

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF KYRGYZSTAN IN 1991-2013: GROWING PAINS

Kanatbek MURZAKHALILOV

*Post-Graduate Student,
I. Arabaev Kyrgyz State University
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the current state of affairs in the Muslim community of Kyrgyzstan and its relations with the state.

Emerging and developing amid never-ending conflict, the community has inevitably become relatively radicalized (the faithful

are divided into jamaats) and, at times, destructive.

The author offers his own cures for the old and new problems of relations between the state and the Muslim community, the resolution of which is absolutely indispensable for their future development.

KEYWORDS: *Islam, the Muslim community, Kyrgyzstan, the SAMK, Mufti, revival, Kurultai, kazyiat, struggle, confrontation, the State Commission, mosque, madrassah, the Ulema Council.*

Introduction

In the last twenty years, the Kyrgyz Republic has been looking for new approaches to relations between the state and Islam, the republic's prevailing religion (over 80 percent of the local population are its followers).

The liberalization of public and political life across the post-Soviet space launched a religious, Islamic in the case of Kyrgyzstan, revival.

This was a far from simple process burdened with never-ending conflicts around the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK) torn apart by the struggle for the post of Mufti.

During the 20-odd years of its independence, the republic has lived through two revolutions: in fact, the power struggle in the top echelons is still going on. This explains why the SAMK, which is seeking more stable and adequate relations with the state and more harmony in its own ranks, is unable to achieve either. Without enjoying uncontested spiritual authority, the SAMK is brimming with intrigues of those seeking greater powers and access to the Administration's financial resources. Confrontation among all sorts of destructive religious groups, including radical and extremist organizations of the Hizb ut-Tahrir-al-Islami (HTI) type, does nothing for the unity of the republic's Muslim community, which is divided into small groups. The gaps between them are being made even wider by the egoistic desire of certain theologians to dominate or come to power. This undermines the position of Islam in the republic and weakens the Muslim community as a whole.

In fact, the recent history of the Muslim community of Kyrgyzstan can be described as a revival amid irreconcilable disagreements.

The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan is Set Up

In Soviet times, the Kaziyat of the Muslims of Kirghizia was part of the Central Asian Spiritual Administration of the Muslims (CASAM).

Until 1991, the republic had 39 mosques and no official religious educational establishments. Those wishing to study theology went to the Bukhara madrassah or the Tashkent Islamic Institute; on rare occasions students were sent to Arab countries; pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina was limited to an absolute minimum.

The downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991 started an Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan: new mosques were built and new madrassahs opened, while the number of hajji and Kyrgyz students in foreign Islamic educational establishments increased manifold. Local governments, individuals, and Muslim countries extended wide support to the republic's Islamic community, gaining popularity for foreign Islamic centers, organizations, and missionaries and undermining the authority of secular power.

The number of registered mosques steadily grew from 464 in 1998 to 1,850 in 2013, a 47-fold increase in the last twenty-two years.

Today, one Islamic university, nine higher educational establishments, and 67 madrassahs offer Islamic education; annual hajj attracts over 4,500 Muslims every year.

The Muslim revival in the republic has encouraged the forces wishing to create a Caliphate and change the social and political landscape accordingly,¹ which might tell the HTI and its Salafi and Wahhabi supporters that their time has come.

Disintegration of the Soviet Islamic community began on 4 February, 1989 when prominent spiritual leaders and theologians from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan gathered at the Barak Khan Madrasah, the official premises of the CASAM, to announce that they had started an Extraordinary General Assembly of the Muslims and insist on dismissal of CASAM Chairman Mufti Sh. Babakhanov. The process of restructuring the system of spiritual administrations began.²

Between 1987 and 1990, the Kaziyat of the Muslims of Kirghizia was headed by Sadykjan kary Kamalov.³ In 1990, the CASAM presidium replaced him, "because of his confessional ideas contradicting the traditional norms of the Muslims of Central Asia,"⁴ with Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov,⁵ who filled the post twice: in 1990-1996 and 2000-2002.

¹ See: K. Murzakhalilov, "Transformatsia institutov musulmanskoy obshchiny Kyrgyzstana v Rossii na rubezhe XX-XXI vv.," Information portal Islam in the CIS, 26 December, 2013.

² See: R. Silantiev, *Noveyshaia istoria islama v Rossii*, Moscow, 1997, 105 pp.

³ Sadykjan kary Kamalov, born in 1950 in the Kara Suu District of Uzbekistan. Between 1977 and 1986, he was imam of a mosque in Osh; in 1987 the CASAM Presidium appointed him Kazy of Kirghizia; he was also a member of the same presidium and received his religious education at the Mir Arab Madrasah in Bukhara and the Al-Asmariya University in Libya, graduating with a Masters degree in theology. Today he heads the International Center of Islamic Cooperation in Kyrgyzstan situated in Osh and the Sadykjan kary Kamaluddin Madrasah in Kara Suu.

⁴ Central State Archives of the Kyrgyz Republic (TsGA KR), rec. gr. 2597, inv. 2, f. 133, p. 65.

⁵ Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov, born in 1940 in the Batken District of Kirghizia; in Soviet times, he received a primary private religious education (hujra) and continued his education at Al-Asmariya University (the Shari'a and Laws Faculty); between 1980 and 1990, he taught at Bukhara Mir Arab University; today he is imam of the Makhmud Kashkari mosque in Bishkek.

Three years later, in 1993, the CASAM split into national spiritual administrations of Muslims controlled by the powers of independent Central Asian states.⁶ In fact, since 1991, the Kazyiat of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan has been independent in everything except spiritual leadership, which still belonged to the Muftiat in Tashkent.

In August 1993, the Ministry of Justice of Kyrgyzstan registered the charter of the Kazyiat of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan as one of the CASAM structures; on 17 September, 1993, it registered the charter of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK)⁷ as an independent religious organization⁸ headed by Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov, former Kazy of the republic's Muslims.

The structure of the SAMK looked very much like the structure of the organs of state power (it has survived until the present).⁹ At the local level, the SAMK structures corresponded to the country's administrative-territorial division; the leaders were appointed by the SAMK. The regional kazyiats, for example, are subordinated to the mufti, the district imam-khatibs to the regional kazys, while the imams of local mosques are under the jurisdiction of the district kazys. The local Muslim communities and mosques are headed by imams, while the main mosques in which Friday services are held are led by imam-khatibs. Classical Islam demands that each mosque hire a mutavli to look after finances and economic affairs and an imam responsible for religious issues (not infrequently, in Kyrgyzstan, these functions are performed by the imam of the mosque).

Appointments to nearly all the top posts in the SAMK and personnel rotation in general are discussed with the local administrations (a normal practice registered in the charters of all religious structures from the SAMK down to the local mosques).

The present system of control of the spiritual administrations of the Muslims has not changed since the time of Catherine the Great, who created it late in the 18th century; the Soviet government borrowed the system to fit Islam into the political system of the Soviet state.

Crisis in the SAMK: Beginning (1995-1996)

By early 1995, the Islamic revival and that of other religions caused a lot of concern in the corridors of power.¹⁰

On 4 March, 1996, the government set up a State Commission for Religious Affairs to control religious groups, coordinate relations between state structures and religious organizations, and create an adequate regulatory and legal framework.¹¹

⁶ See: A. Khalid, "Politika antiterrorizma v Tsentralnoy Azii," *Neprikosnovenny zapas*, No. 4 (66), 2009.

⁷ See: O. Mamayusupov, K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, *Islam v Kyrgyzstane: tendentsii razvitiia*, Osh, 2004, 350 pp.

⁸ The Spiritual Administration is headed by a mufti, hence the frequently used term Muftiat.

⁹ In December 2013, the SAMK had the following structures: (1) Mufti of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan; (2) Naib-Mufti; (3) advisor to Mufti; (4) hajj department; (5) fatwa department; (6) da'wah department; (7) halal certification and standards committee; (8) youth and women department; (9) department of Islamic economics; (10) department of construction; (11) law department; (12) department of madrassahs and mosques; (13) information and public relations department; (14) administration; and (15) secretariat, available at [<http://muftiyat.kg/>].

¹⁰ See: N. Kurbanova, *Proiavleniia politicheskogo islama v postsovetstskikh tsentralnoaziatskikh gosudarstvakh na rubezhe XX-XXI vv.*, Altyn tamga, Bishkek, 2008, 184 pp.

¹¹ See: K. Osmonaliev, K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, *Mezhdunarodnye normy, obespechivaiushchie svobody sovesty i veroispovedania. Zakonodatelnye i normativno-pravovye akty Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki, reguliruiushchie sferu religii*, Osh, 2010, 151 pp.

In 1996, amid the sharp and intensifying contradictions and power struggle among the clergy, the SAMK acquired new leaders.

The rivals were seeking control over the money flows from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Pakistan, as well as from Islamic charities, which created nontaxable dividends. To boost their personal authority, which largely depended on the number of people each of the spiritual leaders managed to bring to Mecca, they needed control over the hajj.

Today, these factors still figure prominently in the power struggle and still threaten the unity of the republic's Muslim community.

The state officials dealing with religious affairs criticized the SAMK and, especially, Mufti Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov for the following:

- (1) *Lack of legitimacy.* In 1993, the mufti was elected by a narrow circle of his supporters,¹² which gave his opponents the opportunity to dismiss the SAMK leaders as "self-appointed." On 23 December, 1996, this fact was confirmed by Temirbay azhy Orunbaev, chairman of the initiative group of the Muslims of the Chu Region.¹³

In 1996, the Ministry of Justice was inundated with letters from people concerned about the illegitimate nature of the SAMK Charter, demanding that it should be registered according to the republic's laws.

On 19 December, 1996, the collegiums of the Ministry of Justice discontinued the SAMK's activities and annulled its registration.

- (2) *Inconsistent personnel policy.* The clergy opposition insisted that the SAMK's personnel policy should be more democratic, which caused confrontation between Saipjan azhy Abduvakhidov, kazy of the Muslims of the Osh Region, and Mufti Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov, who lost his post.

In August 1996, the mufti had replaced Saipjan azhy Abduvakhidov with Mukhamaddin Usmanov, imam of the Shaiyt Tube mosque in Osh. The angered and displeased clergy of the Osh Region closed ranks around the kazy and referred to the charter of the kazyiat to dismiss the muftiat's decision as illegal.¹⁴

When the Kazyiat of the Osh Region was set up,¹⁵ the religious leaders of the republic's south became independent from the SAMK, which meant that practically none of the clergy accepted Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov, or his deputy Khabibulla azhy Zlaikhaev (a Darginian), as their leaders.

The conflict was further fanned by Duyshonbek azhy Otonbaev, one of the officials of the Muftiat, who, together with Mukhamaddin Usmanov, traveled from one mosque to another to strengthen the position of the SAMK. The sides went as far as saying that Islam should be separated from the state and that the state structures should be ignored.¹⁶ The process was ultimately suppressed by early 1997.

- (3) *Lack of influence at the local level.* Throughout the 1990s, the larger part of the Islamic structures (mosques, madrassahs, and institutes) refused to recognize the SAMK and operated outside its control.

¹² See: "Na kurultae v Bishkeke izbrano rukovodstvo musulman Kirgizii," Interfax, 26 December, 1996.

¹³ See: "Bolshinstvo musulman Kirgizii podderzhvaiut ideiu provedenia kurultaia—Initsiativnaia grupp," Interfax, 22 December, 1996.

¹⁴ According to the Charter of the kazyiat, the right to elect and reelect the kazy belonged to the conference of the region's imams; the region's kazy was elected for 5 years in September 1995.

¹⁵ The Charter of the Kazyiat of the Muslims of the Osh Region was registered at the Osh Regional Administration of Justice on 7 September, 1995.

¹⁶ See: M. Khamidov, "Skandal v blagorodnom semeystve", *Slovo Kirgystana*, 3 October, 1996, p. 4.

Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov admitted that in 1995 the republic was moving toward regionalization in the religious sphere: many regions set up their own administrative structures, which were gradually liberating themselves from the control of the Muftiat.¹⁷

This was when the prominent spiritual leaders divided the country into the present zones of influence.

This was especially obvious in the Osh Region and the city of Osh where Sadykjan kary Kamalov controlled about ten mosques in Osh and half of the mosques of the Kara Suu District; Rakhmatulla kary Kasymov controlled more than 20 mosques in Osh, while Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov had control over a certain number in the region.

According to E. Kaptagaev, who filled the post of Chairman of the State Commission at that time, hundreds of mosques remained outside the SAMK for two years.¹⁸

(4) *Mercantilism*. The faithful agree that the SAMK leaders were unscrupulous when it came to financial issues and did not hesitate to accept donations of dubious origin. Organization of the hajj offered other reasons for the biting criticism.¹⁹

(5) *Incompetence*. Since 1990, the mufti issued no fatwas; the SAMK was accused of the extremely low level of the republic's religious educational establishments; even the largest of the republican madrassahs had no curricula and limited their teaching efforts to learning the cannons of the Holy Books by heart; the teaching staff was hired from among hujra imams.²⁰

Many of the SAMK opponents and some of the officials pointed out that the SAMK members had no well-substantiated or convincing arguments in their polemics with extremist structures.

On 19 November, 1996, some of the parliament deputies circulated an open letter to President Akaev and the prime minister, in which E. Kaptagaev was accused of unacceptable voluntarism and forcing the Muftiat to reschedule the date of the kurultai. Before that the mufti had complained to the parliament about E. Kaptagaev's interference in the affairs of the SAMK.²¹

On 13 October, 1996, the village of Kochkor (Naryn Region) hosted a majilis of representatives of the Muslim communities, which decided to convene a kurultai of the Muslims before the end of 1996.

The First Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, attended by 420 out of the 470 elected delegates, was held on 26 December, 1996.²²

The Kurultai approved the new SAMK Charter and elected the Ulema Council (a SAMK leading body of 25 members); it also set up a Central Auditing Commission of 5 members. The Ulema Council was expected to unite the Muslims of the republic into a single community.²³

Moldo Abdusatar Majitov²⁴ was elected Mufti; a refugee from the Jirgatal district of Tajikistan, he knew next to nothing about the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan.²⁵

¹⁷ See: "V blizhaishee vremia v Kirgizii poidet kurultai respubliki," Interfax-Religia, 4 November, 1996.

¹⁸ See: "Bolshinstvo musulman Kirgizii podderzhvaiut ideiu provedenia kurultaya—Initsiativnaia gruppa."

¹⁹ See: O. Mamayusupov, *Voprosy (problemy) religii na perekhodnom periode*, Gos. Kommissia pri Pravitelstve Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki po delam religiy, Bishkek, 2003, 353 pp.

²⁰ See: Ibidem.

²¹ See: M. Zulfija, "Kyrgyzstan: Krizis v otnosheniakh mezhdru gosudarstvom i dukhovenstvom uglubliaetsia," *Tsentralnaia Azia*, No. 7, 1997.

²² See: Muratali azhy Zhumanov, *The Road of Islam in the Country*, Bishkek, 2004, 67 pp. (in Kyrgyz).

²³ See: O. Mamayusupov, K. Murzakhilov, K. Mamataliev, op. cit.

²⁴ Moldo Abdusatar Majitov (1932-2009), a Kyrgyz who lived in the village of Oruk Zar, Kdamjay District, Batken Region, which until 1991 belonged to Tajikistan, received a private religious education from many religious figures of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; under Soviet power clandestinely taught fundamentals of the Shari'a and fiqh; was a respected authority on the Shari'a. Until his last days, he remained the spiritual teacher at the Khazreti Usman madrassah, which he set up himself. Today, many of the madrassahs of Kyrgyzstan hire his pupils as heads and mudarices (teachers).

²⁵ See: O. Moldaliev, "Islamic Extremism in Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5, 2000.

He was a compromise figure, on whom the conflicting sides—the spiritual leaders and the government represented by the State Commission—agreed. His advanced age and canonical convictions kept him away from the intrigues; he never interfered in the conflicts among the spiritual leaders, thus giving the government a chance to take control of the Muslim community and carry out its own religious policy.

Crisis: The Second Wave (2000-2002)

Moldo Abdusatar Majitov remained Mufti until 2000 when he was either removed by the decision of the Ulema Council of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan or by Head of the State Commission Zh. Zhorobekov and State Secretary N. Kasiev.²⁶

It should be said that the governments of all the Central Asian republics never hesitated to interfere in what the muftiats were doing or lobby the clergy they wanted to put in high posts.²⁷

The vacated place went once more to Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov.

Late in 2001, the Muslim community was plunged into another round of tension created by a power struggle among the top religious figures, ill-considered appointments, and unjustifiably frequent replacements of heads of the local religious structures. In 2001 alone, the mufti removed his first deputy Muratali azhy Zhumanov, deputy Lugmar azhy Guyakhunov, kazy of the Osh Region Saipjan azhy Abduvakhidov, kazy of the Chu Region Moldo Ashir Saydilaev, imam-khatib of the Alay District Avazkhan azhy Maripov, imam of the central mosque of Bishkek Abdumanap kary Masaliev, and others.

Moreover, Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov usurped some of the powers of the Ulema Council; in two years he replaced nearly two-thirds of its 25 members.²⁸

He ignored the Shari'a and went as far as appointing a woman with no religious education his advisor, who started meddling in the affairs of the Muslim communities, an amoral step from the point of view of many.²⁹

The wave of criticism of the Mufti was rising higher: the Muslims were displeased with the way hajj was organized; everything the state officials had to say about religious stability in the country was dismissed by the Mufti as interference in the affairs of the SAMK.

On 23 January, 2002, Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov published a fatwa that closed the Muslim cemeteries to followers of other faiths and stirred up unrest and even clashes between Muslims and Protestants in the Chu Region (the villages of Spartak, Myrzake, Chon-Tash, Ak-Tyuz and Tash-Dobo).³⁰

This split the clergy into several conflicting groups, one of which was headed by the mufti, another by Moldo Sabyr Dosbolov, Rector of the Rasul Aqram Islamic Institute.

²⁶ See: M. uulu Taabaldy, "Avoid Temptations and Follow Your Straight Road," *El sozu*, 3 May, 2011 (in Kyrgyz).

²⁷ See: V. Khliupin, "Islam v Tsentralnoy Azii: realnaia 'hizbutizatsia' na smenu falshivoy 'demokratii'?" *Izvestia*, 2 December, 2000.

²⁸ See: "V Dukhovnom upravlenii musulman Kirgizii proizoshla smena rukovodstva," RIA Novosti, 13 August, 2002.

²⁹ See: "V Kirgizii za narushenie zakonov shariata smeshchen s posta mufti," Interfax-Religiya," 15 August, 2002.

³⁰ See: N.N. Shadrova, "Gosudarstvo i religia: put k edinstvu i dialogu," in: *Buddhism i Khristianstvo v kulturnom nasledii Tsentralnoy Azii, Mater. mezhdunar. konf., 3-5 oktyabrya 2002*, Bishkek, 2003, pp. 240-248.

On 10 August, 2002, the Ulema Council met for an extraordinary meeting attended by 18 members to remove Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov from his post for violations of the SAMK Charter and numerous mistakes. Muratali azhy Zhumanov was elected the new mufti.³¹

Crisis: The Third Wave (2002-2010)

The Second Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan was held in Bishkek on 20 April, 2003, seven years after the first kurultai, which discussed how to keep fundamentalism in check and prevent religious extremism and terrorism. The kurultai elected Muratali azhy Zhumanov mufti; the delegates (150 people in all) amended the SAMK Charter and ruled that from that time on kurultais would become a regular feature of the country's religious life with an interval of seven years between them.

It was decided to set up an Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan and kaziyats in Bishkek and Osh.

The kurultai increased membership of the Ulema Council to 30. During the previous period it published several fatwas dismissing the religious ideas of HTI and political Islam as unacceptable. It denounced the efforts to limit publication and distribution of religious literature and recommended improving the plans for building new mosques and madrassahs, completing registration of Islamic facilities, and adding more order to da'wah.³²

In 2005, the political storm that removed President Akaev and his regime put several questions on the republican agenda. Correctly answered, they were expected to improve the "quality" of the imams, exclude hajj-related corruption, and oppose extremist organizations.

In 2005, certain forces tried to organize the Muslims to take part in the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Between 2005 and 2007, the country was watching a fracas between Mufti Muratali azhy Zhumanov and the "Muslim opposition," which demanded his removal. He was accused of manipulating the organization of hajj, as well as the money received from charities, and was severely criticized for everything what the Muftiat had done under his rule.³³

After 2007, the contradictions in the Muslim community gradually subsided, giving the SAMK the opportunity to strengthen its vertical and horizontal structures.

Some of the NGOs and religious figures remained dissatisfied with what they called poor organization of hajj, poor personnel policy, bans on hijabs at schools, wrongly dated Ramazan (orozo) and the Muslim holidays Orozo-ayt and Kurman-ayt, etc.

³¹ Muratali azhy Zhumanov (1 May, 1973-7 July, 2010) was born in the village Yntymak, Nookat District, Osh Region; graduated from the Khazreti Usman madrassah in Kyzyl-Kyia and Islamic Institute in Ufa (Baskiria, RF). Until 1996, was a mudaris at the madrassah and later imam of the mosque in Kyzyl-Kyia. Between 1996 and 1998, was deputy of the kazy of Osh Region; between 1999 and 2002 was SAMK Executive Secretary, first deputy of the Mufti of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Between August 2002 and April 2010, served as Mufti of the republic's Muslims; resigned in the wake of the April 2010 events. On 21 April, 2010, was beaten in his home and abducted by unidentified persons; the abductors demanded \$1 million for his freedom; he died under dubious circumstances. His contribution to the development of religious and spiritual values of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan cannot be underestimated.

³² See: O. Mamayusupov, K. Murzakhalilov, K. Mamataliev, *Kratkiy analiz religioznykh sistem v Kyrgyzstane*, Bishkek, 2006, 172 pp.

³³ See: E. Usabaliev, "Perspektivy uchastiia musulman Kyrgyzstana v politike," *Analitika*, 27 December, 2008.

The Third Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan was held on 15 April, 2009 in Bishkek; it brought together 220 delegates from all over the country to adjust the SAMK Charter to the Law on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations.³⁴

The kurultai extended the numerical strength of the Ulema Council to 35 members, heard the report of the Mufti and the chairman of the Republican Auditing Commission, and approved uniforms for kazys and imams.

The Fourth Wave: More Problems and a Turning-Point (2010-2014)

The 2010 riots, which upturned the Bakiev regime, and the national conflict in the republic's south exacerbated the contradictions in the country's religious communities, the Islamic community in particular.

The riots stirred up the Muslims to even greater political activity and made the political hues of Islam in the republic more obvious.³⁵

Mufti Muratali azhy Zhumanov was the first victim: he left his post under pressure from the politicized part of the Muslim community and very soon died under fairly suspicious circumstances. The next mufti, Rector of the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan Abdyshekur azhy Narmatov, held his post for six days.

In fact, this post became an apple of discord among all sorts of Muslim groups.

The next mufti, Suyun azhy Kuluev, former first deputy mufti, held his post for 45 days and was removed from his new post by force.³⁶ Ruslan azhy Zhumagulov remained mufti for over two months; he lost it to the accompaniment of accusations of exceeding his authority, poorly educated anyway, he was not popular with the Muslim community.

On 26 August, 2010, for the first time in the history of Kyrgyzstan, the mufti was elected on an alternative basis. Chubak azhy Zhalilov was elected out of nine candidates by 21 votes out of 33 of those present at the meeting of the Ulema Council.³⁷

As soon as the euphoria caused by the reformist hajj of 2011 (which earned the mufti a diploma from the government) subsided, Chubak azhy Zhalilov was accused of using his Center of Hajj and Umrah to steal the hajji's money; parliament deputies elected to supervise the preparations for hajj were also criticized. Some members of the religious hierarchy refused to obey the mufti (the kazy of the Osh Region was one of them).

The conflict spread far and wide, acquiring political hues in the process. Members of the State Commission, the head of the presidential administration, and members of the law and order structures

³⁴ See: *The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic* No. 282, 31 December, 2008.

³⁵ See: S. Dyushenbiev, "Islam v sovremennom Kyrgyzstane: sostoianie i problemy," *Religiovedenie*, No. 3, 2011, pp. 107-126.

³⁶ On 6 June, 2010, fifteen young men headed by Ruslan azhy Zhumagulov (kazy of the Chu Region) burst into the SAMK offices where the kazys were holding a meeting and demanded immediate resignation of Suyun azhy Kuluev. The mufti was beaten up, kidnapped, and detained until he did what was wanted of him. A medical examination registered numerous traces of severe beating and concussion; he was placed under a dropper (see: "Pobili muftia, trebuia ostavki," *Delo No.*, 9 June, 2010).

³⁷ At that time, the author who worked at the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic as Deputy Director was involved in the stabilization efforts.

were accused of an “attempt to remove the mufti and seize power in the SAMK.”³⁸ Parliament deputies tried to reconcile the sides, but failed.³⁹

Confronted with the mounting and irreconcilable contradictions inside the country’s religious elite, Chubak azhy Zhalilov left the post.

The Ulema Council accepted his resignation on 17 July, 2012 and elected Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev, head of the SAMK foreign relations department, as the new mufti by a simple majority. The new mufti had no choice but to agree to amend the SAMK Charter within the next two months to make the Ulema Council an independent structure to which the mufti would be accountable.

The same day, the council scheduled the next kurultai for 15 December, 2012.

Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev was elected mufti amid a scandal. On 14 December, 2012, the special services of the Kyrgyz Republic initiated a criminal case against Chubak azhy Zhalilov and Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev, who had failed to pay 8 million soms in taxes on the hajj money. The case is still in court, while the defendants are under recognizance not to leave.⁴⁰ Two days before the election, he circulated a video statement and accused certain officials and members of the special services of putting pressure on him to force him to stay away from the election.⁴¹

The Fourth Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan gathered on the appointed day (15 December, 2012) to discuss a long agenda, including election of a new mufti. The discussions added nine new names to the list of candidates, Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev initially being the only one; six of them stepped down when the voting began. Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev left the other three candidates (Kimsanbay azhy Abdrakhmanov, Sayasat azhy Asanov, and Ubaydulla azhy Sarybaev) behind to be elected mufti with 25 out of 33 votes.

The kurultai agreed with the amended Charter, which allowed the SAMK to set up a Muslim Academy, an administrative structure of the SAMK.⁴² It was suggested that the Muftiat acquire a Central Auditing Commission and its own Administration (Islamic waqf).

Two hundred delegates represented all the regions of the Kyrgyz Republic; there were guests from Russia’s European part, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and South Africa.

Very much like his predecessors, Rakhmatulla azhy Egemberdiev received his share of accusations of financial irregularities, unjustified personnel decisions,⁴³ and inability to resolve the structural problems and was held responsible for the complete failure of the religious and ideological efforts (the critics were especially dissatisfied with the Muftiat, which had done nothing to neutralize the foreign emissaries who arrived in the republic to conscript new fighters for the Syrian conflict).⁴⁴

The decisions of the Fourth Kurultai remained on paper; the reforms, which had barely started, were discontinued to cause another crisis in the SAMK. Late in December 2013, the Internet community had the opportunity to watch a video of a very intimate nature with Rakhmatulla azhy Egem-

³⁸ N. Kurbanova, “Chto-to ne tak v ‘sviatom semeystve,’ ili O problemakh gosudarstvenno-islamских otnosheniy v Kyrgyzskoy respublikе,” *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 8 August, 2012.

³⁹ See: Z. Baktybaev, “V konflikt vokrug muftia vmeshalas obshchestvennost,” Radio Azattyk, 30 June, 2012.

⁴⁰ See: “Ex-verkhovny Mufti Kyrgyzstana Chubak azhy Zhalilov nakhoditsia pod podpisoy o nevyezde,” K-News Information portal, 14 December, 2012.

⁴¹ See: E. kyzy Beyshenbek, “Mufti stal geroem skandalnogo video,” Radio Azattyk, 1 January, 2014.

⁴² Under the draft Charter, the Mufti would be removed from financial and economic issues; his deputy would be expected to deal with money; the authors of the draft charter meant that the Academy would be engaged in teaching and compiling curricula, accreditations, and licensing religious educational establishments. The mufti nominated a candidate to the post of the head of the Academy to be endorsed by the Ulema Council. The decision has not been executed.

⁴³ See: Sh. Turaev, “Predstaviteli muftiata Kyrgyzstana oprovergaiut obvineniia v svoy adres,” Information Agency 24.kg, 15 November, 2013.

⁴⁴ See: B. Malikova, “Abdilatif Zhumabaev: ‘Muftiat nuzhdaetsia v reforme,’” *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 10 January, 2014.

berdiev and an unknown young woman playing the central roles. The mufti admitted that he had married his partner under Muslim marriage law;⁴⁵ on 2 January, 2014, the SAMK press service announced that the video “offended all Muslims.”⁴⁶

On 6 January, 2014, the rally outside the SAMK offices demanded resignation of the mufti. The next day, he pointed to the officials whom he suspected of putting the scandalous video on the Internet and explained why this had been done⁴⁷; he also applied to President Almazbek Atambaev⁴⁸ and resigned.⁴⁹

In turn, the press service of the State Commission issued a statement⁵⁰ saying that the mufti spared no effort to shift public attention from his personal problems to the alleged interference of the state structures in his efforts to improve the situation in the SAMK.

The same day, the Ulema Council met for an extraordinary sitting (convened by a group of Council members) attended by 25 out of 35 members to put deputy mufti Maksat azhy Toktomushev in the vacant post of mufti; the decision was unanimous.

The sitting agreed to elect a new mufti at the next kurultai scheduled for the beginning of February and put Maksat azhy Toktomushev on the list as the Council candidate.⁵¹

Later, the Ulema Council rescheduled the date to 4 March, 2014 to allow the workgroup headed by former mufti Chubak azhy Zhalilov to complete the draft Charter.

The Fifth Kurultai practically unanimously (199 votes out of 200) supported the candidature of Maksat azhy Toktomushev for mufti.

The Kurultai had two more points on the agenda: the new SAMK Charter and elections of the Ulema Council.⁵²

The new charter limited the powers of the mufti: the head of the SAMK, his deputies, and the regional kazys lost their previous positions as voting members of the Ulema Council.⁵³

According to Director of the State Commission O. Moldaliev, the Mufti’s authoritarian rule was rooted in the old charter; the new Charter corrected the balance by dividing the powers of the executive (mufti, his deputies, kazys, and imams) and the legislative branches (the Council of the Ulema [Alimah]).⁵⁴ Under the new Charter, the mufti and the members of the Ulema Council (now called the Aalymdar keneshi—the Alimah Council) were to be reelected every three years; the number of the council members was cut from 35 to 21.

The vice speaker of the parliament T. Zulpukarov informed the kurultai that President Atambaev had received acting mufti Maksat azhy Toktomushev and approved the draft charter.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ See: A. Yalovkina, “Poyavlenie pornograficheskogo video s muftiem udarilo po islamu,” *Vecherny Bishkek*, 8 January, 2014.

⁴⁶ The information that appeared on the Internet about Head of the SAMK R. Egemberdiev damaged not only his family, but also all Muslims (see: SAMK, AKIpress Information Agency, 4 January, 2014).

⁴⁷ See: “Mufti R. Egemberdiev nazval imena chinovnikov, kotorykh on podozrevaet v rasprostraneni skandalnogo video,” AKIpress IA, 7 January, 2014.

⁴⁸ See: Zh. Akaev, “Mufti: Est pravda, kotoruiu dolzhen znat president,” *Radio Azattyk*, 7 January, 2014.

⁴⁹ See: A. Stenin, “Lider musulman Kirgizii ostavil post posle sex-skandala,” *RIA Novosti*, 14 January, 2014.

⁵⁰ See: “Goskomreligiy: Mufti R. Egemberdiev pytaetsia smestit vnimanie ot skandala vokrug sebja,” AKI press IA, 7 January, 2014.

⁵¹ See: “Sovet ulemov naznachil i.o. muftia M. Toktomusheva, vopros utverzhdeniia budet reshatsia na kurultaie,” AKIpress IA, 7 January, 2014.

⁵² See: E. kyzy Sagyndyk, “Kurultai musulman Kyrgyzstana utverdil Maksatbeka azhy Toktomusheva verkhovnym muftiem DUMK,” 24.kg IA, 4 March, 2014.

⁵³ This was done to prevent the mufti’s unilateral decisions on all sorts of applications and complaints addressed to him; the mufti cannot be chairman of the Ulema Council.

⁵⁴ See: E. kyzy Sagyndyk, “DUMK: perezagruzka,” 24.kg IA, 5 March, 2014.

⁵⁵ See: “Kurultai musulman prinial novy Ustav DUMK,” AKIpress IA, 4 March, 2014.

In religious circles, Maksat azhy Toktomushev is known as the leader of Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan,⁵⁶ an organization banned in Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

There is hope that the new mufti will finally launch real reforms, that the Muftiat's financial transactions will become transparent, that personnel will be carefully selected, and that the hajj will no longer be associated with corruption.

Time is short: the next hajj scheduled for September and October 2014 will show whether the reforms were efficient.

Conclusion

The Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan has been going on for about thirty years now. So far, relations between the state and Islam are far from perfect because the authorities have not yet found the best model of cooperation with religious organizations. The never-ending power struggle among all sorts of elite groups seeking monopoly on hajj and control over the SAMK financial sources does nothing for the situation as a whole. Nothing is being done to attract well-educated people to the Ulema Council or to modernize the Islamic education system. The struggle for the post of the Mufti of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (between 1991 and 2013 the country saw 10 muftis) was another fairly high obstacle.

We should admit that the state sometimes trails behind the Islamic revival: thousands of new mosques had no choice but to employ poorly educated or absolutely ignorant imams.

After twenty years of the Islamic revival, Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan is still in a bad way; the Islamic University alone stands apart as nearly fitting the standards of a higher educational establishment; the other 76 educational establishments look more like courses of Arabic.

In the absence of a new generation of educated imams, the void is being filled with graduates from foreign religious schools belonging to different religious traditions.

This promises no acceptable future for the republic's Muslims; the split in the ranks of spiritual leaders and noticeable impact of all sorts of jamaats add even more gloom.

We should say in all justice that the country's authorities have put up no serious opposition to religious extremism: members of HTI and other radical groups are detained with no positive impact: in most cases they can count on small or even suspended prison terms. So far, the state has no clear idea of how a democratic country should oppose religious extremism.

The jamaats take no orders from the SAMK and act on their own; they are small (Tablighi Jamaat being the only exception), but their common aim (an Islamic Caliphate) makes them efficient enough even without a single leader.

When the share of their followers among the Kyrgyz Muslims reaches the critical point (7 to 10 percent), they will come to power in the SAMK by exposing its moderate members to public criticism. In the next 6 or 7 years, the present trends, if continued, will push the country toward an armed religious conflict. This means that the people in power, unable to formulate a correct policy, will be held responsible.

The continued conflicts in the SAMK, lack of educated people, and the growing influence of all sorts of radical groups destroy everything positive the Muslim community has accumulated so far.

If the state policy of the last 15 years continues, disaster is inevitable.

The following may help remedy the situation:

- (1) The state should develop a clear policy in its relations with Islam and identify the internal and external priorities of their cooperation.

⁵⁶ See: Z. Baktybaev, "Muftiat opredelilsia s kandidatom," Radio Azattyk, 14 January, 2014.

- (2) The regulatory and legal framework related to the religious sphere should be improved.
- (3) The SAMK should be encouraged to elaborate a long-term concept of the development of Islam in the country and stabilize the religious situation.
- (4) The SAMK should modernize its vertical and horizontal systems to add efficiency and competitiveness and make it better adjusted to current reality.
- (5) Excessive interference of all sorts of groups and public organizations in the SAMK's internal affairs and its actions under the Charter should be discontinued.
- (6) The controlling functions of the Ulema Council should be strengthened with the post of the Chairman and removal of the clause that makes the mufti the Council's chairman.
- (7) The educational level of the imams should be upgraded, while the Muslim community should be supported in its efforts to train specialists in secular and religious disciplines.
- (8) A strict and transparent system of financial reports should be introduced to make it possible to analyze the results of the SAMK's financial and economic activity.

The above suggests that the time has come to move toward a healthier ideological situation in the republic and to realize the state's systemic and integrated policy regarding Islam.
