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SECULAR PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE THE KYRGYZSTAN MODEL

AIBEK AKCHOKOEV



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THE KYRGYZSTAN MODEL



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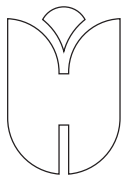
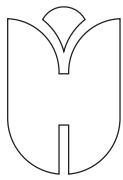


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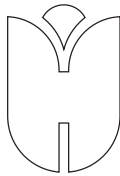


SUMMARY

The Kyrgyz Republic, while officially a secular state, encounters challenges in balancing secular principles with the increasing role of religion in society. Although secularism typically requires impartiality among religions, the state showed preferential support in 2014 toward the Hanafi school of Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church. Efforts to regulate religious expression among citizens have sparked concerns about the government's commitment to secular values, which implies the separation between state and religious institutions.

Kyrgyzstan faces competing pressures: some citizens call for stricter religious regulations to safeguard national identity, while religious minorities cite violations of their rights, and international organizations push for the protection of fundamental human rights.

This paper analyzes how secular principles are crafted, applied, and maintained in Kyrgyzstan, a Muslim-majority nation. It focuses on how Kyrgyz political elites manage rising religiosity, adapting strategies to maintain secular governance. The paper examines policy documents to uncover shifts in Kyrgyzstan's approach to secularism and religion over time.



INTRODUCTION

The Kyrgyz government asserts that it follows a secular strategy in its religious policies. Nonetheless, due to the increasing risk of religious extremism in the area, it has implemented regulations that influence the nation's spiritual landscape. These regulations provide frameworks for how citizens may practice their faith. This attempt to govern religious conduct prompts inquiries into the core values of secularism that the Kyrgyz authorities claim to uphold to.

The Kyrgyz state asserts its commitment to secularism, suggesting that no single religious doctrine should be privileged over others. Nevertheless, in 2014, the government placed the Hanafi school of Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church above other religious expressions.

Secularism establishes that people should not be forced to accept or reject any particular belief. Yet, the Kyrgyz government's efforts to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable religious

practices remain controversial. There is ongoing debate about whether the government has the authority to ban religious attire, such as the hijab, in public places like schools, given that wearing such clothing is a constitutional right as long as it does not harm others. The same issue arises with the regulation of long beards in public spaces. Even when considering the threat of extremism, the rationale for a secular state's intervention in religious affairs is unclear. Additionally, the potential consequences of favoring certain religious groups over others are uncertain, as this might lead to the marginalization and radicalization of some citizens. The effectiveness of such measures in a globalized society, where individuals with diverse identities interact beyond national borders, remains uncertain and questionable.

The Kyrgyz government oversees religious affairs through the State Commission of Religious Affairs, which works in collaboration with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, commonly called the Muftiat.

The Muftiat supervises all mosques in Kyrgyzstan, appoints imams, and coordinates the content of their sermons. While the system seems hierarchical, individual religious leaders wield considerable influence and actively shape public opinion, sometimes openly criticizing political decisions and expressing their views on domestic and foreign policies. Although this may appear to indicate a pluralistic society, it presents challenges given the country's secular status. According to secular principles, just as state authorities should remain separate from religion, religious leaders should also avoid intervening in political matters.

The debate over secularism gained prominence after calls emerged in 2010 to remove the term "Secular State" from the Kyrgyz Constitution.¹ Such suggestions would not be surprising when coming from religious figures²; however, in 2020, the head of the State Commission of Religious Affairs advocated for this change, arguing that since 98% of the population identifies as believers. With only 2% as atheists, the secular status was no longer appropriate.³ Although Kyrgyzstan retained its secular status in the 2021 constitutional amendments, the future of secularism remains uncertain, considering that a high-ranking official once challenged it.

These calls to reconsider Kyrgyzstan's secular status coincided with the opening of a large prayer room in the parliament, funded by Saudi Arabia.⁴ At the same time, intense debates took place in parliament over the proposal to extend breaks in all government institutions for Friday prayers.⁵ Some lawmakers even suggested declaring Friday a day off, as is common in some Muslim countries.⁶

The Kyrgyz state faces ongoing pressure from various social groups. Some citizens call for stricter religious policies, seeing the spread of religion as a threat to their national, cultural, and religious identity. Devout members of religious minorities claim that their fundamental religious rights are being violated,⁷ while international observers urge the state to uphold its obligations to protect basic human rights.⁸

Secularism lacks a universally accepted model, with each country interpreting and applying it based on its unique social and political circumstances.

For instance, the United States perceives secularism as freedom of religion, while France prioritizes freedom from religion. This paper explores the distinct type of secularism in Kyrgyzstan and its implementation, particularly in light of the growing influence of religion in the country.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Following its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan's leadership faced the challenge of establishing a new independent state. From the beginning, Kyrgyzstan developed a reputation as the most liberal country in the region regarding religious organizations. The regulations for registering and legally operating religious organizations were relatively relaxed, requiring only ten individuals interested in forming one group.⁹ Kyrgyzstan's laws guarantee its citizens the freedom of religion, allowing everyone the right to practice any faith or opt not to follow one. Furthermore, individuals have the right to openly express their religious beliefs.¹⁰ Many religious denominations of various origins began to fill the spiritual void created by over seventy years of Communist rule. These organizations used more sophisticated methods of preaching and proselytizing than the established Muslim and Christian clergy in Kyrgyzstan, who struggled to gain the public's loyalty. In 1994, the leaders of the Official Muslim and Christian administrations appealed to the government to reassess the current religious law, aiming to limit the activities of the newly emerging groups identified as evangelical religious organizations.¹¹ Certain politicians viewed the growing missionary activities as a potential threat to national security. They attributed this development to liberal laws, which they believed had been imposed on Kyrgyzstan by Western international organizations.¹²

Kyrgyzstan's political leadership has incorporated religious elements as a central component in shaping national identity. Unlike other nation-building efforts, the religious factor appears to hold more significant potential for fostering a strong sense of identity.¹³ Given that most of the Kyrgyz population identifies as Muslim, the political leadership draws on religious symbols and ceremonies to establish a sense of legitimacy.¹⁴

In contrast to other Central Asian neighbors, Kyrgyzstan's political leadership has historically taken a more open and flexible stance on religious policy.¹⁵ However, in recent years, the scope of religious freedom has become more restricted, mainly targeting the so-called non-traditional branches of mainstream religions. Restrictions on non-traditional Islamic movements are mainly justified on security grounds.

Given the potential for violence among certain Islamic groups, particularly those with Salafi ideologies, some degree of government action may be seen as justifiable. However, outside observers suggest that the root causes of potential violence may not lie in religious beliefs but rather in pervasive poverty, high unemployment, corruption, and discrimination across the country's ethnically diverse regions.¹⁶

Restrictions on the activities of evangelical Christian groups and other religions aim to preserve

social cohesion and harmony.¹⁷ This issue has become increasingly significant, especially regarding burial rights for Kyrgyz citizens who have changed their faith. Local communities have explicitly refused them burial in their cemeteries. To tackle this problem, the government, which is responsible for guaranteeing citizens' rights to choose their burial places, has opted to impose restrictions on religious conversions. The recent religious legislation prohibits proselytizing intended to convert individuals from other faiths.¹⁸ This decision to restrict religious conversion has raised concerns about the state's commitment to secular principles. While maintaining social cohesion is important, limiting religious freedom as the sole approach to preserving harmony is debatable.

In 2008, Kyrgyzstan implemented new regulations for religious organizations operating within the country. Under this law, these organizations must register as religious communities with a minimum of 200 Kyrgyz nationals as members. They are subject to continuous monitoring, and their literature must undergo censorship. Additionally, their places of worship and gatherings must remain open to regular authorities' inspections.¹⁹ Activities aimed at converting new followers are restricted, and any foreign affiliations may lead to a ban on their legal activities.²⁰

Recent research conducted by both local and international scholars on Kyrgyzstan's religious landscape indicates a gradual trend towards radicalization. In contrast, some scholars challenge this interpretation, contending that the religious environment is not, in fact, radicalizing. *Montgomery*, for instance, asserts that while Islam does have a political dimension, it does not pose a threat in Kyrgyzstan. For most Kyrgyz citizens, Islam serves as a moral rather than a political framework, and years without state oversight have not resulted in the emergence of radical groups.²¹ *Nasretdinov and Esenamanova* contend that Kyrgyzstan today hosts a well-established and dynamic religious community, where various groups engage in constructive opposition and competition.²² Importantly, no religious groups within the republic

stand against the state system. Over two decades of independence have not led to the significant spread of extremist Islamic ideologies, and even the most devout Muslims in Kyrgyzstan generally do not view their religion as a basis for political beliefs.²³

The reviewed literature reveals inconsistencies between Kyrgyzstan's proclaimed secularism and its actual practices. It appears that both the state and religious institutions engage in close collaboration, deriving mutual benefits, which conflicts with the core secular principle of separating religious institutions from the state. Similar inconsistencies are noted concerning another fundamental aspect of secularism: the state's role in ensuring freedom of religious expression.

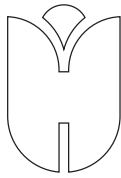
Despite the existing academic work on secularism in Kyrgyzstan, there is a lack of studies focusing on the key factors that shape the development and application of religious policies in the country. It remains unclear how Kyrgyzstan's political leadership manages to balance its secular principles amid the controversies surrounding the religious landscape. Furthermore, there is insufficient in-depth research on the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's religious policy over the years.

Analyzing the formulation and implementation of secularism is significant from an academic and practical perspective, as maintaining religious harmony is a priority for any state. The ongoing debates about secularism demonstrate that the dichotomy between secularism and re-Islamization is still an active issue in Kyrgyzstan. If the principles of secularism were clearly defined and effectively implemented, they would not be a source of controversy at the highest political levels in the country, as is currently the case.

REPORT OBJECTIVES

The report aims to analyze how secular principles are developed, implemented, and maintained within the Kyrgyz state. Given that the concept of secularism is a Western idea originating within a Christian context, the study will explore its application in Kyrgyzstan, a predominantly Muslim country.

The paper will provide a deeper understanding of how the Kyrgyz political elite responds to the rising religiosity among citizens and how they adapt to these changes. It will investigate the key factors for formulating, negotiating, and implementing secular principles in Kyrgyzstan.



ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTS

The Concepts of State Policy on Religion in Kyrgyzstan were developed and implemented by the State Commission for Religious Affairs, created in 1996 as a department of the government of Kyrgyz Republic. The commission is directly subordinated to the president of the Kyrgyz Republic.²⁴ Since forming the commission 3 concepts were developed and presented by it, in 2006, 2014, and the last version in 2021.

The concepts of state policy on religion in Kyrgyzstan serve as guiding principles that reflect the dominant discourse surrounding religion within society. Their formulation is shaped by power structures that influence state ideology. The analysis of these concepts aims to illuminate their evolution, modifications, and inherent contradictions.

These concepts represent not only the state's vision for religious policy but also a strategy for its effective regulation. Their social significance is considerable, as they provide a framework for religious behavior amid the increasing role of religion in Kyrgyzstan's culturally diverse population.

The 2006 Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere of Kyrgyzstan was developed to guide domestic religious policy, reflecting Kyrgyzstan's commitment to democracy. This document emphasized that, along with the Kyrgyz Constitution, international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and OSCE standards were integral to shaping Kyrgyzstan's approach to religious affairs.²⁵

Defining a secular state as neutral toward all religions, the concept affirmed citizens' rights to freely choose, practice, and share their beliefs, with all religious associations deemed equal under Kyrgyz law.²⁶ Notably, this first version did not mention the Hanafi school but recognized Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church as unifying forces. Religious diversity was viewed positively, with religious growth seen as a natural result of legalized non-traditional religions.²⁷

The concept emphasized non-interference in religious organizations' internal matters, under the condition that they do not contradict Kyrgyz laws. It did, however, warn of risks from regional extremism, identifying Hizb ut-Tahrir and Akramiya as fundamentalist threats and cautioning about potential divisions from certain Islamic missionary activities.²⁸

The main goals of the concept were to foster cooperation between the state and religious groups, prevent discrimination, promote interfaith dialogue, and uphold religious tolerance, interpreting religious freedom as the right to follow, share, or reject any belief, so long as constitutional order, security, and citizens' rights were respected.

The 2014 Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere of Kyrgyzstan, rooted in the secular principles of the Kyrgyz Constitution, serves as a tool for implementing Kyrgyzstan's national sustainable development strategy. Unlike the 2006 version, the Defense Council now oversees its formulation, with a focus on aligning religious regulation with national interests, such as preserving Kyrgyz culture, traditional values, state sovereignty, and unity.²⁹

This concept emphasizes the roles of Hanafi Islam and Russian Orthodoxy in promoting national unity and cultural diversity, valuing the Hanafi school for its tolerance and secular alignment. The state supports the traditional Sunni Islam associated with Hanafi jurisprudence and Maturidi beliefs due to its prevalence and inclusiveness.³⁰

New policies limit nontraditional religious practices, are seen as potentially divisive, and address the registration of religious organizations, religious education, the Hajj, proselytizing, and extremism. Measures include restricting dangerous religious organizations, controlling religious literature and media discourse, and overseeing religious institutions for public safety. The concept raises concerns about conflicts from the refusal to bury converts, framing this as a conflict source tied to public resistance to proselytizing.³¹

Religious extremism is identified as a major threat, with the inclusion of groups like Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and others. Additionally, the unresolved issue of hijabs in public institutions is noted, alongside a lack of a comprehensive strategy for secularism, religious freedom, and tolerance, with the Commission responsible for coordinating implementation.³²

While the 2006 concept did not present any binary oppositions, the 2014 version established a clear distinction between traditional religious groups—specifically Hanafi Islam and Russian Orthodoxy—and non-traditional religious organizations. The former are seen as integrative forces within Kyrgyz society, while the latter are perceived as potentially divisive. This binary framework justifies the implementation of religious policies aligned with the national interests of the Kyrgyz state, including:

- Registration of all religious organizations,
- Control over the content of religious literature, media discussions, and speeches,
- Regulation of religious institutions to ensure state and public security,
- Limitations on the activities of religious organizations deemed hazardous to citizens and the state.³³

The 2021 Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere in Kyrgyzstan establishes principles for cooperation between state institutions, religious groups, and civil society, based on the Kyrgyz Constitution and international human rights standards. Building on the 2014 concept's success in requiring registration for religious organizations, which curbed illegal groups, the 2021 concept addresses emerging concerns, including religious leaders' interference in political matters and state employees' lack of religious neutrality.³⁴

The concept concerns the growing emphasis on religious identity over civic identity, which may result in rising religious intolerance, and issues like polygamy and child marriage, partly due to some public religious figures. Legal ambiguities and insufficient monitoring hinder effective policy enforcement, and a lack of experts able to contextualize religious teachings in modern and civic terms limits efforts to foster tolerance.³⁵

State institutions face challenges in preserving secularism and human rights, while the spread of radical ideologies threatens constitutional order. The concept thus outlines the need for a 2021-2026 religious policy, stressing improved religious education by integrating secular and religious studies in schools, including a curriculum covering world religions.³⁶

The 2021 concept explicitly condemns religious discrimination, particularly regarding burial rights, and calls for constructive interreligious dialogue among all sectors. Like previous versions, it strictly prohibits religious interference in state affairs and bans religiously based political parties.³⁷

Given that the content and messaging of these concepts are shaped by considering public opinion, they can be characterized as socially regulated discourse. Analyzing all three concepts reveals that religious policy, often perceived as stable and evident, is subject to change and contingent on various factors.

The progression from the first to the latter concepts of state policy on religion in Kyrgyzstan illustrates a significant shift in focus from democratic principles and international cooperation to an emphasis on national interests, values, and

traditions. This change reflects the evolving political climate within the Kyrgyz Republic. While the initial concept emerged amid the Global War on Terror and rising religious repression in neighboring Central Asian countries, its core message advocated for the promotion of religious freedom and diversity.

Despite a tightening of religious freedoms, Kyrgyzstan remains a unique case among Central Asian states, having avoided a complete securitization of Islam. Within this relatively open political environment, the concepts do not impose strict limitations on religious expression, which is viewed as a natural and acceptable aspect of life, barring those expressions that may pose a threat to national security.

The concepts explicitly outline what constitutes appropriate religious expression, aligning it with the activities of traditional religious organizations. Simultaneously, they implicitly categorize anything outside this framework as unusual, inappropriate, or unacceptable. This classification actively shapes the religious discourse in Kyrgyzstan, rather than simply reflecting the existing religious landscape.

The categorizations and distinctions within the concepts are influenced by the political environments of their respective periods. The 2014 concept was formulated in the context of the Civil War in Syria and Iraq, alongside concerns regarding the participation of over 860 Kyrgyz citizens in that conflict.³⁸ This perceived threat from insurgents and their sympathizers prompted the state leadership to adopt a more restrictive stance toward what it termed non-traditional religious organizations. Such restrictions were justified as necessary measures for maintaining state security.

The evolution and transformation of religious policy in Kyrgyzstan are driven by changing circumstances at national, regional, and international levels. The alterations in religious policy are contingent and could have been framed and implemented in various ways.

The discourse surrounding the need for regulation of citizens' religious expressions not only introduces new labels for categorization but also justifies the establishment of institutions responsible for enforcing these policies. According to the most recent concept, the Muftiyat—Kyrgyzstan's

largest religious organization, which operates independently of the state—is tasked with preserving and promoting the Hanafi version of the Matrudi creed. The State Commission of Religious Affairs is designated to provide legal and technical assistance to the Muftiyat in this endeavor.

The discourse surrounding the regulation of religion in Kyrgyzstan effectively highlights the interplay between regional political dynamics and domestic public sentiment regarding rising religious radicalization and extremism. Convincing the audience of the necessity for such regulations was relatively straightforward, as concerns about maintaining stability have become prominent in the national consciousness.

The prioritization of traditional religious expressions reflects the increasing influence of religion within Kyrgyzstan's political framework. The state, under its political leadership, actively promotes traditional forms of Islam, particularly Hanafism, defining what constitutes acceptable religious expression. This approach underscores that no political system can exert authority solely through force; rather, it seeks to engage religiously devoted segments of the population in a cooperative manner that encourages compliance with these traditional interpretations.

The promotion of Hanafism as the sole acceptable interpretation of Islam creates a stark contrast with “non-traditional” religious expressions, which are framed negatively. The term “non-traditional” itself carries specific connotations that guide public perception and shape the narrative around acceptable religious practices. Analyzing the rhetoric used in these concepts reveals how the state seeks to persuade the public by embedding common sense assumptions and traditional values within the discourse.

Despite professing to uphold the right of Kyrgyz citizens to practice any religion, the concepts present contradictions regarding religious freedom. While the first version of the concept viewed the proliferation of diverse religious expressions as a natural outcome of social and political transformation, later versions attribute this diversity to the strategic actions of foreign-influenced religious organizations.

This ambivalence is also evident in sensitive issues such as the burial rights of citizens who convert to different faiths. Although all concepts assert the unacceptability of religious discrimination, the second version identifies the burial practices of converted individuals as a potential source of conflict without offering any solutions to address these tensions. Similarly, issues surrounding the hijab in public institutions highlight contradictions; while constitutional guarantees exist for religious expression, the concept frames this issue as unresolved.

Perhaps the most striking inconsistency lies in the declared secular nature of the Kyrgyz state. Initially portrayed as neutral and non-partisan in religious matters, later concepts explicitly favor Hanafism, providing both material and symbolic support to this tradition. This evolution illustrates a clear preference for one religious doctrine over others, contradicting the earlier commitment to secularism.

The analysis of religious policy in Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that the absence of a fixed discourse is often perceived as a norm. The dynamic nature of religious policy, which has shifted from an era of relative freedom to one of increasing restriction, reflects the complexities of the political landscape. The lack of clear definitions and consistent frameworks can be attributed to the diverse interests of various political factions—Russian, Western, and nationalist—competing for influence in Kyrgyz politics.

Furthermore, the frequent reshuffling of political leadership due to political instability has resulted in fluctuating strategies concerning religious policy. While the fundamental logic of religious governance has remained, each political regime has introduced its unique approaches. A close analysis of these concepts indicates a discernible trajectory moving from an environment characterized by freedom of religious expression toward one marked by increasing restrictions.

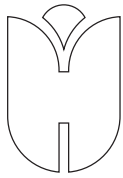
CONCLUSION

Kyrgyzstan's adoption of secularism occurred almost by default, similar to its sovereignty. All former Soviet republics, including Kyrgyzstan, declared themselves secular states, viewing sovereignty, independence, and secularity as self-evident principles at the beginning of the nineties.

The analysis of the three Concepts of State Policy in the religious sphere of the Kyrgyz Republic reveals an evolution in the country's religious policy. Initially characterized by a relative freedom of religious expression, the trajectory has shifted toward a more restrictive stance, particularly in the later versions of the concepts.

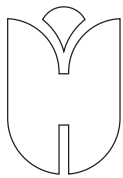
A clear binary opposition has emerged, distinguishing between traditional and non-traditional religious expressions. This delineation is influenced by both internal factors—such as the rising role of authoritarianism—and external factors, including the growing threat of religious extremism and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

Despite these restrictions, Kyrgyzstan maintains a relatively high degree of religious freedom compared to its regional counterparts, positioning it as an exception within Central Asia. This context underscores the complexity of religious governance in Kyrgyzstan, where state policies respond dynamically to both domestic and international pressures.



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