

Islam in Kyrgyzstan since 1991

by Alisher Khamidov

Abstract

Kyrgyzstan's religious liberalism of the early 1990s gave way to a rather repressive control since the political unrest in 2010. As a result of the political exclusion, Islamic radicalization is discernable among the Uzbek ethnic minority in southern Kyrgyzstan. The newly sanctified state-religion is to counter the radicalization.

Key words: Islam, Kyrgyzstan, Religious Politics, Radicalism, Uzbek Minority

Country background

Kyrgyzstan, a mountainous and predominantly Muslim country,¹ gained independence in 1991. After two tumultuous decades in the post-Soviet period, the country experienced dramatic political unrest in 2010 that culminated a violent overthrow of government in April and interethnic violence in June. Six years after the political upheaval, the country has made remarkable progress. In the political domain, the parliamentary system, adopted in June 2010, has grown in strength as coalition parties have exhibited the capacity to compromise with each other and resolve disputes relying on the current constitutional arrangements. In the security realm, the central government strengthened the ability of law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order, which prevented the recurrence of violence. In the economic sphere, fuelled by remittances from labour migrants in Russia, the country's economy grew between 2010 and 2014. In the international arena, Kyrgyzstan has deepened security and economic ties with its Central Asian neighbors as well as with Russia and China.

¹ Kyrgyz Muslims are Sunni Muslims of Hanafi mazhab (school of Islamic jurisprudence).

Liberal approach toward religion in the early 1990s

After Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991, its citizens witnessed significant changes in the domain of religious practices. As the country's leadership pursued a liberal approach to religion, the number of mosques, *madrassahs*, and seminaries quadrupled in the early years of independence and various kinds of religious missionaries established a presence throughout the country.² Taking advantage of new political freedoms, various religious clerics became vocal and officially recognized voices in their communities, presiding over local efforts to reinstate the pre-Soviet role of religion in public life.³

Hardening of religious controls in the late 1990s

A series of events in the late 1990s and the ear-

² According to statistics from the Kyrgyz State Agency for Religious Affairs, there were only 39 mosques in Kyrgyzstan in 1991. By the year 2015, their number reached 2,500. The number of unregistered mosques and associations is several times higher than official figures, according to estimates by independent scholars.

³ Interviews by author with Uzbek and Kyrgyz historians of Islam in Central Asia, Bishkek and Tashkent, 1999.

ly 2000s – the infiltration of South Kyrgyzstan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1999 and 2000, and a rise in the public visibility of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) – prompted the government to backtrack on religious liberalization and ushered in a tougher approach to dealing with religious radicalism. The hardening of government policy toward religion continued after the March 2005 Tulip Revolution. Kyrgyz security forces engaged in hundreds of search-and-seizure operations, arresting alleged HT members. In connection with the crackdown, the security forces carried out several controversial shootings of suspected Islamic militants, including a popular imam from South Kyrgyzstan. In 2009, the Kyrgyz Parliament passed a new law, imposing stricter rules on the registration of mosques and seminaries.⁴

The repressive state policies toward religious dissent had a number of effects. First, despite the government's strict controls, membership in banned groups continued to rise throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, prompting many experts to link the growing appeal of radical groups to weak governance, deep economic recession, and the spread of various social vices (including HIV).⁵ Second, faced with increasing state repression, many groups went underground and began using more secretive methods of recruitment, making it difficult for authorities to monitor them. Third, internal splits within underground groups emerged, leading to the formation of more extremist

4 In keeping with the law, registering a new mosque requires the signatures of 200 people, whereas the previous legislation required only 10. Clerics must also go through periodic exams to establish their theological/ideological reliability. The law also prohibited private religious tutoring, the unsanctioned distribution of religious materials and proselytizing. In addition, it banned mosques from admitting children.

5 International Crisis Group, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," Report No. 1763 (September 2009).

and violent groups, some of which reportedly planned terrorist attacks.⁶

The nexus between political exclusion and religious radicalism

Political exclusion of ethnic minorities has been inter-linked with religious radicalism. Ethnic Uzbeks from South Kyrgyzstan reportedly predominate in banned religious groups such as HT, prompting some analysts to suggest that the rise in religious radicalism among Uzbeks is a response to political exclusion and ethnic discrimination. Throughout the 2000s, Uzbek leaders called for the expansion of political and civic rights for ethnic minorities. Political mobilization by Uzbek leaders was one of the catalysts of the June 2010 violence in South Kyrgyzstan.

Following the June 2010 inter-ethnic clashes in South Kyrgyzstan in which more than 400 people died, two trends have created a more permissive environment for religious radicalization among Uzbeks and other ethnic minority groups. The first trend is the continuing harassment of ethnic Uzbeks by ill-trained law enforcement agencies.

After the June 2010 interethnic violence, law enforcement agencies (staffed predominantly by ethnic Kyrgyz) raided Uzbek neighborhoods, arrested many residents for their alleged role in the unrest, and frequently extorted money for their release. Police actions not only alienated many Uzbeks from the state, but also affected commercial ties among ethnic groups and deprived a large number of residents of their economic livelihood.⁷ The

6 Naumkin, Vitaly, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: between Pen and Rifle*.

7 Human Rights Watch, "Where is Justice? Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its Aftermath",

second trend was a rise in ethnic nationalism as demonstrated by an increase in inflammatory nationalistic rhetoric in Kyrgyz-language press and in the number of chauvinistic vigilante groups targeting ethnic minorities. Disillusioned by brewing ethnic nationalism and the lack of state efforts to tame it, many residents, primarily ethnic Uzbeks, have reportedly turned to conservative Islamic values to find an escape and purpose in life.⁸

Recent trend: the rising ideological appeal of global radical groups

Recent studies indicate that a growing number of practicing Muslims in Kyrgyzstan believe that they are part of an *Umma*, or global Muslim community. This change in people's consciousness is believed to have been caused by two developments. First, over the past two decades, Kyrgyz citizens have come into frequent contact with representatives of many foreign religious charities that fund the construction of mosques and Islamic learning centers in different corners of the country. While a majority of these charities have a legal status, many others rely on informal means of channeling resources and proselytizing. Second, thousands of Kyrgyz citizens have forged connections with their co-religionists in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries during their travels abroad as religious pilgrims and proselytizers.⁹

The political turmoil in the Middle East in 2011 and the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has attracted im-

mense attention from Kyrgyz Muslims in recent years. Utilizing sophisticated digital platforms and employing an extensive network of recruiters, the ISIS and other rebel groups in the Middle East have been making appeals to the global identity of Kyrgyz Muslims and reaching out to socially marginalized and disenfranchised groups in Kyrgyzstan. These recruitment campaigns are designed to persuade Kyrgyz Muslims that they must not be indifferent to injustices against Muslims in other parts of the world, including in Syria.

State response to rising religious radicalism

By 2016, the Kyrgyz government officially banned 20 religious organizations, 14 of which are considered terrorist or extremist in nature. The number of registered extremist offenses such as the distribution of banned publications and plotting terrorist attacks increased threefold between 2010 and 2015.¹⁰ Approximately 500 Kyrgyz citizens, primarily from the southern regions, have reportedly joined rebel groups in Syria. Religious radicalism is present not just in the south, but also in other parts of the country. According to government data, various *salafi* and *takfirist* groups, which openly reject the secular order, have established a presence in the northern provinces, engaging in extensive proselytizing among various layers of society, including Russian-

August 16, 2010.

⁸ International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South," March 29, 2012.

⁹ Approximately 4 thousand Kyrgyz citizens make annual Hajj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

¹⁰ Presentation by Emil Jenebekov, Head of Department on the Analysis of Religious Situation, 10th Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, at the OSCE/ODIHR National Roundtable on Freedom of Religion, Bishkek, 3 February, 2015. A late September 2016 attack against the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, which was allegedly carried out by terrorists with ties to rebel groups in Syria, underscored the potential for violent extremism.

speaking communities.¹¹

Alarmed by an increase in the number of Kyrgyz nationals departing for Syria, Kyrgyz authorities have taken a series of measures to counter radicalization. Recognizing the link between flawed law enforcement and radicalization, the authorities are working to reform the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. Responding to the exclusion of ethnic minorities, the State Agency for Local Government and Ethnic Relations coordinates state policy to include ethnic minority groups more fully into governance structures. In 2014, Kyrgyz authorities also adopted a blueprint on state policy in the religious sphere that outlined a series of measures to reduce religious radicalization through community outreach and

support of state-sanctioned religious education. The 2013-2017 National Strategy for Sustainable Development also attaches special importance to the religious affairs. The State Commission on Religious Affairs and its newly established Centre for Religious Studies are expected to take an active role in this area.

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11 In November 2015, Kadyr Malikov, a prominent theologian and a staunch critic of the ISIS and other radical groups, was attacked by two young men who were later identified as ISIS followers by Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies. "ISIS followers who attacked religious expert Kadyr Malikov detained in Turkey: police," AkiPress, November 11, 2015, <http://akipress.com/news:569212/>.