

RELIGION IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KYRGYZSTAN

Alexander KRYLOV

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Senior Fellow
at the Institute of World Economy and
International Relations,
Russian Academy of Sciences
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

With the advent of Soviet power, Islam and Christian Orthodoxy in Kyrgyzstan retreated into the background and lost much of their former influence to the extent that, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Muslim clergy proved incapable of alleviating the contradictions inside the Muslim community and preventing ethnic clashes. In 1989, the Kyrgyz and Tajiks came to blows over land plots—there are still about 70 disputed plots in the village of Uch-Dobo. In 1990, the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks clashed in the Osh Region in the country's south. In both cases, the official Islamic clergy proved impotent in the face of the dramatic events and were unable to normalize the situation.

The Kyrgyz, however, remained devoted to popular Islam and its everyday practices: throughout the Soviet period it was a tool of self-identity and an element of the locals' way of life. The local Muslims continued practicing it on an everyday basis, but on a national clan-dominated scale Islam lost some of its pre-revolutionary importance.

State atheism, the policy consistently pursued across the Soviet Union, left a void in the post-Soviet world rapidly filled with all sorts of radical Islamic ideas and new sects and religious (including totalitarian) organizations. The Soviet Union's demise revived religious feelings in all social groups. It was in the early post-Soviet period that the country acquired scores of new mosques and Orthodox

churches as well as new religious trends. The Koran was translated into the Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages, while the Bible appeared in Kyrgyz translation. Several bookstores in Bishkek sold Islamic and Christian books; the faithful received two periodicals, the national newspaper *Islam madaniaty* published in Bishkek and *The Muslim*, which appeared in Jalal-Abad.

The republic's newly acquired independence changed the local religious structures: the republic set up the Muftiat and regional spiritual administrations of the Muslims. While in the Soviet past the republic did not have any Islamic educational establishments of its own and used the religious educational institutions in Uzbekistan, today it has 2,000 mosques (compared with less than 40 in 1991), 39 madrasahs, and 7 higher Islamic educational establishments, most of them built on foreign money. About 300 students from Kyrgyzstan are studying at Islamic educational establishments in Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Syria, and Kuwait. An Association of Religious Educational Establishments is functioning in Osh.

In the early post-Soviet period, the number of Christian Orthodox parishes rapidly increased to reach a figure of 97 by the mid-1990s. In 1990, the Russian Orthodox Church opened a Spiritual College in Tashkent, which educated enough priests for Kyrgyzstan. The republic's government gave the Christian Orthodox Church land plots in the capital to build new churches and a Church Administrative Center.

According to the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the country is the home of people from 84 ethnic groups and nationalities, 80 percent of whom are Muslims, 16 percent, Orthodox Christians, while 4 percent belong to other confessions. All people who belonged to the so-called Muslim nations were registered as Muslims—the republic's Muslim community consists of Kyrgyz, who comprise more than a half of it, Uzbeks (15 percent), Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tatars, Bashkirs, Tajiks, Azeris, Dungans, Turks, Chechens, Ingushes, Darghinians, and others. All members of the Christian Orthodox nations (Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and others) were lumped together as Orthodox Christians. Since no previous poll had been conducted, the picture is far removed from reality—it was taken for granted that ethnic and religious affiliations coincided in all cases. A large number of the local people, however, particularly in the fairly Europeanized north, are still indifferent to religion.

In December 1991, the country acquired the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which declared the freedom to follow any faith, simplified the procedure of setting up religious alliances and organizations, while the clergy received all the rights, property rights included, the rest of the nation enjoyed under labor and other laws.

This attracted all sorts of religious organizations and sects as well as numerous missionaries to the republic. They flocked from all corners of the world. Today, Kyrgyzstan has several Christian educational centers (the Biblical College, the Educational Presbyterian Center, etc.). Totally unknown religious organizations came to the republic to launch their activities there: by the mid-1990s there were about 900 foreign officially registered missionaries in the country, an even larger number of them acting clandestinely for many years.

Some of the sects banned elsewhere hastened to put down roots in Kyrgyzstan (the Moon's Unification Church, the White Brotherhood and other totalitarian structures). Some religious associations chose to avoid official registration and were registered as secular institutions (the Moon's Church, the Center of Dianetics, etc.).

When the country gained its independence, the new religions began intensely vying with each other to win influence over the hearts and minds of the local people, while the traditional confessions (Islam and Orthodox Christianity) found themselves in a quandary. Islam was attacked from all sides by Islamic radicals lavishly funded from abroad, while the outflow of part of the Slavic population left the Christian Orthodox Church with a considerably diminished community. Between 1992 and 1994, 100,000-110,000 left the country every year; the country has already lost over 400,000 Russian

speakers. The share of the non-autochthonous population dropped from about 50 percent to 25 percent of the total population (about 700,000). As a result, many of the restored and newly built Orthodox churches were closed; by the end of the 1990s, their number was much smaller than at the dawn of independence.

From the very beginning, the two local official religions—Islam and Christian Orthodoxy—found it hard to repel the onslaught of Islamic radicals and numerous sects. While the state was in its atheist phase, they obviously lost the missionary skills and expertise needed to operate among all sorts of social groups. At the same time, the Islamic radicals and sects of all hues and colors accumulated enough experience during the years of persecution and trained enough dedicated missionaries to go on with their openly hostile activities.

When the country became independent, the Islamic radicals, sects and religious organizations plunged into proselytism. The Islamists preferred to work among the autochthonous people who, they believed, followed a distorted and non-orthodox version of Islam and kept away from the Slavic population. They owed their success partly to the very low educational level of the local clergy. A special sitting of the administration of the Bazarorgan District (Jalal-Abad Region) held early in 2003 pointed out that merely four out of 98 district imams had a special religious education. The others learned Islam on their own and therefore interpreted its canons in their own way; they could tend to the needs of their communities, but proved incapable of opposing the professional Islamic radicals.

As distinct from the Islamists, the sects and religious organizations work with all ethnic and social groups and are especially active among the Kyrgyz.

This is true primarily of the Protestant churches: they have begun publishing their books in Kyrgyz on a large scale and use the local tongue to promote their ideas. In recent years, a growing number of Kyrgyz have been joining all kinds of Protestant churches. Today, there are over 15,000 converted Kyrgyz in the republic.

In the country's north, for example, where all sorts of religious communities are especially active, families divided by religious affiliation are not rare. The Evangelical Christian Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses were especially successful; the Bahai built up a large following too.

In their fight against the government the Islamic radicals are skillfully exploiting the division between the country's North and South. The former is a seat of civil opposition that has already produced many prominent activists, heads of media and human rights organizations. The latter, much more Islamic and less developed, rejects secular political parties—it sides with the Islamic opposition. Most of the prominent religious opposition figures came from the South.

Foreign missionaries made the differences between the North and the South even more obvious: foreign Protestant missionaries are especially active in the North and the capital; in recent years, the Kyrgyz in these areas have been showing an interest in Christianity. In the South, where Islamic radicals operate, fundamentalism and Wahhabism are gaining momentum.

The March 2002 official statement of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan says that the Christian sects engaged in redividing spheres of influence have worsened the religious situation in the republic. Indeed, in the countryside, those who changed faiths were condemned and expelled from the traditional system of mutual assistance (*yntymak*).

In many places, people insisted on moving the "apostates" away. In the spring of 2002, over 500 villagers of the Suzak District (Jalal-Abad Region) insisted that eight Kyrgyz families, which had become Evangelical Christian Baptists, should be removed from the area. In other places, newly converted people were beaten up or even murdered.

The country's authorities and the heads of the Muslim community are very much concerned with the mounting influence of Islamic radicals and sects. The South is the source of greatest concern in this respect—it is seen as threatening state security. According to M. Imankulov who heads the Ad-

ministration of the National Security Service of the Osh Region, a test of the local clergy's knowledge revealed that most of the local mullahs were ignorant, a quarter of them were unsuited for their posts, while nearly 60 percent had to take the test again. For this reason, he said, the mullahs preferred to stay away from any disputes with those who represented Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Liberation Party), Wahhabis, and al-Qa'eda operating in Kyrgyzstan. He is convinced that on many occasions imams of the local mosques not only remain impassive but, having failed to grasp their meaning, encourage radical Islamic ideas.¹

In the spring of 2003, the Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan gathered in Bishkek (after a seven-year hiatus) for its second congress attended by representatives of the State Commission for Religious Affairs and people from the NSS. The meeting confirmed that the Muslim clergy and the country's Muslims should follow the true canons of Islam as a religion of peace and goodness. At the same time, the head of the Spiritual Administration of the republic's Muslims, Murataly azhy Zhumanov, pointed out that the extremist Islamic trends had increased their influence because some of the imams proved ignorant and unconscientious.²

The Kurultai formulated several decisions designed to improve the performance of the Spiritual Administration; they amended its Charter and doubled the Ulema Council membership to thirty. The forum ruled that the Kurultai should be convened once every seven years and agreed that the republic needed more Islamic educational establishments. In the future, the republic will acquire its first ever Islamic University in the republic's history with the right to confer academic degrees.³

Radical Islamists came to the republic back in the late 1980s and divided the Muslim community into "moderates" and "genuine believers." The latter favor a return to "pure Islam" by abandoning what they see as "pagan admixtures" and restoring the old moral norms and very modest lifestyle. Their activities funded from abroad created numerous Wahhabi communities in the country's south. In the mid-1990s, the contradictions inside the Muslim community continued mounting: the imams and their followers were locked in increasingly sharp conflicts.

The countries where Wahhabism is the official religion or where radical Islam predominated spared no amount of money to plant the ideas of pure Islam in Kyrgyzstan. In the first decade of independence, the republic acquired 2,500 mosques, which was obviously much more than the 3.5 million Muslims needed: many of them were never used for want of a congregation and clergy.

Today, Hizb ut-Tahrir, an illegal party, dominates the radical Islamic movement of Kyrgyzstan and its Central Asian neighbors with the aim of turning the region into a Caliphate, an Islamic state. The poorest groups in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions, mostly Uzbeks wishing to address their social problems by means of the Islamic revival, readily embraced these ideas. The party is seen as the only hope for this ethnic minority.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international Islamic organization with the full name of Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami. It was set up back in 1953 in Jerusalem. Its founder Taqiuddin an-Nabhani remained its leader until his death in December 1977 when the post went to Palestinian Abdul Qadim Zallum, who lived in Jordan. The party is active in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Kuwait, Palestine, Turkey, and Western Europe.⁴

The party brands the governments of all Muslim countries as non-Islamic and explains all the problems of the Muslim ummah by the "absence of Islam in everyday life" and "lack of Muslim governance." Being aware that the Muslim states cannot be united into a "genuinely Islamic state" in the near future, the party favors a Caliphate in one state and its gradual extension.

¹ See: *Deutsche Welle*, 22 April, 2003.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ See: A. Ignatenko, "Zelenyi internetsional," *NG-religii*, 7 April, 1999.

Formally, the party rejects force as a method of struggle, but it looks at jihad as a “never-ending struggle for strengthening Islam and giving back the Muslims the legal rights of which they were robbed.” The party leaders are convinced that as soon as genuinely Islamic governance (the Caliphate) is set up, the Muslim world and the planet will gradually develop into a kind of confessional community with no social contradictions and division into titular nations and ethnic minorities.

Many countries concerned with the party’s religious extremism and its calls to “never-ending struggle” against the infidels and supporters of traditional Islam have outlawed the party. It has practically no influence in the Arab East and is banned in Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, the U.S., and Western Europe.

Hizb ut-Tahrir tried to use the void the Soviet Union left behind to achieve its program aims and strengthen its position in the Islamic world. The party came to Central Asia in the early 1990s and entrenched itself in Uzbekistan. Its leaders selected the Ferghana Valley, even then divided among three Central Asian republics, as the best place to set up a “genuinely Islamic state,” and they worked there with special zeal.

The party’s leaders are working hard to legalize their structures as a political party in the Central Asian countries. To avoid any association with terrorism, Hizb ut-Tahrir concentrated on propaganda, leaving terrorism to the numerous groups it controlled. According to the Administration of Internal Affairs of the Osh Region, there are about a dozen small yet highly mobile terrorist groups operating in the Ferghana Valley: Tabligh, Uzun sokol (The Long Beard), Adolat Uiuishmasi (Society of Justice), Islam Lashkarlari (The Warriors of Islam), Tovba (Repentance) and Nur (The Ray).⁵

Today, Hizb ut-Tahrir has regional branches in the Andijan, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Ferghana regions. According to conservative estimates, there are several thousand Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Central Asia; for better secret performance they are all divided into groups of five.

In Kyrgyzstan, the party has launched an extensive propaganda campaign under the slogan: “Those who can hold arms should fight; those who can’t should use their tongues and their property.” The campaign involved imams of new, mostly illegal, mosques (later in the 1990s, in the Osh Region alone, there were 200 unregistered mosques out of the total 700 newly built ones). The movement airs its ideas in the press with the help of its supporters or the journalists and politicians on its pay-roll who are campaigning for the legalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan, as well as through leaflets distributed by activists and printed in huge numbers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

In February 1999, Tashkent lived through several terrorist acts designed to destabilize the situation across the country. The authorities blamed Hizb ut-Tahrir. The resolute measures of the late 1990s drove the radical Islamists to the south of Kyrgyzstan. The movement adjusted its tactics as well: it abandoned its plans to overturn the authorities in the near future through terror for the sake of building up a massive social basis.

At first Hizb ut-Tahrir mainly relied on the members of Adolat, an Uzbek Islamic organization banned in Uzbekistan in March 1992. According to the law-enforcement bodies of Kyrgyzstan, today there are 4,000 members of Hizb ut-Tahrir operating in the country. Its ranks are swelling with young and poorly educated jobless people from the countryside. The party is also courting women: it has already set up structures in Eastern countries to educate and brainwash future female members. The party ideologists expect Central Asian women to return home after taking a study course to proliferate the movement’s ideas by setting up “genuinely Islamic families” in which the children will grow up as fanatics and change society’s mood.

The Islamic radicals have worsened the relations among the Central Asian republics and increased ethnic tension. Several years ago, the state border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was semi-transparent and left unguarded; it remained practically non-delimited until 1999 when the IMU fighters

⁵ See: *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 28 May, 1999.

invaded southern Kyrgyzstan and repeated their raids in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan the following summer.

This forced the Central Asian neighbors to guard their borders, increase the number of customs posts, and station more military to prevent Islamists from crossing their borders and to stem drug and weapon smuggling. The local people suffered because of this: transborder trade, in which the local peasants were involved, was no longer possible. Landmines along the borders became a serious threat—the governments, particularly of Uzbekistan, mined the border area to prevent invasions, causing casualties among the civilians.

* * *

It took Islam a long time to adjust itself to the local specifics of the Kyrgyz until it finally took the form of everyday moderate Islam. The local clergy were mainly tending to the people's everyday needs and kept away from tribal politics.

While Kyrgyzstan remained part of the Russian Empire, religious stability was maintained by strict delimitation of the spheres of influence between the Islamic and Russian Orthodox clergy: the Islamic clergy worked with the locals, while the Christian Orthodox priests concentrated on the people who moved from central Russia.

In the post-imperial period, Islam was used as a political weapon for the first time: the enemies of Soviet power used Islamic slogans, but failed to rally the faithful around them to oppose the unfaithful. The civil war and state atheism weakened the positions of both religions in Kyrgyzstan. Members of all sorts of sects and religions were exiled to Kyrgyzstan, which made the religious situation there even patchier.

An influx of foreign missionaries into independent Kyrgyzstan made the religious situation even more complicated: impoverished people, who could barely survive in the hard social and economic conditions, willingly embraced the new teaching promoted by the rich foreign sects and religious organizations lavish with their money.

As distinct from other confessions, the Islamic radicals are using religion as an ideological truncheon in the hope of replacing the secular governments of Kyrgyzstan and its Central Asian neighbors with an Islamic state.

Their activities are multiplying the religious problems and threatening the country's future and its existence as an independent state. Today, confessional stability is one of the priorities: power and the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan should offer an attractive alternative to Islamic radicalism and fundamentalism and make the Muslims realize that Islam should not be used as a political weapon in multi-confessional societies.

The future of the religious situation largely depends on whether official Islam and Christian Orthodoxy adjust to the new conditions, restore their former influence and, working together with secular power, oppose the Islamic radicals and totalitarian sects.

The constantly growing number of sects and religions in Kyrgyzstan, which is a global phenomenon, will obviously prevent Islam and Christian Orthodoxy from regaining their former domination. Therefore, they should enter into a dialog with all acceptable religious organizations and sects to stabilize the religious situation in the republic.