

**Individual Submission to the United Nations Human Rights
Council for the Third Universal Periodic Review of the Kyrgyz
Republic**

Religious freedom and influence of media in Kyrgyzstan

Submitted by:

International Alert in Kyrgyzstan

Contact Person:
Mrs. Shakirat Toktosunova
Position: Country Representative of
International Alert in Kyrgyzstan
Email: SToktosunova@international-alert.org
Tel: (996) 770 07-37-17

Brief overview national legislation of Kyrgyzstan on religion

The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic defines the state as secular, legal, and unitary, and describes the rights and freedom of individuals as being of the highest value. The Constitution defines that no religion can be recognised as the state religion or be obligatory, and guarantees that religious institutions are separate from the state, and prohibits discrimination against all persons on the basis of origin, gender, race, nationality, language, creed, political and religious convictions (art. 15, para. 3). Religion in Kyrgyzstan is closely connected with social structure and relates to other spheres of social life; however, the main body regulating the relationship on religion is Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. The Constitution forbids any discrimination on any ground, including religious affiliation or beliefs. Every individual, regardless of religious affiliation, is guaranteed all rights and freedoms of an individual by the Constitution.¹

Methodology of collected information

Recommendations below were based on the results of two research works conducted within the framework of International Alert's project "Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy". The research method of "Real and perceived Islamophobia in Bishkek" combined quantitative and qualitative methods². Additional research "The media's role in covering religious topics and building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan" involved a desk review and field research³. The survey involved active users of Internet resources, mainly students and the representatives of academia.

Islamophobia in Bishkek

According to research completed recently by researchers on International Alert's (EU-funded) 'Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy' project, the causes of Islamophobia are varied: personal experience, education, lack of reliable information about/ignorance of Islam, and low religious competency (among secular and religious communities). Additionally, some Islamophobic sentiment has been fueled by the proliferation of mosques and the fact that a number of Kyrgyz citizens have travelled to so called Islamic State controlled territory at the time in Syria and Iraq; and to Afghanistan. In the capital, Bishkek, Islam is viewed in a positive light; however, outward religious appearance is viewed negatively, namely beards for young men, Muslim clothing for men, and hijabs for women. Women who wear the hijab experience frequent humiliation on religious grounds, especially in family settings (from less religious family members). This also extends to the street in applications for full-time employment. While outwardly religious men are not targeted as often as women, they are more likely to experience Islamophobia at work, social media, and from law-enforcement agencies, primarily as a result of their choice of wearing traditional Muslim clothing.

¹ Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Kyrgyz Republic: an overview report. Foundation Open Viewpoint. 2013. P. 8

² The questionnaire survey of urban residents included 400 respondents of different ethnic groups living in the city centre, micro-districts and urban periphery. The survey included 100 practicing Muslims, both male and female respondents. Moreover, series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with representatives of both secular and religious communities and with experts in the field of religion complemented the survey data.

³ For example, desk review included content analysis of three online media sources in Kyrgyzstan: TV Radio Company (KTRC, government –funded); Azattyk (Liberty, international non-commercial); 24.kg (local). Field research included interviews with experts and mass survey of 400 respondents (200 in Bishkek and 200 in Osh).

The influence of media on religious topics

According to additional research conducted under the EU-funded project mentioned above, the internet is the dominant source of information on religion for citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic. Media coverage of religious topics plays a vital role in building religious freedom. Journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic understand the importance of the general (journalistic) standards and principles of objectivity, reliability of information, and sensitivity of approach. However, not all journalists share these principles fully. Many agencies are sensationalist approach religion without the required attention to detail or indeed journalistic competency. Indeed, there is a lack of qualified journalists who could be considered competent in covering religious affairs. Not all media platforms are able to present their views on religion independently from the state; therefore, media are viewed as a contributing factor to tension between secular and religious communities. Media have the potential to wield positive influence and build constructive relationships; however, this will not be possible without adhering to the following recommendations:⁴

Recommendations:

Enhance social cohesion and combat religious intolerance, negative stereotypes of Muslim communities and discrimination against individuals and communities on the basis of their religion or belief by:

1. Developing, promoting and providing – in consultation with religious and faith leaders - teacher training on human rights values and principles, and introduce or strengthen intercultural understanding as part of the school curriculum for pupils of all ages, as recommended in the Rabat Plan of Action.
2. Ensure that journalists receive special training on human rights values and principles by for instance introducing courses on ‘journalism and religion’ at university and other faculties of journalism to strengthen budding journalists’ ability to address religious themes sensitively, including on:
 - a. the Code of Ethics of Journalists of the Kyrgyz Republic
 - b. right to religious freedom
 - c. freedom of expression
3. Introduce courses on public speaking and public relations into religious education institutions to train current and future religious officials on how to communicate with different audiences and mass media.
4. Ensure reliability of information while covering religious issues and by amending legislation to require mass media agencies have a special unit that covers religious issues (with theology expert/s on board) in editorial teams.
5. Developing new and enhancing existing public policies and regulatory frameworks which promote pluralism and diversity of the media, including new media, and which promotes universal and non-discrimination in access to and use of means of communication, as

⁴ Duisheeva, Roza; Kenjekulov, Abai; Abdylidaeva, Aiperi. 2019. “The media’s role in covering religious topics and building a constructive dialogue on religion and democracy in Kyrgyzstan”. A research conducted within the framework of International Alert’s project “Constructive Dialogues on Religion and Democracy” funded by the European Union.

recommended in the Rabat Plan of Action.

6. Include religious leaders, communities and organizations in consultations regarding state policy on religion and the constitutional principle of secularism to foster trust and understanding and prevent intolerance
 - a. in particular, review the Law on Religion to ensure that the right to freedom of religion is upheld in compliance with international legal standards.
7. Actively support media platforms to foster constructive dialogue on religion and democracy and be open to preparing and publishing materials on religious topics by organizing monthly roundtables and raising awareness campaigns on religion and democracy;