Periodically arising controversy around religion once again demonstrates the importance of dialogue between the authorities and citizens in the search for an optimal model of the religion-state relationship. Six socio-political factors cause disputes over religion-state relations.

Follow us on [Facebook](#)

The Kyrgyz Republic is preparing to develop a new state concept of faith-based policy. On December 24, 2019, the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) held a round table to discuss the preliminary results of the implementation of the 2014-20 Concept and outlined several issues that are to be included in the new document. Prior to that, "Orthodoxy and Islam – the religions of the world" and "Interfaith dialogue in Kyrgyzstan" conferences were held in Bishkek. These events caused a lively discussion on social media and once again emphasized the importance of the religious issue for modern Kyrgyzstan society.

Based on the comment section, Internet users have split up into three different groups based on their opinion on state policy in matters of religion:

- The first group believes that the state should not create special privileged conditions for any particular faith but should ensure the right to freedom of religion for all.
- The second group of Internet users, on the contrary, was inclined to believe that Kyrgyzstan, as a young state, is not yet ready to accept the religious pluralism in the society. Moreover, active missionary activity of the so-called "non-traditional faiths" will lead to a split in society because of religion and the loss of cultural identity.
- Proponents of the third approach expressed the view that the state should strengthen control over all faiths to prevent the radicalization and spread of various destructive ideologies.

Periodically arising controversy around religion once again demonstrates the importance of dialogue between the authorities and citizens in the search for an optimal model of the state-faith relationship. However, before the importance of a social contract in political decision-making on religious matters, we need to analyze the current state of religion along with the main stances on the issue.

The current state of religious matters in Kyrgyzstan

Disputes over religion-state relations in Kyrgyzstan are at least due to six socio-political factors: domestic and foreign political conflicts of interest, the lack of an authentic tradition and clearly defined paradigm of religion-state relations, a lack of relevant statistics and societal taboo on religious matters. A detailed consideration of these factors will help to create an overall picture of the state of religion in Kyrgyzstan.

The domestic political conflict of interests on the matters of religion is determined by the existing religious diversity. Contrary to the widespread belief that this phenomenon is relatively recent for the Kyrgyz society, numerous archaeological discoveries[1], as well as archival data from the Soviet period, indicate the opposite.

Located at the crossroads of trade routes between local civilizations, the population living on the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan has long professed various religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam, pagan cults, etc.

Although the religious composition changed over time, in general, religious diversity has always existed in one form or another. It persisted in the Soviet period, despite atheistic propaganda and state pressure on communities of believers. For instance, according to the report of the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kyrgyz SSR on the success of anti-religious propaganda, in 1985 there were 96 registered and 68 unregistered religious communities[2] of Islamic, Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Lutheran, Jewish religions[3], including the Catholic Church founded by Polish officers of the 5th division of General Andersen, stationed in Jalal-Abad in 1942[4]. After Kyrgyzstan gained its independence, most communities got the opportunity to enter the public space and became more visible.

At the same time, religious movements new to Kyrgyzstan received the opportunity to spread their beliefs. Among the latter, Bahá'ís, Mormons, and representatives of neo-Hindu religious traditions could be specifically distinguished. Since 1996, there has been an increase in tension among religious groups associated with "competition for the flock", which led to a review of legislation on religious matters in 2008-2009.

Despite the limitation for missionary activity and many other measures taken by the authorities to resolve interfaith relations, the tension between some religious groups continues to persist. This periodically leads to various kinds of conflicts related to burials, proselytism, as well as disputes over legislative activity and its practical application regarding the right to freedom of religion.

The foreign policy conflict of interests is associated with geopolitics and the use of religion as "soft power" to influence the country's political life. The conflict of interests of external actors leads to Kyrgyzstan adopting rather contradictory international obligations as part of its membership in the UN, OSCE, OIC, etc. For example, in 2019, there was a debate within a society over Kyrgyzstan ratifying (2012) the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which raised concerns among civil society and PACE regarding its compatibility with several international human rights treaties[5]. Kyrgyzstan's participation in several OIC treaties demonstrates a rather mixed attitude towards the "Israeli issue". The multi-vector nature of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy also partly adds a certain degree of tension to interfaith relations within local communities, provoking conflicts that already arise within religious denominations, in particular – Sunni Islam.

The lack of an authentic tradition of state-religion relations is directly related to the Soviet period of the statehood formation. The public administration system of the Soviet Union represented a high degree of centralization of power. State policy in the area of religion was no exception and was also formed by the center, the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which sent instructions through the Council for Religious Cults to its republican units[6]. At the local level, these instructions were directly implemented by the authorized of the Council for Religious Cults.

After the collapse of the USSR, this system ceased to exist. In Kyrgyzstan, a specialized body for religious affairs was established only in 1996.[7] But only after 10 years, the state began to consistently build relations with religious communities revising legislation in the field of religion. This process continues today, as evidenced by the ongoing development of program documents and amendments to the relevant regulatory legal acts.

The lack of a designated paradigm of state policy on religious matters is an extension of the problem. The ongoing review of legislation and the search for an optimal model of religion-state relations are associated with insufficient theoretical support in this area. On the one hand, there is either a Marxist-Leninist approach to religion that still dominates among a certain part of the expert community or no approach at all. On the other hand, the crisis of contemporary education does not allow a new generation of experts to master sufficiently modern approaches. Thus, the state faces a dilemma: to return to the familiar Soviet paradigm of state policy on religious matters or leave it undetermined.

The lack of relevant statistics on the religious composition of the population also complicates the building of religion-state relations. Official statistics tend to associate a denominational identity with ethnic identity. As a result of this approach, as of 2014, about 80% of the population was associated with Islam (without dividing into Sunnis and Shias)

and 17% with Orthodox Christianity[8]. Separate sociological studies revealed similar results with the 86% representation of Muslims in the total population of Kyrgyzstan[9].

However, the inconsistencies between ethnic and "traditional" religious identities cast doubt on the figures cited. The most accurate information can only be obtained through a population census with the inclusion of an additional question on religious affiliation. This kind of research was last conducted in the republic in 1937[10]. However, the results of the All-Union census were removed from the national archives and are currently stored in Moscow. The lack of this scientific research makes it extremely difficult to develop measures to effectively regulate such a delicate sphere.

The taboo on religious topics is another obstacle to the development of an optimal model of religion-state relations. As a result of the atheistic propaganda of the Soviet period, negative stereotypes about believers persist in society. It is interesting to note that most of the stereotypes turned out to be very stable and have been preserved practically since the October Revolution. For instance, even at congresses of the Communist Party, the Bolsheviks identified Muslims as supporters of pan-Islamism, Protestants, and Catholics as agents of the European and American bourgeoisie (agents of the West), and Jews as accomplices of Zionism[11]. Due to stigma and discrimination, believers preferred to hide their religious beliefs.

A certain degree of distrust between a part of believers, the authorities and society are still preserved, which facilitates the exit of certain religious communities from public space.

Even though there was a significant relief, after the collapse of the USSR, in relation to religious rights and freedoms, stereotypes remained in society. Sometimes they are reflected in the rhetoric of certain politicians and public figures, in terms such as "sect", "destructive movements"[12], etc. Thus, a certain degree of mistrust between a part of believers, the authorities and society are still preserved, which contributes to the exit of certain religious communities from public space. This complicates the state monitoring of the dynamics of the religion and, accordingly, the development of relevant policies on religious matters.

Religion Policy Vector Choice

As mentioned earlier, in society and among government representatives, there are three main opinions regarding the choice of the vector for the development of state policy on religious matters.

Supporters of the **right to freedom of religion for all** believe that enabling equal conditions and opportunities for different religious communities, as well as for non-believers, agnostics, and atheists promote the integration of society based on common civic values. In their opinion, this approach will not only contribute to the harmonization of interfaith relations but will also provide greater economic growth and security. Besides, the model meets all international human rights obligations enshrined in the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic.

However, this position is often criticized by several politicians, experts, representatives of local religious communities, as well as law enforcement agencies. It should be noted that the popularization of this approach requires active outreach and enlightenment among the population, especially in the regions, to increase legal literacy and a culture of tolerance. Otherwise, there is a risk that the model will be rejected, perceived by a part of society as an attempt to impose liberal values on others.

Supporters of the **preferential model of** religion-state relations believe that the state should base its policy on the cultural and historical heritage and support only "traditional religions". This approach, as a rule, is popular among the general public and several politicians. However, it is criticized by representatives of the human rights community, religious minorities and part of the secular population, who prefers to see the state's position as neutral to all faiths.

![CABAR - Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting]

Freedom of Religion in Kyrgyzstan: Necessity, Luxury, or a Threat to National Security?

The "Orthodoxy and Islam – the religions of the world" international conference held on November 21, 2019, in Bishkek. Photo: kabar.kg

It should be noted that recent events in religion-state relations demonstrate the direction of state policy taken on the implementation of this particular model (National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040). Nevertheless, we should not forget that independent Kyrgyzstan has witnessed several changes in the policy in this area, which indicates its variability and unpredictability.

Supporters of the **securitization** of religious policies argue that the uncontrolled religious sphere poses challenges and threats to Kyrgyzstan's national security. To prevent them, it is required to establish the greatest possible degree of control over religious communities to prevent the spread of extremist and destructive ideologies aimed at undermining the territorial integrity, sovereignty and constitutional system of the state.

This rhetoric is popular with representatives of the security forces and is supported by a few regional obligations undertaken by Kyrgyzstan as part of its membership in the CSTO and SCO. At the same time, this position is strongly discarded by the representatives of the so-called "traditional and non-traditional faiths" as well as civil society. It also negatively affects the reputation of Kyrgyzstan in the international arena.

Despite the common views on this issue among the supporters of the two prior models, the

contradictions between them prevent united confrontation against the securitization of legislation in the field of religion. We should note the opposite effect the trend aimed at tightening legislation might have. Extremist groups can take advantage of the increasing pressure from the state on religious communities as a tool for recruiting new adherents, which casts doubt on the political feasibility of this model.

To summarize

As mentioned earlier, the choice of the optimal model of religion-state relations should be based on a social contract between the government and citizens. The possible policy vectors listed above in this area are subject to in-depth analysis and discussion. Each model certainly has its strengths and weaknesses, a subject for scrupulous study and weighting before any decision is made. The following should also be mentioned among central nuances.

The model of the right to freedom of religion for all, despite its unpopularity among the general population, requires the least time and financial costs for its implementation. The main tool for its implementation is conducting awareness-raising and educational work among the population in the regions to increase the level of legal literacy and a culture of tolerance.

The preferential model of religion-state relations, which at first glance seems the most easily feasible, carries a few risks in the long run. These risks are mainly associated with economic regression caused by the migration of religious minorities who believe their rights and opportunities in the country are limited. Given the fact that many members of religious minorities are highly skilled workers, their migration from Kyrgyzstan may adversely affect the country's economic development.

The policy of securitization of the religious sphere seems to be the most dangerous given the insufficiently studied dynamics of the state of religion. Also, establishing control over the activities of religious communities is a difficult task as some groups have already gone underground after the first wave (2006–9) of tightening legislation that governs religious matters.

The existence of hybrid models that combine elements of two (or even three) approaches at once is also acceptable. The introduction of such models may carry additional risks due to the combination of conflicting paradigms. Hybrid models, on the one hand, weaken the effectiveness of measures taken to achieve mutually exclusive goals.

On the other hand, hybrid models exacerbate existing contradictions and cause the most undesirable consequences in the sphere of religion-state relations, undermining the level of trust of all stakeholders in the government. Thus, the implementation of hybrid models seems extremely undesirable in the development of state policy on religious matters in Kyrgyzstan.

This article was prepared as part of the IWPR project "Stability in Central Asia through Open Dialogue".

References:

SCRA. "About the State Commission: History of Establishment". http://religion.gov.kg/ru/comission/history. Accessed on November 23, 2019

Goryacheva, V. *Medieval urban centers and architectural ensembles of Kyrgyzstan 1982*. Frunze: Ilim, 1983.

Fe. "PACE called on Kyrgyzstan to abandon Sharia in favor of European law." Published January 24, 2019, http://fergana.agency/news/104586/. Accessed on November 23, 2019

Ibragimov K.S. *Fifth Polish motto in Kyrgyzstan: 1942*. Jalal-Abad, 2009.

Kadyrov, M. *Action plan to combat the deployment of the religious movement within the Alamedin region of the Kyrgyz SSR* from 1960

Mamontova, D. "Tursunbai Bakir uulu on behalf of his party demands the closure of all sects in Kyrgyzstan." *K-NEWS*, February 13, 2012, http://shorturl.at/hlvI0. Accessed on November 23, 2019

Maurizio, G. *Ethnic Minorities in Democratizing Muslim Countries: Turkey and Indonesia*. Norfolk: Pulgrave, 2018.

Minner, M. *Stalin`s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics, 1941-45*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Open.kg. "Religion in contemporary Kyrgyzstan." Published April 7, 2014, http://shorturl.at/bqDE6. Accessed on November 23, 2019

Decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR "On the structure and staff of the Central Office of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR" of March 17, 1966

Resolution of the XII Congress of the Communist Party "On the issues of propaganda, press, and agitation"

from April 17-25, 1923

Usubaliev, T. *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan* on February 24, 1985

[1] Goryacheva, V. *Medieval urban centers and architectural ensembles of Kyrgyzstan 1982*. Frunze: Ilim, 1983 – S. 34.

[2] Usubaliev, T. *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan* of February 24, 1985

[3] Kadyrov, T. *The action plan to combat the deployment of the religious movement within the Alamedin district of the Kyrgyz SSR* from 1960

[4] Ibragimov, K. *Fifth Polish motto in Kyrgyzstan: 1942*. Jalal-Abad, 2009.

[5] *Fe.* "PACE called on Kyrgyzstan to abandon Sharia in favor of European law." Published January 24, 2019, http://fergana.agency/news/104586/. Accessed on November 23, 2019

[6] *Decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR* "On the structure and staff of the Central Office of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR" of March 17, 1966

[7] *SCRA*. "About the State Commission: History of Creation". http://religion.gov.kg/ru/comission/history. Accessed on November 23, 2019

[8] *Open.kg*. "Religion in contemporary Kyrgyzstan." Published April 7, 2014, http://shorturl.at/bqDE6 Accessed on November 23, 2019

[9] G. Maurizio. *Ethnic Minorities in Democratizing Muslim Countries: Turkey and Indonesia*. Norfolk: Pulgrave, 2018 – P. 68.

[10] M. Minner. *Stalin`s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics, 1941-45*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003 – P. 33.

[11] *Resolution of the XII Congress of the Communist Party*. "On the issues of propaganda, press, and agitation" from April 17-25, 1923

[12] Mamontov, D. "Tursunbai Bakir uulu on behalf of his party demands the closure of all sects in Kyrgyzstan." *K-NEWS*, February 13, 2012, http://shorturl.at/hlvI0. Accessed on November 23, 2019
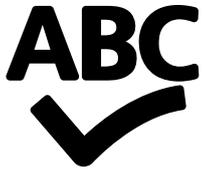
If you have found a spelling error, please, notify us by selecting that text and pressing *Ctrl+Enter*.