revolutions and a violent inter-ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south. Throughout it all, the country has suffered from ineffective governance, serious economic hardships and pervasive corruption. Nonetheless, despite these structural problems and

the proven societal ability to mobilize against the government, religion has yet to become a serious mobilizing political factor. This indicates that thus far, the general state approach taken to religion resonates fairly well among the population.

## **Author Bio**

**Johan Engvall**, Ph.D., has been a Researcher at the Swedish Defense Research Agency since 2017. He is a Senior Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. His expertise is in state-building, political economy, corruption, and organized crime, with a particular focus on Central Asia. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Government from Uppsala University, as well as a degree in Political Science from Stockholm University. He is the author of "*The State as Investment Market: Kyrgyzstan in Comparative Perspective*" (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016). He is co-author of "*Kazakhstan in Europe: Why Not?*", a 2017 Silk Road Paper; "*Kazakhstan 2041: the Next Twenty-Five Years*", a 2016 Silk Road Paper; and of "*Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in International Organizations*", a 2015 Silk Road Paper.