

THE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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Kyrgyzstan is a multiethnic and multi-confessional republic in which, according to the 1990 population census, more than 90 different ethnic groups live. The largest is represented by the Kyrgyz, who comprise 64.9% of the republic's residents, followed by Uzbeks, 13.8%, and Russians, 12.5%. But significant changes have occurred in the ethnic structure of the population since this census was carried out. For example, the size of the Muslim ethnic groups has dramatically grown: the Kyrgyz by 40%, the Turks by 57%, the Dungans by 40%, the Uighurs by 27%, the Tajiks by 27%, and the Uzbeks by 21%, while the number of Christians has decreased. In particular, the percentage of Russians has decreased by 9%, Germans by 2%, and

Ukrainians by 1.5%. All of this has created enormous shifts in the structure of believers. According to the data of the Commission for Religious Affairs under the Kyrgyzstan Government, the country's population is currently broken down in terms of confession as follows: 80-84% of the residents are Muslims, 14-15% are Christians, and approximately 3% belong to other confessions.¹

The liberalization of sociopolitical life, building of a democratic society, and observation of human rights have promoted an increase in

¹ See: N.M. Omarov, "K probleme stanovleniia polikonfessional'nogo obshchestva v suverennom Kyrgyzstane," *Orientir*, Analytical bulletin of the International Institute of Strategic Research under the Kyrgyzstan President, No. 1, 2003, pp. 7-8.

ethnic self-awareness among all the republic's residents. It is expressed in the formation of national and cultural centers, the activity of which is aimed at reviving the native language, history, and

culture of the republic's ethnic groups. In turn, this ethnic renaissance has tilled the ground for religious revival and the reanimation of corresponding traditions, primarily Muslim.

The Revival of Islam

Since the end of the 1980s, there has been a significant upswing in Muslim consciousness and a substantial increase in the number of mosques (in 1991, there were 39, whereas by 2003 there were as many as 1,600)² in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in other republics of the region. For example, more than 1,000 mosques operate in the south of the republic in the Osh, Dzhahal-Abad, and Batken regions. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was not a single religious learning institution in Kyrgyzstan. The local priests used to go to Bukhara and Samarkand to receive their education. Today, there are eight Islamic higher learning institutions in the republic, including joint Kyrgyz-Iranian and Kyrgyz-Kuwait universities. What is more, a theology (Islamic) department financed by the Turkish Dianet Wakfy Foundation opened at Osh University in 1993. A similar department was created at the Manas Kyrgyz-Turkish University. What is more, there are 38 active madrasahs in the republic, and in 2001-2002, 284 Kyrgyzstan citizens studied in foreign Muslim centers: 155 in the Al'Azhar University (Cairo), 84 in Turkey, 22 in Pakistan, 24 in Syria, 5 in Kuwait, 4 in Saudi Arabia, 3 in Jordan, and 1 in Libya.³

The interrelationship between Islam and the state is also problematic, since for 13 centuries, Islam has been the political foundation of state formations in Central Asia and the main regulator of social relations. The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK) and its nine kaziats (territorial structures) which function in the republic testify to this.

After gaining its independence, our republic carried out important reforms in the religious sphere, in particular, the Law on Freedom of Confession and on Religious Organizations was adopted in 1991. But the rapidly changing international situation, as well as the socioeconomic state of affairs in the country revealed the shortcomings of this document. A new draft has already been prepared, which OSCE experts believe to be more in harmony with current reality.

A Republic of Kyrgyzstan presidential decree of March 1996 envisaged creating a Commission for Religious Affairs in the government responsible for drawing up and implementing government policy in this field. It functions in compliance with the country's Constitution, in which such generally accepted regulations are enforced as freedom of conscience and secularity of the state. Pursuant to Art 16.11 of the Constitution: "Each citizen is guaranteed freedom of conscience, confession, religious or atheistic activity. Each citizen has the right to freely confess any religion or not to confess a religion at all..." Art 8.3 declares: "Religion and all cults are separate from the state." Art 15.2 envisages: "...No citizen may be subject to discrimination or infringement of rights and freedoms based on origin, gender, race, nationality, language, confession, or political and religious convictions..."

Islam and Ethnic Identity

Islam is an important element of the Kyrgyz ethnic identity. But the potency of the Muslim component in the national identity of the peoples of Central Asia does not always nurture a convinc-

² See: O.Sh. Mamaiusupov, *Voprosy (problemy) religii na perekhodnom periode*, Bishkek, 2003.

³ See: N.M. Omarov, op. cit., p. 10.

ing feeling of affiliation with the broader supranational Muslim community. With respect to the Muslims of Central Asia, who acquired their national identity during the Soviet era, the Islamic identity should be viewed in keeping with ethnic and national categories.

The Muslim revival and rise in religious consciousness among the Kyrgyz were largely generated by the ethnic renaissance at the end of the 1980s-beginning of the 1990s. Islam is viewed as a way to reconstruct and acquire a Kyrgyz ethnic and cultural identity under the conditions of new independent statehood and is important as part of the historic memory of the indigenous ethnic groups. Identifying ethnic with religious origins is characteristic of Kyrgyz society, so national traditions are perceived as Muslim in the public consciousness of the Kyrgyz, and Muslim traditions as national. Today, even those who do not consider themselves true Muslims believe it their duty to observe the corresponding holidays and rituals. Even during Russian colonization and the years of Soviet power, both identities (Islamic and ethnic) were perceived as a single whole.

When talking about the growing significance of Islam as a factor of the Kyrgyz ethnocultural identification, two main levels should be singled out (according to A. Malashenko's classification).⁴ At the first (personal) level, the matter concerns belief in the Almighty and changes in the individual's world outlook. This means that by turning to religion, an individual is primarily trying to rid himself of the Soviet world outlook and to a lesser extent is setting himself against the believers of other confessions. The second level is traditional-ritual, where the degree of affiliation with Islam is defined by the regularity with which rituals are carried out and by the observation of Islamic behavior codes, including prohibitions. At this level of group identification, Islam is one of the elements of the Kyrgyz identity (along with language), it is affiliation with one's kin and communality of historical destiny and territory.

In specifying these levels, it should be noted that manifestations of personal religious consciousness are inherent in the first, while so-called secularized religiosity, which plays the role of ethnocultural identifier, is manifested at the second.⁵

In the post-Soviet period, Islam is becoming a way to legitimize almost all social forms and actions, since regulating public opinion and human behavior through traditions, customs, rituals, and religious rites is still important in Kyrgyzstan society. Kyrgyzstan is still a traditional society, where morals prescribe performing certain acts and refraining from others, respecting certain freedoms, and adhering to specific values. This reflects the special features of Islam, which plays the role of the moral factor forming people's value systems and regulating relations between them. Jumping ahead, I will note that a second type of religiosity and believer predominates in the republic, which is not related to regular cult practice.

The Ethnoreligious Situation

Although in terms of size, the Muslim community is the largest in the republic, other ethnic groups also live in Kyrgyzstan, including those which traditionally confess Christianity. Today, there are Russian Orthodox churches and parishes in every region of the county (a total of 44, including one women's convent). They are mainly in the northern regions: there are twenty in the Chu and eleven in the Issyk Kul regions. This is due to the special historical and geographical features of the settlement of ethnic Slavs in the republic.

During the Soviet era and earlier, Islam and Orthodoxy were perceived as ethnic religions, affiliation to which determined the ethno-confessional identification of the peoples of Kyrgyzstan. For

⁴ See: A. Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza*, Moscow, 2001, pp. 82-83.

⁵ See: G. Kurbanov, "Religion in Post-Soviet Daghestan: Sociological Aspects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (18), 2002, p. 134.

example, the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Dungans, and Tajiks were considered Muslim ethnic groups, while Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians were considered Orthodox. In the post-Soviet era, mixed communities appeared (Protestant, Evangelist, and others), in which the representatives of different ethnic groups (Muslims and Christians) preached common spiritual values.

The most serious alternative to Orthodox Christianity is Protestantism. At present, there are 218 Protestant churches and 11 Protestant trends in the country. The largest are the Jehovah's Witnesses (7,000), Baptists (3,000), and Pentecostals (1,500), as well as Adventists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans.⁶ Until the mid-1990s, the Germans living in the north of the republic formed the traditional ethnic foundation of Protestantism. But due to their mass emigration (70%) to their historical homeland, since 1995-1996, the Kyrgyz have been swelling the ranks of these communities. According to the State Commission for Religious Affairs, in 2003, approximately 20,000 Kyrgyz Protestants were registered in the republic.

At the same time, religions which are non-traditional for its peoples have appeared in our country: the Scientology and Universal churches, the community of Emmanuel Presbyterian Christians, the Saran Presbyterian Church, the Unification Church (Moonies), the Harry Krishna Society, and many more. Financed by corresponding organizations in the U.S., Germany, and South Korea, they are becoming increasingly popular. Many of their centers are engaged in charity, they participate in the building of schools and hospitals and hand out humanitarian aid. What is more, theology is taught in their religious schools along with general educational subjects.

Foreign missionaries are striving to adapt theology to the local conditions, particularly by simplifying rituals and performing them in the local language. Several communities, for example the Evangelist Christian Baptists, hold special prayer meetings in Kyrgyz, have copies of the Bible—*Inzhyl*—in Kyrgyz, and put out hymnals and cards with excerpts from the Bible in Kyrgyz.⁷

The Bahai community is particularly popular among the Kyrgyz, which has created 18 local spiritual assemblies united into a National Spiritual Assembly. The Bahai teaching assimilates and integrates the spiritual values of different religious systems. Bahais do not deny other gods and prophets and preach the traditional universal values of good, humaneness, and morality. Their community appeared in Kyrgyzstan in 1992 and was registered with the Ministry of Justice in 1997. The National Spiritual Assembly holds seminars and conferences at which the Bahais share their experience based on their theoretical and practical work. For example, in December 1999, a conference called "Inculcating Morality in Children and Young People (based on the experience of the Bahais)" was organized on the basis of the country's National Library, in which not only members of this community participated, but also teachers from schools, colleges, and universities, and representatives of Kyrgyzstan's creative intelligentsia.⁸

What is more, there are three Catholic, two Jewish, and two Buddhist communities in the country. They are mainly based in the north and in the republic's capital, while in the south radical fundamentalist Islamic groups hold sway.

Most of the newly converted Protestants, Bahais, and representatives of other non-traditional trends are women, that is, the most vulnerable members of the population, who are trying to find spiritual support in religion. What is more, they are possibly attracted to the non-traditional confessions by their codes of behavior, which are more democratic than Muslim with respect to everyday and family life.

Due to Kyrgyzstan's special features, the problem of inter-confessional relations is spreading to the ethnic sphere. The close tie between religion and ethnic groups is expressed in the negative atti-

⁶ See: N.M. Omarov, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

⁷ See: Z. Galieva, "Problemy i protivorechia sovremennogo polikonfessionalizma v Kyrgyzstane," *Trudy Instituta mirovoi kultury*, Issue 3, *Gosudarstvennost i religia v dukhovnom nasledii Kyrgyzstana*, Ilim Publishers, Bishkek-Leipzig, 2003, pp. 159-160.

⁸ See: S.M. Gromova, "Vera Bakhai v sisteme mirovykh religii," *Trudy Instituta mirovoi kul'tury*, Issue 3, p. 166.

tude toward people who change their traditional ethno-confessional affiliation. At the everyday level, there are frequent clashes between Kyrgyz Muslims and Kyrgyz Protestants. For example, the first say that infidels should not be allotted land for growing vegetables or given water for irrigation, and should have their electricity cut off. Sometimes such conflicts assume more radical forms. In particular, the residents of a settlement in the Aktiuz Keminsk Region demanded that the Kyrgyz Protestants be driven out of this population settlement.⁹ Clashes during the performance of funeral rites are particularly frequent. For example, one such clash occurred in the village of Usubaliev in the Naryn Region during the funeral of Kyrgyz Zamir Istiev, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Three sides took part in this conflict: the village residents (Kyrgyz), the members of the sect, and the relatives of the deceased, since the followers of Islam, headed by the local imam, objected to him being buried in the Muslim graveyard.¹⁰

At the beginning of 2002, the republic's mufti issued a *fatwah* (decision), according to which Kyrgyz who changed to a non-traditional faith during their lifetime were not allowed to be buried in Muslim graveyards, which aroused a wave of protest among the Protestant organizations. In particular, the leaders of one of them, which is quite well known and has both Kyrgyz and representatives of other nationalities among its members, tried to influence the official authorities, saying that this *fatwah* violates the right of citizens to freedom of conscience and confession.

Aspects of the Formation of Linguistic, Ethnic, and Religious Identity

An ethno-sociological study carried out by the author of this article in the form of a questionnaire in the summer of 2003 focused on these problems, as well as on the degree of integration of Kyrgyzstan society. One thousand people of 16 years and older were questioned, whereby 200 people were questioned in each of the following places: the Chu, Issyk Kul, Osh, and Dzhahal-Abad regions and Bishkek. This was because the population of these territories is multiethnic and, which is particularly important, they all have a high percentage of non-indigenous residents. Whereas the regions of the country not encompassed by the study, the Talas, Naryn, and Batken, are monoethnic. Based on the ethnic structure of the republic's population, 63% of the respondents were Kyrgyz, 18.8% Russians, and 11.7% Uzbeks. The representatives of other nationalities (6.5% of the total number of respondents) were placed in a separate column entitled "others."

According to the results of our survey, 76.7% of the respondents consider themselves to be Muslims, 15.1% Christians, 0.2% the followers of Judaism, and 7.2% said they did not profess any religion at all. The results we obtained are almost identical to the data of the State Commission for Religious Affairs, which vouches for the study's high representation and reliability.

In terms of nationality, the indices of affiliation with a specific confession are presented in Table 1. Although 92% of the respondents consider themselves to be followers of one of three confessions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—the number of those who observe the necessary religious rituals (regularly or sometimes) constitutes only 77.4% in terms of the regions studied (see Table 2).

⁹ See: *Delo No. ...*, No. 13, 13 April, 2002.

¹⁰ See: *Analiticheskiy otchet po materialam sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya "Molodezh i religia,"* Bishkek, 2002, p. 16.

Table 1

What Religion Do You Confess? (%)

| | Kyrgyz | Russians | Uzbeks | Others |
|--------------------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| Islam | 96.3 | 0.5 | 100 | 70.8 |
| Christianity | 0.5 | 73.8 | 0 | 15.4 |
| Judaism | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3.1 |
| Do not confess any | 3.0 | 25.1 | 0 | 9.2 |
| Other (undecided) | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0 | 1.5 |

Table 2

Do You Observe Religious Rituals? (%)

| | Bishkek | Chu Region | Issyk Kul Region | Osh Region | Dzhalal-Abad Region | Total |
|-------------------------|---------|------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|
| Always observe | 4.4 | 7.2 | 3.6 | 5.5 | 5.0 | 25.7 |
| Observe, but not always | 10.5 | 7.6 | 12.1 | 10.1 | 11.4 | 51.7 |
| Do not observe | 2.4 | 4.7 | 2.5 | 2.8 | 1.9 | 14.3 |
| Undecided | 2.7 | 0.2 | 1.7 | 1.6 | 1.6 | 7.8 |

The number of those who pray is even less (Table 3).

Table 3

Do You Know How to Pray and How Often Do You Pray? (%)

| | Bishkek | Chu Region | Issyk Kul Region | Osh Region | Dzhalal-Abad Region | Total |
|---|---------|------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|
| I know how to pray and pray every day | 3.0 | 3.0 | 2.1 | 3.2 | 4.2 | 15.5 |
| I know how to pray, but I do not pray regularly | 8.0 | 5.7 | 6.3 | 6.5 | 7.9 | 34.4 |
| I know how to pray, but I do not pray | 2.9 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 4.0 | 1.8 | 0.4 |
| I do not know how to pray and I do not pray | 6.1 | 8.4 | 8.9 | 6.2 | 6.0 | 13.9 |

Church attendance gathered the lowest indices (see Table 4).

Table 4

**How Often Do You Attend the Mosque
(Church or Other Prayer Houses)? (%)**

| | Bishkek | Chu Region | Issyk Kul Region | Osh Region | Dzhalal-Abad Region | Total |
|-----------------|---------|------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|
| Once a week | 2.1 | 1.5 | 1.1 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 9.9 |
| Once a month | 2.4 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 0.8 | 2.0 | 7.6 |
| Occasionally | 6.7 | 6.4 | 5.3 | 5.8 | 4.9 | 29.1 |
| I do not attend | 8.8 | 10.9 | 12.1 | 10.7 | 10.3 | 52.8 |

In terms of nationality, the Uzbeks are the most religious (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5

Do You Observe Religious Rituals? (%)

| | Kyrgyz | Russians | Uzbeks | Others |
|-------------------------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| Always observe | 25.9 | 13.3 | 41.0 | 33.8 |
| Observe, but not always | 55.2 | 49.5 | 44.4 | 41.5 |
| Do not observe | 12.8 | 24.5 | 7.7 | 12.3 |
| Undecided | 6.1 | 12.8 | 6.8 | 12.3 |

Table 6

**How Often Do You Attend the Mosque
(Church or Other Prayer Houses)? (%)**

| | Kyrgyz | Russians | Uzbeks | Others |
|-----------------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| Once a week | 8.1 | 2.7 | 28.7 | 15.4 |
| Once a month | 8.3 | 9.1 | 3.5 | 4.6 |
| Occasionally | 29.0 | 42.8 | 15.7 | 16.9 |
| I do not attend | 54.5 | 45.5 | 52.2 | 63.1 |

The second group of most religious respondents comprised representatives of “other” nationalities: Dungans, Uighurs, Ukrainians, Tatars, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Turks, and so on. All religious rituals are always observed by 33.8% of this group, while 41.5% do not always observe them. What is more,

15.4% of the respondents attend a mosque or church once a week, 4.6% once a month, and 16.9% occasionally.

In terms of religiosity, the Kyrgyz occupy third place. In so doing, 25.9% of them always observe religious rituals, 41.5% do not always, 8.1% attend prayer houses once a week, 8.3% once a month, and 29% occasionally.

As we have already mentioned, after the republic gained its independence, an increase in religious self-awareness was observed. Democratization, as well as the ideological and spiritual vacuum which arose as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, encouraged an interest in religion. As a result, the number of those who have one of the following three books, the Koran, Bible, or Torah (or other religious publications), at home significantly increased. But only 16.2% of the respondents have read them in full, 49.1% have read certain chapters and pages, and 34.4% are not familiar with them at all.

In so doing, the highest index of those who have read the Koran (Bible, Torah) in full was noted among the respondents from "other" nationalities, 23.1% (see Table 7).

Table 7

**Have You Read the Koran
(Bible or Other Religious Books)? (%)**

| | Kyrgyz | Russians | Uzbeks | Others |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Yes, I have read in full | 15.1 | 19.1 | 13.7 | 23.1 |
| Yes, I have read certain chapters or pages | 52.1 | 44.1 | 46.2 | 41.5 |
| I have not read | 32.8 | 36.7 | 40.2 | 33.8 |

Since the end of the 1980s, pilgrimages to the holy places have acquired unprecedented popularity. Incidentally, Kyrgyz nomads made them long before they turned to Islam. Pilgrimages to Takhti-Sulayman in Osh are the most popular, to which hundreds of pilgrims from all over Central Asia flock during Muslim holidays. What is more, the number of those who carry out hajj to Mecca has also dramatically grown (3,000 people annually). According to the data of our study, 11.5% of the respondents make pilgrimages to the holy places. Among them, 14.7% are Kyrgyz, 13.7% are Uzbeks, 6.1% fall under the "other" column, and 1.6% are Russians.

Summing up the results obtained, we would like to note again that many believers do not observe the requirements prescribed by the religions. A large number of respondents adhere to their rituals. However, while giving preference to these rituals, the followers of different confessions cannot subordinate themselves to a set of strict religious rules or follow them in their daily lives. In this way, they primarily single out the national-identification element in religion. Affiliation to a religion, in the understanding of the respondents, largely helps to form their ethnic identity.