

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated as the government passed legislation that further shrank the space for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Throughout the year, Kyrgyz officials used both new and long-existing legislation to target religious minorities, including Muslims who do not adhere to the state's preferred interpretation of Islam under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SAMK) and Christians who do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Authorities penalized peaceful religious activities through fines, detentions, prison sentences, forced renunciations of faith, and physical abuse. In June, a USCIRF delegation visited Kyrgyzstan to assess FoRB conditions.

There were significant legislative changes that eroded FoRB protections during 2025. In January, the Kyrgyz government passed the law On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations, or the religion law. The 2025 religion law restricts FoRB, particularly hindering the rights of minority religious groups through its onerous mandatory registration requirement. The government also amended the Administrative Code to ban face coverings in public, a provision that authorities have enforced as a ban on religious face coverings and have used to harass and fine Muslim women who wear niqabs. In April, authorities issued warnings to about 300 women wearing niqabs in a raid in Osh City, creating an environment of intimidation. In July, authorities also amended the law On Countering Extremism, or the extremism law, to penalize the "storage of extremist materials" for the first time. The law preserves its broad definition of "extremism," omitting any reference to violence or incitement to violence.

In 2025, there were two known FoRB victims imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities under Criminal Code Article 330, which broadly penalizes incitement in line with the extremism law. The first individual is True and Free Reform Adventist Church congregant [Pavel Shreider](#). In July, a judge sentenced Shreider to three years in a labor camp and subsequent deportation to Russia, his

country of origin. Following Shreider's arrest in November 2024, an indictment against him claimed that his church's religious materials promoted the superiority of the Adventist Church over other faiths. While Shreider was detained, officers reportedly physically abused him and other detained Adventist Church members. In September, authorities transferred Shreider to a prison medical unit after a medical examiner found evidence of brain damage. The second FoRB victim is [Asadullo Madraimov](#), who was initially detained in 2023. Authorities sentenced him to three years in prison in 2024 for posting a video online complaining about the inspection and potential closure of his local mosque.

During the year, authorities targeted religious groups that had not sought mandatory registration. Specifically, in March, the Alamudun District Court designated the True and Free Reform Adventist Church as an "extremist" organization. In September, State Committee on National Security (SCNS) officers raided a service of the Council of Churches Baptist Church in Bishkek. Officials seized religious literature and fined the community's pastor and deacon under Administrative Code Article 142, which penalizes violations of the religion law.

As in years past, Kyrgyz officials detained members of organizations banned for engaging in "extremist" or terrorist activities, including some religious groups with no known history of violence. For example, in February, Chui officials detained four members of Yakyn Inkar, charging them under Article 332 of the Criminal Code, which bans the preparation and distribution of extremist materials. The detained men distributed a video from Yakyn Inkar allegedly containing so-called signs of "extremism." In August, the SCNS reported that 11 individuals, whom officials had convicted of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, publicly renounced their beliefs in Arstanbap. SNCS officials routinely coerce accused Hizb ut-Tahrir members to renounce their beliefs under threat of more severe punishment.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kyrgyzstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, including encouraging incorporation into any new or existing commercial agreements;
  - Impose targeted sanctions on Kyrgyz officials, such as those from the State Committee on National Security, responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States; and
  - Collaborate, through the U.S. Department of State, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to encourage the Kyrgyz government to adhere to international standards when implementing the laws on religion and extremism, especially in developing regulations for the religion law.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Kyrgyzstan's religious freedom violations by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Sent a Delegation to Kyrgyzstan to Assess Religious Freedom](#)
- **Hearing:** [Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia](#)
- **Country Update:** [Kyrgyzstan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

## Background

Of Kyrgyzstan's approximately six million people, around 90 percent [identify](#) as Muslim. Most Kyrgyz Muslims adhere to Hanafi Sunni Islam, while one percent adhere to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population largely includes Christians, who make up seven percent of the remaining population. Around 40 percent of Christians identify as Russian Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The remaining population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, International Society for Krishna Consciousness members, and Tengrinists. While Article 34 of the Kyrgyz constitution guarantees the right to freedom of conscience and religion, the government widely restricts these rights through various legislation.

## 2025 Religion Law

In January, President Sadyr Japarov approved the 2025 religion law, a development officials lauded as necessary to combat "extremism." However, the law seemingly benefits majority and larger religious organizations, such as the SAMK and the ROC, while restricting the rights of minority religious groups.

Primarily, the law maintains the requirement that religious groups must register with the state to legally engage in any religious activity. It increases the bureaucratic obstacles to register, including new requirements that are particularly difficult to overcome for smaller congregations. For example, the law raises the membership threshold required for a religious group to register from 200 to 500 individuals. Those 500 individuals must reside in the same administrative-territorial unit. Religious groups applying for registration also must identify a building for their religious activities, but personal residences are explicitly prohibited from being used for this purpose. Registration certificates last for 10 years, unlike under the previous law, which did not place time limits on registration. Registration is similarly required for "religious preachers" and missionaries.

The religion law includes vague provisions that authorities can broadly interpret to arbitrarily penalize peaceful religious activities. For example, the law prohibits "the promotion of religious hatred," an activity defined as "extremist" under the extremism law. Similarly, vague provisions ban religious conversion attempts that use "psychological influence" and public events and online activities that "insult religious feelings." Additionally, the law bans "door-to-door preaching" and the involvement of minors in religious activities. Finally, the law prohibits private religious education outside of registered religious schools. Those who would like to study religion abroad must notify the state and complete general secondary education in Kyrgyzstan, a process that is unclear. As the government works to develop regulations to implement the new religion law, there is an opportunity to clarify potentially ambiguous provisions and address concerns of religious groups that the law will be used to hinder their religious practice.

The law places additional restrictions on religious literature, including banning individuals from distributing religious materials in public places. Kyrgyz citizens crossing the border into Kyrgyzstan can bring no more than one copy of a given religious book for personal use. The National Agency for Religious Affairs (NARA) conducts official examinations of religious materials that are imported or produced for inclusion in library collections.

The 2025 law allows religious organizations to form a central governing body to coordinate the activities of groups from the same faith. Such bodies ensure that religious groups are operating in line with Kyrgyz law and work with state authorities to appoint religious leaders and coordinate religious education and online religious expression. The religion law also states that the quasi-independent SAMK is the central governing body of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan.

## Administrative Ban on Face Coverings

The January 2025 amendments also added Article 127.1 to the Administrative Code, which bans "the complete concealment of a person in public." While this provision does not explicitly mention religious facial coverings, authorities implemented the article to penalize Muslim women who wore niqabs in 2025. In 2025, police in Osh region fined 22 women for wearing a niqab in public and issued 140 warnings. In Jalal-Abad Province, police fined at least seven women for wearing a niqab. Mufti Abdulaziz Zakirov, head of the SAMK, supported the ban, stating that the niqab is a foreign trend not in line with local traditions in Kyrgyzstan. In an interview, President Japarov stated that the facial covering ban is not a state policy. He insisted that his government was only helping implement Mufti Zakirov's religious ruling.

## Extremism Law Amendments

In July, President Japarov signed into law amendments to the extremism law and related legislation. The amendments penalize the storage of extremist materials for the first time with a fine under Administrative Code Article 142.1. However, if the actions "qualify for criminal liability," the Criminal Code also penalizes the storage of extremist materials with up to three years in prison under Article 332.1.

Additionally, the amendments created a minimum sentence of three years for creating and financing an extremist organization and preparing or distributing extremist materials under Criminal Code Articles 331 and 332. Prior to the amendments, the Administrative Code did not provide a minimum sentence for violators of these two articles. Authorities often cite the possession or distribution of "extremist" religious materials when imprisoning or detaining individuals for their peaceful religious activities.

## Key U.S. Policy

While bilateral engagements between the United States and Kyrgyzstan included some discussion of FoRB, most discussions focused on expanding economic cooperation. In January, U.S. Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Lesslie Viguere [met](#) with representatives of the Evangelical Baptist Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Buddhist community to assess religious freedom conditions. In September, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau and Kyrgyz Republic Foreign Minister Jeenbek Kulubaev [discussed](#) economic cooperation opportunities, particularly in the critical minerals sector. In November, President Japarov [met](#) with President Donald J. Trump through the C5+1 platform along with other Central Asian leaders to discuss business opportunities between U.S. and Kyrgyz companies.