

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan worsened as authorities increasingly enforced long-existing restrictive legislation regulating religion. Authorities rigorously penalized religious practices, including online religious expression, collective religious worship and studies, and, relatedly, the possession of unauthorized religious materials.

Authorities have particularly targeted Muslims who practice a form of Islam that deviates from the state's preferred interpretation. The government often penalized such individuals for their peaceful religious activities and labeled them and their beliefs as "extremist," foreign, or nontraditional. During the year, the government maintained a list of "extremist" groups, which included peaceful religious organizations, and detained alleged members under the guise of combating "extremism," a concept vaguely defined in Kyrgyz law. Authorities also conducted a mass inspection of religious institutions and ultimately fined, suspended the activities of, and closed hundreds of mosques and *madrasas* across the country. In one case, three men who criticized these government actions were placed in pretrial detention on charges of "inciting religious enmity," accused of belonging to the banned religious group *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

Throughout the year, government officials also targeted and penalized non-Muslims, including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), for their religious activity. Authorities fined individuals for participation in prayer services, closed churches, prevented the import of religious materials, and denied certain religious groups registration or intimidated others from even attempting to apply. Sources continued to report that members of certain religious groups were reluctant to report religiously based hate crimes for fear of government retaliation or non-response.

In July, a court [sentenced](#) Aytbek Tynaliyev, a Protestant Christian, to six months in prison for "inciting religious enmity" through his online activity. In social media posts, Tynaliyev shared

his religious beliefs and criticized official religious policies, which, according to authorities, insulted Islam. Tynaliyev was released in September after completing his sentence. Authorities had previously targeted Tynaliyev for his online activities criticizing the government's religious policies. In another case, authorities [detained](#) Arstanbek Abdyl daev for "inciting religious enmity" in December. According to officials from the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Abdyl daev owned books and brochures and authored social media pages that contained calls for religious hatred. In such materials, Abdyl daev called himself a "new God" and a "savior" and criticized other religions. On January 5, 2024, Abdyl daev reportedly [killed](#) himself while in detention, although the circumstances around his death remain unconfirmed.

In November, a member of parliament [proposed](#) a draft law to ban face coverings and long beards under penalty of a fine or community service to maintain "the rules of public security." The same month, the chairman of the SCNS [compared](#) those who engage in "religious fanaticism" with individuals who "wear different clothes," claiming that they collectively differed from the "traditional Islamic religion practiced by our forefathers." In response to the proposed law, the Council of Scholars of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), [stated](#) that "it is appropriate for each person to dress in accordance with the customs of the state in which they live."

Also in November, the official State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) introduced to parliament a new draft religion law that, if passed, would further restrict and securitize peaceful religious practices. In December, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, on minority issues, and on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism [expressed](#) their concerns regarding the draft legislation in a joint letter to President Sadyr Japarov, urging his government to comply with international human rights law.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kyrgyzstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise religious freedom conditions with the Kyrgyz government, such as at C5+1 meetings and other bilateral engagements;
- Condition U.S. aid on meaningful government efforts to improve religious freedom

conditions, including amendments to the religion law, investigation, and punishment of those who commit religiously based hate crimes, and increased transparency regarding security measures taken against individuals belonging to religious groups unjustly labeled as "extremist"; and

- Work with the government of Kyrgyzstan to revise the 2008 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards and urge

the government to seek a legal opinion on the draft religion law from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns with the Kyrgyz government through hearings, letters, and congressional delegation trips abroad.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Landscape in Kyrgyzstan](#)

Background

Since the beginning of President Japarov's presidency, the Kyrgyz government has rapidly eroded existing democratic mechanisms and increasingly enforced legislation regulating religion that violates the rights of all religious groups, especially Muslims. The 2008 law "About Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic" prohibits unregistered religious activity, mandates burdensome registration processes to engage in religious activity, restricts religious materials, and requires religious organizations to submit periodic activity reports. A draft religion law proposed in November 2023 would additionally require religious organizations to reregister every five years, introduce a tiered registration system, affirm that the SAMK is the spiritual governing body of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, mandate the registration of prayer rooms, and ban religiously oriented political parties.

Of a population of about six million people, approximately 90 percent of individuals identify as Muslim, with most adhering to Hanafi Sunni Islam and one percent adhering to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population is composed of Christians, who make up seven percent of the population. About 40 percent of Christians identify as Russian Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The remaining three percent of the population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, ISKCON members, and Tengrinists.

Crackdown on Independent Muslims

In 2023, Kyrgyz authorities dramatically expanded a campaign targeting independent Muslims by conducting mass inspections of mosques and arresting those who allegedly belonged to organizations that the government had arbitrarily labeled as "extremist." For example, the SCNS reported arresting at least 23 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members and at least 16 alleged Yakyn Inkar members between January and June 2023, surpassing the total reported arrests in 2022. Authorities often only pointed to the possession of "extremist" religious materials to justify such detainments. Per SCNS reports, some individuals in detention renounced their beliefs after speaking with officials, while others did so on video, warning others not to succumb to the same beliefs. It is unclear how long these individuals remained detained, as officials are often reluctant to share information about "extremism"-related cases due to purported national security concerns. In June, the Manas District Court sentenced a man to two years in prison for owning "extremist" religious materials and attempting to purchase additional religious materials.

Beginning in May, the government began an interdepartmental mass inspection of Islamic institutions throughout Kyrgyzstan. According to June reports, officials [found](#) 60 illegal Islamic institutions in Jalal-Abad region. In July, officials [investigated](#) and suspended the activities of 39 mosques and 21 *madrasas* in Osh region, imposing fines on 39 institutions. In August, officials [began](#) an investigation in Bishkek and [issued](#) fines against religious institutions that totaled close to \$1,791 (160,000 soms) in Sverdlov district alone for violating "sanitary standards." Also in August, officials investigated 192 Islamic

institutions in Talas region and [found](#) that 172 violated registration requirements, safety standards, and/or sanitation standards. At the end of the year, officials were still expected to [inspect](#) Islamic institutions in Chui. In October, authorities [arrested](#) and placed in pretrial detention three individuals who criticized the closure of their mosque on video, accusing them of "inciting religious enmity."

The Status of Non-Muslims

The Kyrgyz government also penalized the peaceful religious activities of non-Muslims. In March 2023, authorities raided religious services at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas region based on accusations that two foreign nuns were illegally preaching. The authorities blocked churchgoers from leaving the building until the nuns signed a document that stated their guilt, and they fined each nun \$98 (8,733 soms) for violating the religion law. Authorities similarly raided a registered Protestant church and fined foreign churchgoers for engaging in "illegal missionary activity." Additionally, authorities [closed](#) several Protestant institutions in Chui region and Bishkek during the year due to alleged building standards violations.

In June, authorities raided an ISKCON wedding rehearsal and fined the host \$84 (7,500 soms). Officials also canceled the visas of Indian students who participated in the event. Authorities have continuously denied ISKCON devotees registration as a religious group. In a July meeting with the SCRA, authorities told ISKCON representatives that they needed to follow the requirements of the religion law and gather 200 adult founders to register. However, devotees are reluctant to provide the personal information required to become a founder for fear of state retaliation.

Jehovah's Witnesses likewise have faced government restrictions on their religious practices. In addition to an ongoing refusal to grant local-level registration, authorities this year denied Jehovah's Witnesses' request to import a faith-based children's book.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2023, the United States engaged with Kyrgyzstan to support its sovereignty and ensure compliance with international sanctions instituted against Russia, [providing](#) about \$49 million or programs in Kyrgyzstan. During the reporting period, high-level officials from the U.S. Department of State, including Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, met with Kyrgyz officials to discuss security and economic issues and sometimes human rights. In September, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Japarov and other Central Asian leaders on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly for the C5+1 Presidential Summit. A resulting joint statement only passingly [mentioned](#) the countries' "commitment to protecting human rights."

In August, then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) [sent](#) a letter to President Japarov, calling on Kyrgyzstan to uphold international sanctions against Russia and to respect human rights.