

ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOUTH OF KYRGYZSTAN

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the ways in which official and unofficial Islamic organizations operate in the south of Kyrgyzstan and analyzes their relations with the state. The author notes that unofficial Islamic organizations are mainly forming and developing in the republic's southern regions. The author singles out moderate apolitical and destructive religious-extremist organizations among them, *Tablighi Jamaat* and *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, respectively. He goes on to suggest ways for all the sides concerned (the state, Islamic organizations, and the media) to enter into a dialog aimed at opposing extremism.

KEYWORDS: *Kyrgyzstan, Islamic diversity, muftiats, kaziats, official and unofficial Islamic organizations, jamaats, Salafism, Tablighi Jamaat, Hizb ut-Tahrir.*

Introduction

Elements of Islamic diversity (i.e., the coexistence of maddhabs and different types of Islamic schools and trends) are emerging in three southern regions of Kyrgyzstan—Osh, Dzhahalal-Abad, and Batken. Islamic diversity encompasses not only the activity of official (muftiats and kaziats), but also unofficial Islamic organizations, such as *Tablighi Jamaat*. This also implies development of Islamic social life as it is seen today, with the emergence of a new social entity—the active Muslim. He is primarily engaged in business, using Islamic financing principles, developing the Halal industry, and charity.

At present, Islamic diversity in Kyrgyzstan does not have the unity that existed in the pre-Soviet period. The differences in attitude toward the role and place of Islam in the life of society, the state, and the believing Muslim himself are giving rise to dissidence and contradictions that are leading to active opposition and rivalry.

These differences in the way people living in Kyrgyzstan's southern regions relate to the Islamic clergy¹ and government institutions, such as the parliament, government, law-enforcement

¹ The institution of moldo (the mullah) has become extremely distorted since Soviet times. People often say, "do what the mullah says, but don't do what he does himself" (translation from the Kyrgyz).

structures and self-government bodies, are giving rise to an alternative value system (for example, in family-marital relations and education) and social reference points at the local level.

At the same time, external religious and political projects aimed at destabilizing the situation in the region are being implemented with increasing vigor in the southern regions of the Kyrgyz Republic. A symbiosis is occurring between established religious-political organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir and other associations and jamaats, such as the Salafi movement. In so doing, external religious and political projects are acting as an alternative exogenous opposition confronting both official Muslim organizations (muftiats and kaziats) and government structures.

The above-mentioned organizations are not inclined to use the mosque as a platform for dialog or discussion, it is only a place for believers to gather and perform namaz. Faith-related issues, on the other hand, are generally discussed in the private homes and apartments of the organization's members. In other words, unofficial Islamic organizations are trying to keep a low profile.

Relations between unofficial and official Islamic organizations are unstable and expected to remain so in the near future. Their main differences address issues relating to the adat, Shari'a, fiqh, attitude toward Islamic celebrations, what the government is doing, and so on.

In recent years, unofficial Islamic organizations have become very popular among members of criminal communities. An increasing number of former members of organized criminal groups are becoming active Muslims, which is arousing the concern of the region's law-enforcement bodies. What is more, the popularity of unofficial Islamic organizations is growing in specific social groups (such as among disabled people and prisoners). This is undermining the authority of the official Islamic organizations; the unofficial organizations are pointing out their shortcomings and failures, hoping in so doing to attract more attention to themselves.

It should be noted that there are no unified Islamic organizations in the post-Soviet Central Asian states. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, for example, the activity of Salafis and Tablighi Jamaat has been banned in order to protect the security and national interests of these countries. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, which has more liberal religious legislation, has still not introduced a ban on their activity.

Each of the Central Asian countries wants to establish state-religious relations that will meet their own national interests. Therefore, government bodies are striving to gain control over religious (Islamic) organizations and regulate their activity.

Relations among the State, Official, and Unofficial Islamic Organizations

The southern regions of Kyrgyzstan have become the main center for cultivating and spreading Islam throughout the country. During Soviet times, official Islamic organizations—the kaziats and central mosques—were the main custodians of traditional religious values. In addition, because there were no Islamic scientific establishments, most imams and ulems received their religious education at home or at mosques. This promoted a quantitative and qualitative increase in Islamic organizations after independence was declared.

According to the data of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), there are currently 266 mosques and 20 prayer houses (42 mosques and 15 prayer houses have not passed registration with the State Commission for Religious Affairs) in the Batken Region. More

than 722 mosques, 62 of which are in the city of Osh, function in the Osh Region. Nevertheless, the official Muslim clergy has still been unable to establish the precise number of mosques in the region.² There are also two Islamic universities, 19 madrasahs, and 11 funds and centers functioning in the region and in Osh.

There are 445 mosques in the Dzhahalal-Abad Region, 6 of which have not passed registration; there are no prayer houses there. The region has an Islamic institute, five madrasahs, and several Islamic funds and centers.

According to Kyrgyz parliamentary deputy K. Osmonaliev, the republic has the most Islamic organizations in Central Asia³; however facts present a different picture. For example, in the Sogd Region of Tajikistan there are 13 central mosques, while in Uzbekistan there are more than 2,000 mosques, 10 madrasahs, and a higher Tashkent Islamic Institute.

During the Soviet era and throughout the entire independence period, the muftis of the SAMK, K. Abdurakhmanov, M. Zhumanov, Ch. Zhalilov, and R. Egemberdiev, have traditionally been natives of the country's southern regions.

Until recently, the level of training and knowledge of the ulema of the country's south has been much higher than the theologians of the northern regions, for which there are several reasons.

- First, the southern regions are closer to such Central Asian Islamic centers as Tashkent, Bukhara, and others.
- Second, in the southern regions, the population learned the fundamentals of Islam in "hud-jras" (special rooms) or studied with ulema at home.
- Third, when the country acquired its independence, the population of the south espoused a traditional Islamic worldview.

However, it was the southern regions that first saw the appearance of unofficial Islamic organizations that subsequently became the foundation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Other unofficial organizations are now becoming active in the southern regions of the country, which, in turn, are lobbying their interests in the region.

Moreover, the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan are beginning to generate ethno-religious stereotypes. The people who attend the mosques in these regions are divided by ethnicity into Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, and the state cannot remain indifferent to this problem.

Tablighi Jamaat

One of the largest groups is Tablighi Jamaat (TJ); the people call its representatives *du'āt* (Islamic enlighteners). At present, TJ's goals and tasks are still not entirely clear; nor is it clear what criteria should be used for assessing its activity.

Some think that the TJ movement arose in India and at first promoted an increase in the role of Islam in the local communities. Over time, however, it became a world movement of Muslim enlighteners. Members of TJ advocated the movement among the people by going from house to house.

However, the Kyrgyz groups of *du'āt* (plural of *dā'ī*—a Muslim who practices *da'wah*, either as a religious worker or in a volunteer community effort) do not form a united Islamic movement,

² This is mentioned on an official Internet resource of the Kyrgyz Republic, available at [www.muftiat.kg].

³ See: K. Osmonaliev, "Kyrgyzstan iavliaetsia liderom Tsentralnoi Azii po kolichestvu religioznykh obrazovatelnykh uchrezhdenii,—glava Komiteta ZhK," available at [http://kg.akipress.org/news:582849].

since they have different understandings of the essence, designation, and role of *da'wah* (for example, how to treat one's family, children, relatives, and so on).

But TJ cannot be called a religious organization either; it does not have a program, charter, or specific goals and tasks, which greatly disorientates the law-enforcement bodies. Even if TJ as a movement is banned, a *dā'ī* (preacher of Islam) will continue its activity. So comprehensive measures are needed ranging from ideological opposition to organizing a dialog and carrying out official legalization.

The TJ movement penetrated the Ferghana Valley at the beginning of the 1990s and can now be found throughout the entire region. It is also having an influence on all the CIS countries.

In contrast to Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have banned the TJ, which they recognize as an extremist organization.

In the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, TJ is an Islamic social network; all questions are resolved at a general assembly of all its members (*mashwara*), without the participation of women. A different person is assigned to be in charge of each issue. Regional, district, and republic-wide meetings are also held for keeping in touch with other groups. There is a collective support system among TJ members, whereby they help each other wherever possible (providing money for food, transport, accommodation, and so on).

TJ has become a means of social mobility for its members; some of them have opened their own businesses, traveled abroad, and created a certain kind of communication system. It is worth noting that they include big businessmen, physicians, teachers, university professors, employees of the defense and security structures, and so on, that is, people from different social strata of society, but all with equal positions within the group.

It was also TJ that first managed to draw criminal groups to its side, which other Islamic organizations have been unable to do.⁴ It is obvious that criminal structures make skillful use of the philosophy of TJ for the mercenary motives. TJ also includes former members of criminal groups who are mending their ways.

The law-enforcement bodies consider TJ to be one of the problem groups.⁵ On the one hand, the organization's distinct apolitical nature does not give full license to prohibit it, while on the other, its activity goes beyond the framework of traditional Central Asian Islam.

The fact that other CIS countries have prohibited the activity of TJ and recognized it as extremist puts the Kyrgyz defense and security structures in an uncomfortable position. This is because Kyrgyzstan is a member of regional organizations (for example, the Collective Security Treaty Organization) that also recognize the activity of TJ as extremist.

In Kyrgyzstan, the activity of TJ adepts contradicts the position of the official organizations, one of which is the SAMK. Traditional Islam, its *akida* trend, and the philosophy of TJ differ significantly on several points, which arouses a certain amount of discontent in the *muftiat*.

In order to establish control over the *da'wah* process, a special department was established in 2008 under the SAMK with branches in all the *kaziats*. It was presumed that all *du'āt* would register with the *kaziats*, but this did not actually happen. At present, registration of the *du'āt* and regulation of their activity has been left to take its own course.

Nor is there any control over the flow of TJ supporters going to Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh; in 2013, Turkey, France, and the U.S. were added to the list. No one can stop people from going to TJ's central markazes located in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. After TJ was banned in Kazakhstan,

⁴ See: "Kadyr Malikov: V Kyrgyzstane nabliudaetsia postepennoe srashchivanie politiki, kriminala i religioznogo faktora," available at [<http://www.24.kg/community/155460-mvd-kyrgyzstana-naznachilo-yekspertizu.html>].

⁵ See: "T. Aitkeev: Sotrudniki UVD po Dzhahalabadskoi oblasti popolniaiut riady religioznykh ekstremistov (letter)," available at [www.centrasia.ru], 18 September, 2013.

most of the *du'āt* took up roost in Kyrgyzstan and leave for markazes in Lahore and Peshawar via the Pakistani embassy in Kazakhstan.

This way, TJ is becoming one of the main interest groups and could well create an alternative to the official spiritual structures, primarily the SAMK. At present, active members of TJ have already begun worming their way into the regional and district official spiritual structures, as well as kaziats and mosques.

Nevertheless, TJ is not a political organization and does not strive to change the constitutional system; it is only trying to spread Islam among the population regardless of nationality. However, it should be understood that full dissociation of TJ from the state political system is fraught with unpredictable consequences.

Salafis

Salafis, who should in no way be considered a new phenomenon in the religious sphere of southern Kyrgyzstan, are another jamaat that causes many problems for the law-enforcement bodies and official clergy. There can be no doubt that Salafism, which is little studied in Kyrgyzstan, is a product of the transformation in the IMU's ideology. There is still no unified definition or understanding of the essence of Salafism in the republic, while most experts refer to the conclusions of foreign theologians and Islam experts.

Most of Kyrgyzstan's experts and theologians regard Salafism as one of the trends of Islam. Some of the country's population think of Salafis simply as a group of believers called on to follow the Islamic traditions of the times of the Prophet Mohammad, may Allah bless him and greet him. State officials regard Salafism as a radical movement, the ideology of which is jihadism, while representatives of the country's law-enforcement bodies see it as a tool used by foreign special services to form the Islamic community and cause a split in the Muslim world.

The Salafis claim that each Muslim should come to his own understanding of the Qur'an and Hadiths, without following the methods taught by the maddhabs (schools). Whereby they believe that the Qur'an and maddhabs are entirely different things. Today, many people who do not know Arabic and are not acquainted with the Hadiths call themselves Salafis; this shows that they do not follow any of the maddhabs and their ideology is no more than a manifestation of religious illiteracy and narrow-mindedness.⁶

At present, fervent discussions are building around Salafism in Kyrgyzstan. In contrast to Kazakhstan, the law-enforcement bodies of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia have officially prohibited the activity of the Salafis and entered the Salafi movement itself on the list of banned organizations.

Kyrgyz experts are not quite sure what in fact to ban—the Salafi movement, the Salafi ideology, the Salafi group, or the Salafi party. For some ulems, the Salafis are simply a sect that has strayed from traditional Islam.

According to employees of the Religion, Law, and Politics Center headed by Kyrgyz religion expert K. Malikov, Salafism is a threat to the traditional Islamic school itself founded by Abu Hanifah. However, they also note that the movement does not pose any political threat to the country.⁷

⁶ See: "Kaidrat Joldybai: Umerennogo salafizm ne byvaet," available at [<http://conference.antiterror.rsbi.kz/index.php/p/pressaabout/41-salafism>].

⁷ See: "Teoreticheskaia i politicheskaia otsenka deiatelnosti salafizma v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike," available at [<http://analitika.org/107-20091202065802539.html>].

There are a total of three trends within this movement in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries that are typical of all Salafis:

1. Salafiya al-Nasia.
2. Salafiya al-Ijtihadiya.
3. Salafiya-Jihadia.

The ideology of jihadism is spread by means of the Internet; what is more, the IMU's terrorist centers, as well as the mojahedeen of the Northern Caucasus and Afghanistan, are engaged in proselytizing it.

So Salafism, which is a threat to traditional Central Asian Hanafism, could be an effective lever of pressure on Kyrgyzstan's secular foundation. Keeping in mind the activity being carried out by the adherents of this teaching in the Middle East, Kyrgyzstan should draw up a clear strategy of ideological opposition to the concept of Salafism.

It stands to reason that Salafism has become the ideological foundation of the worldview of those Kyrgyz citizens who have moved to Middle Eastern countries. For example, according to the data of the State National Security Committee of Kyrgyzstan, due to the military-political situation that has developed in the border regions of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the city of Osh is still a center for recruiting people into the ranks of international terrorist organizations.

During the investigative measures carried out in August 2013 in the city of Osh and the Osh Region, four people were arrested who had participated in the Syrian conflict on the side of the fighters from international terrorist organizations; among them was one citizen of Kazakhstan. As the report of the defense and security structures pointed out, the main purpose of these people coming to Kyrgyzstan was to organize subversive-guerilla operations to destabilize the sociopolitical situation.⁸

However, we should also take into account that the transfer of combat groups of mojahedeen from Afghanistan to Syria is a temporary phenomenon. This gives rise to a question that cannot help but concern the country's state structures: Where will these combat groups go next?

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is another influential banned religious-extremist organization whose activity spread to Kyrgyzstan at the beginning of the 1990s. Until 2010, HT, which has strong groups in the country's southern regions, constantly criticized such official spiritual structures as the SAMK and kaziats. At present, members of HT are appearing more frequently in the reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from the country's northern regions. Between 2009 and 2012, the reports of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs included information about HT's activity in the Chuisk Region. By 2013, its activity was also being mentioned in the Naryn Region.

However, the political activity of the organization's members has dropped compared with 2000-2008, for which there are several reasons.

- First, an important role was played in this by the wave of violent and repressive operations carried out by the law-enforcement bodies that spread throughout the country after the well-known Nookat events of 16 December, 2008.

⁸ Osh is still a center for recruiting people into the ranks of international terrorist organizations—Osh Department of the State National Security Committee, available in Russia at [<http://osh.akipress.org/news:213004/>].

This prompted most of the organization's adepts to withdraw their membership and cease their activity. Such instances took place in the Batken and Osh regions; active members of HT publically renounced their views on local TV and called on their former supporters to take their cue.

- Second, foreseeing mass repressions on the part of the law-enforcement bodies, most of the HT leaders went to other countries as labor migrants. Even after the well-known amnesty on the Nookat case declared in April 2010, most of the released prisoners went abroad.

Along with this, the tactics of HT's activity also changed; the organization began placing emphasis on helping its supporters in prisons, temporary solitary confinement, and colonies. The activity of unofficial organizations in prison also has a reverse side: criminal and religious-extremist structures are joining forces, which might have a negative effect on the spiritual sphere in the future.

Some Problem Areas in Relations between the State and Islamic Organizations

Organizing Umrah and Hajj is a major problem in relations between the Muslim clergy and the state. For example, the SAMK gives itself the prerogative with respect to certain aspects of organizing the send-off of pilgrims to perform hajj under state control. The state, on the contrary, thinks that organizing and sending off pilgrims to perform hajj is a government prerogative (in particular, it is under the jurisdiction of the Kyrgyzstan State Commission on Religious Affairs).

Both sides claim that corruption occurs during the organization and send-off of pilgrims to perform hajj, which they blame on each other.

In 2010, the country's Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) adopted a special resolution; it placed the entire organization and send-off of pilgrims under the jurisdiction of the SAMK.⁹ The reason for this decision was the scandal that broke out at the end of the pilgrimage involving state officials' use of corruption schemes.

Another problem is wearing attributes of Islam in public places; the matter concerns headscarves ("hijabs")¹⁰ worn by schoolgirls,¹¹ wearing long beards, and the clothing worn by *du'āt* men ("sunnot"). However, neither the Muslim community nor the state can offer clear ways to resolve this situation; issues related to it repeatedly come up in the country's southern regions.

This has given rise to contradictions between the local secular institutions (secondary schools and local self-government bodies) and Islamic jamaats about Islamic attributes (there were arguments over whether hijab is only the headscarf or part of clothing, what sunnot is, and so on). It should be noted that the local population is concerned not only about the ideology of the *du'āt* themselves, but

⁹ On the results of the organization and performance of pilgrimage by citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic to Mecca (hajj, umrah) in 2010, No. 151-V of 04.02.2011.

¹⁰ Hijab is in fact not only headwear, but the entire dress that covers the arms to the wrists and legs to the ankles. Hijab is special Muslim clothing for women Muslims.

¹¹ [http://www.knews.kg/society/36531_musulmanskie_obschinyi_napravyat_jalobyi_devushek_nosyaschih_hidjabyi_v_sudebnyie_organyi_na_razbiratelstvo/].

also about their appearance.¹² Meanwhile, the problems are not being resolved; conflicts between school administrations and the parents of Muslim girls are only intensifying.

Why are these contradictions being politicized?

Before 2013, the most urgent question concerned Islamic educational institutions—*madrasahs* and institutes (they usually only teach Islamic sciences). The SAMK has been severely criticized by the state on numerous occasions regarding this, not to mention being subjected to repeated audits.

In 2013, a special department for Islamic education was created by the SAMK; special teaching standards appeared including separate secular disciplines.¹³

In an attempt to take control over Islamic educational institutions, deputies of the country's parliament initiated a draft law On Religious Education. It cannot be said that it was fully approved by all the religious organizations; moreover, they are not even trying to introduce their own proposals, which the parliament and State Commission are so waiting for.

Conclusion

If we look at the above situation from a positive viewpoint, it can be noted that Islamic *jamaats* have become a tool of human social growth. An Islamic social network has formed in which a new social entity has begun to play the main role—the active Muslim engaged in socioeconomic activity and charity. Islamic *jamaats* have their own economic and social spheres of activity. Islamic organizations have also formed their own corporation for selling Halal products.

Attempts by Islamic organizations to enter the state's political sphere are meeting with a strong rebuff from official government institutions. Despite this, there are more and more people in the state structures who perform *namaz* and visit Friday prayer services in the mosques. This is not only explained by the increase in religious consciousness, but also by the fact that for some officials, reading *namaz* has unfortunately turned into a fashionable trend, although it in no way testifies to any changes in their worldview.

On the whole, unofficial Islamic organizations in Kyrgyzstan do not collaborate with each other, however the members of each of them consider themselves the “best” believers, unfailingly following the behests of the Prophet Mohammad, may Allah bless and greet him. They constantly criticize the activity of the SAMK and believe that the official Islamic structures are not meeting their obligations to protect Muslim rights (for example, with respect to wearing hijab in public places). However, unofficial Islamic organizations are nevertheless striving to join the SAMK.

Nevertheless, the inter-community fight for access to power and resources is motivating radical groups to carry out certain violent operations.

However, in our view, the SAMK is capable of becoming not only a platform for holding talks, but also a tribune for a dialog between the state and unofficial Islamic organizations. If the SAMK develops a unified platform with the participation of all the interested sides (the state, Islamic organizations, media, and civil society), this may be very conducive to opposing the ideology of violent extremism.

¹² See: “Du’at are Causing Citizen Displeasure,” available in Russian at [http://rus.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_daavat_islam/24542846.html].

¹³ See: “Novaia uchebnaia programma v religioznykh uchebnykh zavedeniakh,” *Kyrgyz tuusu*, No. 72, 24 September, 2013, p. 1.

On the whole, there are no tools or institutions of collaboration between the state and the Islamic organizations in Kyrgyzstan for pooling efforts to oppose violent extremism.

The state structures and Islamic organizations do not have a common understanding of how serious the threat of violent extremism is. So the magnitude of this threat and how it will affect the state and society in the future remains a mystery.
