



Social Research Center
American University of Central Asia



Muslim Community in Kyrgyzstan: Social Activity at the Present Stage

Brief Overview

Bishkek 2010



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This publication is a concise version of the report compiled based on the findings of a research study that was conducted to determine the extent of social activity among the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan and to identify obstacles and constraints with regard to its social integration. This report analyzes the structure of the Muslim community and its relations with the government, civil society and international organizations. Also, the report discusses government policies in the area of religion and highlights the specific nature of activities carried out by Muslim organizations and communities in different parts of Kyrgyzstan.

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This publication is addressed to representatives of Muslim communities, non-governmental and international organizations dealing with the social activity and development of civil society, as well as to public officials, independent think-tanks and researchers interested in social integration of the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan.

Any views or opinions expressed herein by the author and research participants may be different from those supported by the SRC/AUCA, DANIDA or DCACA. Please include reference to the source when quoting from this publication.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
List of abbreviations	5
Glossary	6
1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH	7
3. RESEARCH METHODS	8
4. ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND THEIR SOCIAL ACTIVITY	8
4.1. Official Mosque	8
4.2. Islamic Education Institutions (IEIs)	10
4.3. Muslim public organizations and different jamaats	11
4.3.1. Public organizations	11
4.3.2. Jamaats (groups)	12
5. INTERACTION OF MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTAL AND NON- GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEMS	12
5.1. State authorities and Muslim organizations	12
5.1.1. State policies on Muslim communities	12
5.1.2. Interaction of government bodies with the Muslim community.	13
5.2. International organizations and Muslim communities	14
5.3. Civil sector and Muslim organizations.	14
6. SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN DIFFERENT PROVINCES OF KYRGYZSTAN	15
6.1. Southern provinces	15
6.1.1. Osh province	16
6.1.2. Jalal-Abad province	16
6.1.3. Batken province	16
6.2. Northern provinces	16
6.2.1. Issyk-Kul province.	17
6.2.2. Talas province.	17
6.2.3. Naryn province	17
6.2.4. Chui province and Bishkek	17
7. CONCLUSIONS	18
8. RECOMMENDATIONS.	19
For public authorities	19
For the Spiritual Board of Muslims and kazyyats.	19
For international organizations	19



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUCA	American University in Central Asia
CF	Charitable Foundation
CO	Charitable Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
Danida	Danish International Development Agency, Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark
DCA CA	Danish Church Aid in Central Asia
DCCA	NGO "Development and Cooperation in Central Asia"
EFCA	Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia
IAB	Internal Affairs Bodies
IAC RLP	Independent Analytical Center "Religion, Law and Politics"
IEI	Islamic Education Institution
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PA	Public Association
PF	Public Foundation
RO	Religious Organization
SARA	State Agency for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic
SBM	Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Kyrgyz Republic
SHG	Self-Help Group
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

GLOSSARY

Adat	folk custom
Hajj	pilgrimage of believers to Mecca
Halal	food products allowed for consumption by Shariah law
Hujra	traditional teaching method in a Muslim madrasa
Ihsan	a stage of faith marked by fear of God and good deeds
Jamaat	community or a group of believers united by common ideology or one idea
Kazyyat	regional department of the SBM KR
Kurban Ait	feast of sacrifice
Mahalla	community of people residing in a certain area
Muftiyat	spiritual board of believers headed by the supreme clergyman, Mufti of all Muslims in Kyrgyzstan
Orozo Ait	feast marking the end of the Muslim fast
Sadaqa Al-Fitr	religious duty of believers to donate a certain amount of money to the poor at the end of the fast
Sawab	reward from God for good deeds
Ulem	Islamic scholar
Zyakat	religious obligation to pay tax for the benefit of the poor

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Constitution, Kyrgyzstan is a secular, democratic and law-governed state. Nonetheless, most of the people in Kyrgyzstan consider themselves Muslims, and every year the influence of Islam on society is growing. Following the disbandment of the Soviet Union, the atheist ideology quickly lost its dominant position, and the ideological vacuum was filled in part by religion. Against a background of growing interest in the traditions, language and history of the people, religious revival was viewed as one of the major ways of spiritual and moral social development, and as a quest for goals in life and spirituality. The formation of a national state and dramatic changes related to this process often had a cultural and religious overtone, and promoted the ideologization of relations between the state and religious communities.

The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country, characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, rampant corruption, and falling literacy levels, has resulted in a growing distrust of believers in secular power and increased their political activity (particularly among youth). Realizing the menace of such trends, the state has attempted to suppress them by passing laws and to differentiate so-called destructive sects and traditional religious movements. This has raised many questions about the criteria for dividing religious movements and about the usage and interpretation of different terms, including the understanding of such notions as radicalism and traditionalism. Representatives of government structures often remain under the influence of authoritarian concepts of power and the role of religion in society, adhering to stereotypical understanding and interpretation of the word "secularism." As a result, the authorities are not flexible enough in the political sense, which is important for building partner relations with the Muslim community. The political activity of believers should not be confused with political radicalism, which can be avoided by involving believers in social life and creating favourable conditions for cooperation between government and religious institutions at various levels.

The experience of many Western countries demonstrates that Muslims can participate in the state's social and cultural life rather successfully, abiding by the laws of their country and possessing a high educational level and ability to adapt to secular life. In Kyrgyzstan, the Muslim community, and particularly young believers, still remains passive as regards participation in social life. The Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan will have to realize the socio-economic challenges of the contemporary world, and understand that religious stereotypes and a low level of social activity deprive them of social mobility, and prevent them from integrating into the life of a modern secular society and using their reputation and human capacity.

2. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The goal of this study was to examine the extent of social activity of the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan, its involvement in social processes in the country, and its readiness for further social integration, and to identify difficulties and obstacles in this area. Also, the major mechanisms in this area have been analyzed, and relevant proposals and recommendations have been provided to all stakeholders. The report examines government policies on religion using the example of Islam. A description of various Muslim organizations and groups has been made, and the specific nature of their social activity and interaction with government institutions, civil society and international organizations has been revealed. Specific activities of religious organizations and communities in different regions of the country are also reflected in the report.

The study is founded on the idea that the development of Islam should be orientated away from radical politicization towards social activity and integration, on the basis that improved relationships between religious organizations and government institutions, active involvement of the Muslim community in the social life of the country, and cooperation with wider civil society will help prevent the spread of religious extremism. The protest and radical potential should be turned towards social and educational activities which will benefit both the government and the religious community in Kyrgyzstan.

The study has been supported by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Kyrgyz Republic (SBM) and the State Agency for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic (SARA), and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (Danida).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers used the method of open participant observation, describing in detail and analyzing social situations from the point of view of the participants. Semi-structured interviews and unstructured informal discussions were conducted with representatives of the SBM, informal religious leaders, representatives of Muslim NGOs and Islamic education institutions, and representatives of USAID and other international organizations cooperating with the Muslim community. Respondents were selected by expert sampling based on the classification of religious leaders used by the author and leading researcher of the project, Kadyr Malikov (PhD in Political and Islamic Studies from Madrid University). According to the author, religious leaders can be divided into three groups: traditionalists, moderate reformers and modernists.

The author and other research participants do not claim ultimate objectivity and welcome critical comments on the issues raised in the study, since its main purpose is to draw attention to the problems described and to initiate discussion.

4. ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND THEIR SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Islam contains mechanisms to promote the social responsibility of each believer, including rules directing that each believer is responsible for his or her family, society and humankind as a whole. The Islamic principle of *ihسان* implies not only mandatory help of the poorer by the richer (*zyakat* – mandatory payment or tax on profits in favour of those in need), but also voluntary charity for socially important non-religious causes, for example assistance in building or repairing schools and orphanages, or cleaning and improving common land.

The Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan is not homogeneous; it consists of various social, intellectual, ideological, ethno-religious and age groups. The level and forms of their social activity depend primarily on the ideological orientation and values of the *jamaat* (group), expressed through the rule *Amr bil Ma'ruf* ("command the good") and *Nahy an al Munkar* (restraint from sin).

The author identifies 4 categories of religious organizations and communities:

- 1) Formal clergy represented by the SBM and its regional *kazyyats* and mosques;
- 2) Educational Institutions (madrasas, institutes, Departments of Theology at public universities and other religious schools and centers);
- 3) Public associations (e.g. public foundations, associations), foreign and local charitable and humanitarian organizations, i.e. various NGOs with official status under the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic whose activities are based on the values of Islam;
- 4) Informal movements, communities and their leaders which exist and operate in Kyrgyzstan without any legal status.

4.1. Official Mosque

In general, the official clergy maintains a position of neutrality and non-interference in political affairs, preserving the *status quo* on a number of issues. Rarely does the official clergy criticize the authorities, and more often than not they view the government as a defender, supporter and ally in the fight against various destructive movements or *jamaats*. If all necessary conditions for social activities are created, believers could contribute significantly to solving such issues as poverty among the public. However, some Muslim leaders reject the trend of "governmentalization" of Islam. Some informal religious leaders are concerned about the possibility of confluence of the government and

religion, which they believe could lead to tighter government control of Islam and restrict Islam. They advocate the rights of believers and oppose the formal clergy, criticizing the latter for its conformism (cooperation with secular power). It is among such informal Muslim leaders that protest potential is most obvious and a fair degree of distrust in the authorities exists.

Currently, such issues as “borders and barriers” between secularism and religion, the role of Islam in society and government policies regarding Islam are undergoing implicit ideologization. This uncertainty with respect to the borders between secularism and religion is relevant among both the official clergy and public officials. To some extent, the attraction of more young and promising people to these institutions, who have both secular and religious education from foreign universities, could solve this problem. However, the imams of mosques generally do not trust young graduates of foreign universities.

The attitude of the authorities toward the Muslim clergy is different at different levels. There is often good mutual understanding at the local and district levels, but at the central level, and in vertical relationships between levels, there tends to be mutual wariness.

“The government should seek other forms of interaction, rather than resorting to administrative and restrictive measures such as tightening of laws. A Muslim is first and foremost a citizen of Kyrgyzstan with rights and responsibilities. Kyrgyzstan has a majority Muslim population and this must be taken into account. The government should be more constructive, should collaborate more and view religion, especially Islam, as a partner. They should support us, especially in raising the spiritual level of the public. The spiritual wealth of people will not let violence and other ills of society spread.”

Advisor to the Mufti of Kyrgyzstan

The main obstacle to vigorous social activities by the Muftiyat, according to its representatives, is poor management, particularly in financial matters, and poor communication with the public. The Muftiyat has no web site or TV channel through which it could work with the people, and the lack of information breeds mistrust of the transparency of the mosque’s activities. Having no regular sources of funding, the Muftiyat experiences financial problems. All income comes from *Sadaqa Al-Fitr* (compulsory charity during fasting) and organization of the annual *hajj*. Notably, mosques have very limited possibilities to carry out charitable activities, since the traditional sources of funding allowed by the state barely cover the recurrent expenses of the SBM and salaries of the clergy and Muftiyat staff.

It should be noted that the Muftiyat cooperates quite actively with USAID, Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia and other international organizations on a number of educational projects and on HIV/AIDS prevention, and has actively participated in many international symposiums and conferences. This shows the openness of the Muftiyat. However, there are certain differences in approaching sensitive issues like drug abuse and the spread of HIV/AIDS, and these differences should be taken into account. Another problem is that religious organizations do not have the necessary skills and knowledge in the area of developing projects, managing project cycles, and submitting reports, which is an obstacle to attracting grants from international donor organizations.

Nonetheless, the SBM regularly provides charitable assistance to low-income citizens of Kyrgyzstan, distributing money, clothes and food products among them. Such assistance is provided primarily to the neediest citizens, such as pensioners, orphans, and young unemployed parents. The second priority is assistance to Islamic education institutions. According to representatives of the SBM, *Sadaqa Al-Fitr* is distributed as follows: 40-50% to the Muftiyat, 10% to regional *kazyys*, and the remaining 40-50% to mosques for distribution at their own discretion, including in the form of charitable assistance to the public. However, the money is scarce, and the lack of information about the Muftiyat’s activities reinforces the suspicion among the people that the mosque misuses funds. The author believes that transparency and accountability of the mosque would help increase the level of fees received from the public.

4.2. Islamic Education Institutions (IEIs)

The structure of the SBM officially includes seven regional *kazyys*, 1619 officially registered mosques, 45 madrasas and Koran study classes, six institutes, one university, and 26 different Islamic centers, foundations and associations.

The traditional method of teaching in Central Asian IEIs, *hujra*, delivers only narrow religious education, instilling in students a conservative attitude towards society and the government, and developing conservative religious thinking. This traditional religious education has turned out to be unable to meet the challenges of modern life and to make them fit within Islam. In fact, the traditional Islamic religious education in the country cannot "intellectually" resist radical ideologies from within Islam. Finding no convincing answers to their questions, young people begin to search outside the official mosque, and some end up swelling the ranks of radical movements. IEIs in Kyrgyzstan suffer from many problems, notably poor education standards, a distorted view of secular sciences, a narrow understanding of contemporary issues, scarcity of resources in madrasas, a lack of qualified teachers, and the absence of recognition of students' diplomas and their inability to find jobs.

Recruitment of qualified personnel in the SBM is inhibited by traditionalism and nepotism, and this creates little demand for graduates of foreign theological universities. The title of Mufti is very often obtained by inheritance, with level of education playing a minor role. Among other obstacles to improving the quality of Islamic education, experts also note that Islamic and secular education institutions are in psychological and ideological opposition to each other.

Attempts are being made to develop standards for religious schools, and particularly in the Islamic University, within the USAID and EFCA programme. However, the project has limited scope and budget. Rectors of IEIs and government agencies prefer to distance themselves from each other, particularly in matters of funding, with government agencies fearing Islamization of secular education and IEIs being afraid of secularization and dependence on the government. Many IEI representatives suggest solving this problem with the help of international donor organizations, but at the same time they believe that the authorities should help the clergy in choosing the "right" donors. IEIs fear that accepting assistance from the "wrong" donor may damage their relationship with the state, and therefore, they speak about some sort of a "filter" or "guarantor" as represented by the state. In actuality, it means that IEIs would like to have a list of donor organizations recommended for cooperation by the state.

Some experts and IEI managers believe that madrasas should be funded by wealthy individuals to achieve independence, although government assistance is also welcomed.

Similarly to mosques, IEIs also suffer from a lack of information and channels to communicate and work with the public. The media rarely addresses the problems of madrasas, and when they do they often adopt a stereotyped and distorted attitude in their coverage.

Liaison between IEIs and business structures is also very weak.

"The media often cover the activities of madrasas or Muslims inappropriately, showing them as ignorant or radicals. It would be great to intensify work in the media, and to increase the number of programmes like "Juma hutbasy" and "Karynyn sozun Kapka sal." Objective information would counteract the view that madrasas are hotbeds of extremism. Sometimes they show a mosque or our madrasas when they talk about extremists."

Head of a Muftiyat's daavat

4.3. Muslim public organizations and different jamaats

4.3.1. Public organizations

There are numerous Muslim public organizations in Kyrgyzstan. The following organizations are the most active: *Adep Bashaty*, *Mutakallim*, *Sumayya*, *Dil myurok*, *Waqf al Islami*, *Sunnat*, *Assalyam* and *Muassasah Shabab aalyami al Islami* (World Islamic Youth Foundation). Unlike the official mosque or IEs, Islamic public organizations are quite active in terms of charitable activities, providing humanitarian and social assistance to the public.

Public Foundation “Adep Bashaty” was established in 2003 by a group of graduates of Egypt’s Cairo and Al-Azhar universities, and today it is one of the most active public foundations. The management is chiefly composed of graduates of Cairo and Al-Azhar universities, and the leaders place great importance on a national component of Islam and its values. The foundation is dealing exclusively with social activities, working with both religious and secular members of society. Charitable activities include scholarships for gifted students from poor families, humanitarian assistance for older people, charity concerts, and fund-raising for secular kindergartens, schools and rural water supply systems.

Adep Bashaty has established good communication with the public, business circles, governmental organizations and official clergy, and has developed a network of branches operating in all provinces of Kyrgyzstan except for Talas and Naryn. It is funded by donations from local medium-sized businesses.

Progressive Women’s Public Association “Mutakallim” was established in 1999 by 12 female activists, and is headed by Jamal Frontbek kyzy. The key aim of the organization is to spread Islam. The NGO and its branches run programmes on women’s rights and family issues, including collaboration with UN agencies on domestic violence, family issues, and HIV/AIDS. Branches of *Mutakallim* operate in Toktogul, Balykchy, Karakol, Osh and Aravan. Since 2003 it has been working with women serving their prison sentences in the village of Stepnoe. They organize weekly classes on various educational subjects for young girls. In 2007, the organization made a significant contribution to solving the problem of allowing women to wear headscarves in passport photographs, and in 2009 the organization held several panel discussions on the right of girls to wear headscarves in schools. In 2008, together with the Red Crescent Society, *Mutakallim* organized computer and sewing courses for young girls.

Mutakallim is mainly funded by donations and grants from international organizations (for example a grant from the UNFPA), and is ready to cooperate further with government institutions and international organizations to achieve their goals.

Women’s Community Foundation “Sumayya” was established in 2004 at a congress of its members, and is headed by Turgun Davletbayeva. The purpose of the organization is charity and youth training and education. It works to advance the moral education of girls in Bishkek, and sometimes also helps older people. The foundation brings together older women of different ethnic groups and operates using its own funds (membership fees, donations, mutual support). The foundation is ready to cooperate with government agencies, while many members distrust international organizations. Currently, the organization is working on opening an elementary school in Bishkek’s twelfth micro-district with the support of the Ala-Too Development Center, and is trying to obtain a license from the Ministry of Education and Science.

Public Association “Sunnat” was established in 2002. This association has no regular funding and its activities are sporadic, although they are planning to implement activities on the prevention of drug and alcohol abuse. *Sunnat* prefers to work with local sponsors and does not trust international organizations.

Dialogue Eurasia Foundation has been operating since 2008 as a platform and a branch of the World Foundation “Dialogue Eurasia.” This foundation aims to develop international public dialogue, and their main sources of funding are local and international organizations (which were not specified by the interviewees). The foundation has held a number of events in Bishkek, Naryn and Karakol, dedicated to famous historical figures who have sought peace, such as Togolok Moldo and Kurmadzhan-Datka. The members of *Dialogue Eurasia* have a positive attitude to international assistance.

Public Foundation for Women “Ak Jooluk Ajary” was established in Bishkek in 2008 and mainly comprises of young girls. The foundation’s activities aim to call others to faith, and also to provide assistance to orphans, large families, those suffering from illness and to a local school. The members of the foundation did not mention their sources of funding. *Ak Jooluk Ajary* is ready to cooperate with government agencies and international organizations “within the limits permissible under Islam.”

Public Foundation “Yyman Bakyt” has been working in Osh since 1998, and was officially registered in 2000. The foundation was founded by its 11 members and is headed by Talantbek Almamatov. The foundation’s purpose is to spread the values of Islam through edificatory activities. It operates in three southern provinces and consists of representatives of various ethnic groups, including Russians and Tatars. 80% of its staff members are women. *Yyman Bakyt* conducts charitable activities in the form of collection and distribution of clothes to the poor, and organization of *subbotniks* (voluntary cleaning of common spaces on Saturdays). *Yyman Bakyt* is financed by donations, membership fees, and United Nations Population Fund grants, and it cooperates with universities, city and district departments of the Ministry of Education, SBM and *kazyyats*.

4.3.2. *Jamaats (groups)*

Jamaat “Daavat Tablig” (“*Tablighi daavat*”) is unique, because it acts as some sort of a rehabilitation centre for those who face difficult times, e.g. drug and alcohol addicts, persons who lost any meaning in life, etc. This group stays out of politics as its ideology, which is greatly influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism, makes the distinction between the spiritual and the secular. *Tablighi daavat* has a clear organizational structure and programme of action. They created the so-called *mashvars*, or councils at the national, province and district levels which include ordinary citizens with experience in preaching. The national council is convened every month in Bishkek and Kara-Balta, and delegates from the provinces come to participate in its work. The council discusses how to spread Islam effectively among the people. Representatives of local governments or law enforcement agencies are often invited to the meetings of this council. Daavatists urge other people to profess Islam, and rarely engage in charitable activities, except for their work with socially vulnerable groups (drug and alcohol users).

5. INTERACTION OF MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

5.1. State authorities and Muslim organizations

5.1.1. *State policies on Muslim communities*

One can distinguish three stages in the history of state policy on religious affairs in Kyrgyzstan since independence.

The first stage (1991-2000) can be described as **liberal**. During this period the state gave its citizens full freedom of conscience and religion; it acted as a neutral bystander, and took little part in religious affairs beyond registration of religious groups. Secularism was understood as the complete separation of religion and the state.

The second stage (2000-2006) can be labeled **moderately repressive**. The incursion of militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan in 2000, and a series of other events indicated an increasing threat of religious extremism to the country and the region. The state faced the challenge of fighting extremism in a country where Islam is the dominant religion, and with very limited material, technical and ideological resources. Combating extremist movements became the major focus of the state’s religious policies. However, the distinction between extremism and forms of Islam considered non-extreme was not always clear.

The third stage (2006 - 2010) is the **modern** stage. The state has asserted itself as an active actor in the regulation of religious affairs in the country. In 2006, the Government of Kyrgyzstan approved the State Policy Concept on Religious Affairs. In 2008, a new Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" was passed. A draft law on religious education has also been developed, and the relevant regulatory framework is currently being drafted. At the same time, the government is trying to standardize and classify the various Islamic organizations, educational institutions and religious facilities.

The government fears politicization of Islam, but sometimes it mistakenly identifies the political activity of Muslims with radical political Islam. Believers, similarly to those who are not religious, display varying degrees of political activity. They vote in elections and express certain political preferences. It is worth mentioning that poverty, the low socio-economic level of believers, and the narrowness and isolation of religious education from secular knowledge might, among other things, indeed lead to significant political radicalization of Islam in the country.

An example of government regulation of religion is the adoption in 2009 of the Concept of interaction between internal affairs bodies and religious denominations. The Concept was designed to raise legal awareness of the public, reduce the number of cases when civil rights and freedoms regarding religious matters are violated, and counteract religious extremism using the resources of traditional denominations.¹ However, there are no specific mechanisms for implementing this Concept.

Recent statements by the Prosecutor-General's Office about a possible ban on the movement *Daavat Tablig* and recognizing it as an extremist movement, and a Ministry of Education and Science decree banning the wearing of *hijab* in schools, were met with intense resistance from Muslim organizations. Although the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Ministry of Education withdrew their proposals, Muslim organizations and *jamaats* are afraid of possible pressure that may be exerted on Muslims in the near future. Many Muslim activists that were interviewed remarked on the need for unity and coordination of action to protect Islam and the rights of believers.

5.1.2. Interaction of government bodies with the Muslim community

The legal basis for interaction between the state and the Muslim community is the State Policy Concept on Religious Affairs approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Ref. No. 324, of 6 May 2006. This Concept elucidates the term "secular government" as "a denominationally neutral state."² The aim of this Concept is the "harmonization of relations and consolidation of society, respect for the principles governing the relationship between a secular state and religious associations, creation of conditions for the exercise of basic rights to freedom of faith ..."

The main objectives and principles of the state policy of interaction with religious organizations are the following:

- preserving and strengthening the spiritual and moral capacity of Kyrgyz society;
- promoting charitable, cultural, educational and other social activities of traditional religious organizations.³

However, there are no specific mechanisms to implement this Concept due to the poor regulatory and legal frameworks and lack of institutional sustainability. The different legislative acts regulating the activities of religious organizations and public associations supporting the values of Islam need to be analyzed and made consistent with each other and with the Concept.

1 This Concept of the Ministry of the Interior was developed in 2007-2008 by the Ninth Department of the Interior and independent experts on religion (in May 2008 this Concept was approved by the Minister of the Interior)

2 Introduction to the State Policy Concept on Religious Affairs approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Ref. No. 324, of 6 May 2006

3 Ibid.

Examples of cooperation between authorities and Muslim communities (especially visible in the south) include the leasing of plots of land to mosques, and cooperation to address social issues in local communities (HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, alcohol abuse). The clergy often cooperate successfully with government agencies to address social problems. Lately the government, represented by SARA, has been engaging actively with Muslim leaders in its work with migrant workers leaving for Russia and other countries.

5.2. International organizations and Muslim communities

Most international development organizations have so far avoided working with religious communities due to the sensitivity and specific nature of their activities. The most notable exception is, perhaps, the problem of HIV/AIDS. In other areas, the OSCE Research Center at the University of Hamburg has been working closely with Muslim leaders since 2007 on programmes of Islamic-secular dialogue, Islam and democracy, and the modernization of Islamic education. USAID works most closely with the SBM on various exchange, education and research programmes (directly or through its partners – AUCA and EFCA). However, such cooperation is constrained by mosques' mistrust of international organizations, fearing discredit to Islam and Islamic institutions. Nevertheless, in 2007-2009, the clergy's interest in international cooperation began to grow, particularly cooperation in the moral and spiritual development of society.

The Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan actively cooperates with Arab donors, typically to fund the construction of mosques and distribution of copies of the Koran among the public. This is due to the common understanding of charity in the Arab world as the donation of funds to NGOs for the construction of religious buildings (mosques or madrasas), and in this way the Arab donors hope to earn *sawab*, i.e. reward from Allah.

5.3. Civil sector and Muslim organizations

The weakness of communication and media coverage of the Muslim community's activities does not encourage close cooperation between Muslim and secular civil society organizations. In the south of the country such interaction is more active, while in the north the official mosque's credibility among NGOs is low: the perception is widespread that Islam is a conservative religion which deprives an individual of their rights and freedom of action, and inhibits development. There is also a stereotype that the mosque "only takes everything, but does not give anything back." Popular support of mosques in the north of the country is therefore very weak, and most mosques are experiencing severe economic difficulties. In remote rural areas the interaction between the Muslim communities and civil sector is virtually non-existent, despite the many social problems that need to be addressed (e.g. alcohol abuse among adolescents, or cases of suicide related to domestic and school violence and the custom of bride kidnapping).

Interaction of NGOs with the Muslim community in solving social problems is rather indiscriminate in nature. NGOs sometimes invite representatives of the clergy and believers to participate in their projects, but there are very few projects specifically aimed at the integration of Muslims in secular community life. Believers, in turn, often expect NGOs to develop projects aimed at addressing specific needs of Muslims (e.g. providing madrasas and mosques with computers and desks and building warehouses for them, water supply, constructing libraries or sports facilities attached to mosques, etc). Mosques and madrasas prefer to work only with the Muslim community; they are engaged mainly in the construction and repair of religious sites and only occasionally participate in *ashars*⁴ in local communities. For their part, NGOs know little about the internal structure of the mosques and their work, or the ideological differences between various *jamaats*.

4 Collective work and mutual assistance in rural communities to build socially important facilities, infrastructure, urban development, etc.

Unofficial religious organizations are the most active in their work with the public. We invite the clergy to cooperate, but the mosque, although is sometimes involved in our projects, remains closed to NGOs, limiting its work to its own community. Of course, they do build mosques and help people, but there's still a gap between the secular public and Muslims. I think there should be more work done with Muslim women. We probably need to tackle gender issue to increase their social activity."

Representative of NGO "Mehr-Shavkat" (Osh province, Aravan district)

Many NGOs are unwilling to cooperate with religious organizations, fearing that they may lose their donors, as they are not always sure that their donors would approve of any cooperation with the Muslim community. However, there are NGOs in Kyrgyzstan that do have practical experience of working with religious organizations. DCCA, for example, has worked directly with Muslim communities since 2005-2006 as part of their projects on social mobilization funded by Danida and other donors. During three years of work with mosques and district and province-level kazyys in southern Kyrgyzstan (Kara-Suu, Jalal-Abad) DCCA created self-help groups led by imams. Many of these groups have successfully implemented agricultural projects. According to DCCA, Islamic religious leaders have shown themselves ready to accept new working methods if these methods do not contradict their religious principles. Another example is the successful work of the NGO "Arysh" in Bishkek.

Our organization is engaged in social mobilization of the public through creation of self-help groups (SHG). This work is carried out in rural areas in various provinces of Kyrgyzstan, where the majority of the population is traditionally Muslim. In the beginning it was difficult because mosques had a very narrow religious understanding of social mobilization as material assistance (sadaqa), assistance in building mosques, or distribution of the Koran. But eventually, religious leaders saw the effectiveness of SHGs, in particular they were interested in access to credit through SHGs. Imams initiated the creation of six SHGs from among Muslims, headed by imams. They also suggested holding roundtable meetings and discussions at various levels to enhance the ideas of social mobilization and implementation of socio-economic projects, using the principles of Islam."

Director of DCCA in Bishkek

6. SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN DIFFERENT PROVINCES OF KYRGYZSTAN

The study revealed that the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan is diverse and involved in different levels of social activity. This is due to variations in geography (valleys, foothills) and the degree of influence of Uzbek and Tajik (i.e. agricultural) cultures on the religiosity of the people and their perception of Islam. The population in the south of the country is traditionally more religious, and here the level of social activity of Muslims is higher than in the north.

6.1. Southern provinces

The highest degree of Muslims' involvement in public processes occurs in province and district centers. In southern Kyrgyzstan, the Muslim community has its own specific regional and ethnic features, with Uzbek believers demonstrating greater self-organization. This is probably due to the tradition of community life in *mahallas*, with their strong leaders – *aksakal-moldo*, and the high level of devoutness of the people living there; for them Islam is part of tradition and custom - *adat*.

Despite similarities, Muslim communities have their own specificity in each province. The differences relate to the inclusion of young people in managing structures, their degree of openness, their willingness to modernize management and approaches, their levels of social activity, and their

relationships with government structures. Mosques in all provinces face financial problems and a lack of permanent sponsors; they have a weak material base and poor management.

6.1.1. Osh province

In Osh province there are many mosques. In some districts their number exceeds the number of secular schools, which government bodies interpret as evidence of the growth of religious extremism. Religious life is most active in Osh, Kara-Suu, Nookat, Uzgen and Kadamjay, where *jameh* mosques with thousands of worshippers can be found. Mosques are engaged in charitable work through the system of *mahalla*, and mobilize the people for social events. The imams, who have both secular and religious education, are usually more active.

Among education institutions, the theological department of the Osh State University is pre-eminent. Over 15 years it has graduated about three hundred specialists, who now work in various religious and non-religious organizations.

Most madrasas are privately owned and maintained by students and donations. The madrasa *Moldo-Tabyldy* in Nookat district stands out for its social activity, good economic management, attracting young and educated staff, introduction of secular subjects in the curriculum, active communication, and openness to international organizations. A southern branch of the Public Foundation *Adep Bashaty* works actively in Osh. It is engaged in charitable work and successfully attracts funding from local businessmen, who, for the past 5-6 years, have donated to religious institutions more readily. The foundations *Yyman Bakyt* and *Mutakallim* also operate in Osh.

6.1.2. Jalal-Abad province

The province-level *kazyyat* is based in the town of Jalal-Abad, so the official clergy coordinate their efforts much better when working with the public authorities here. The members of the *kazyyat* and many imams of mosques speak perfect Russian, as they had previously worked in government bodies. On Fridays, they hold sermons in the mosques relating to the ritual side of Islam. Mosques have participated in the cleaning of cemeteries and, together with *SIDE BIOM*⁵, the construction of bio-toilets. *Adep Bashaty* also works actively in this province.

6.1.3. Batken province

In Batken, which is the centre of the province, the majority of the population is Kyrgyz. Poor infrastructure, low population levels, the problem of water shortage and the presence of territorial enclaves contribute to a greater solidarity among the Batken population, and its concentration in the province centre. The relationship between the authorities and the clergy is closer because the area is small and people tend to know each other. The clergy are flexible and active, and include many young professionals with many ideas. Of the three southern provinces Batken has the highest level of involvement of Muslims and the official mosque in public social processes. Because of its proximity to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Batken has always been considered a birthplace of *ulems* (Islamic scholars), so the attitude towards religion is respectful here. The local clergy is actively involved in various international projects and public activities, with work being done to alleviate poverty and reduce the cost of various family and public events.

6.2. Northern provinces

In comparison with the southern regions, the Muslim community in the north of Kyrgyzstan (except for Bishkek and some areas of Chui province) is involved little in secular social life, and the imams are

5 The environmental movement BIOM is a public non-profit organization that brings together, on a voluntary basis, young specialists, scholars and leaders involved in addressing the environmental issues in the Kyrgyz Republic and Central Asia in general. The mission of BIOM is to involve various public groups on a broad basis to solve environmental problems and follow the idea of sustainable development.

mostly older people with outdated religious knowledge. Madrasas can be found only in larger cities (Bishkek, Tokmak, Karakol, Talas). The highest level of Muslims' social activity can be observed in Bishkek and Chui province, followed by Talas and Karakol. The least active religious communities are found in Naryn.

6.2.1. Issyk-Kul province

The Muslim community is most active in the towns of Balykchi and Karakol. Four people, aged from 35 to 70 years old, work in the province-level *kazyyat* in Karakol. All mosques in the province are short of funding, and suffer from weak management, poor communication with business structures, and staffing problems. The Public Foundation *Adep Bashaty* has a branch in Karakol whose activities are implemented in Tyup, Jety-Oguz and Ak-Suu.

6.2.2. Talas province

Despite Talas province having the most religious population of the four northern provinces, the Muslim community here is the least active in providing social assistance. The province is largely isolated from the rest of the country by poor transport and communication infrastructure. There are almost no Muslim organizations in Talas, and local mosques hold charity events only on holidays.

6.2.3. Naryn province

The Muslim community of Naryn province is very little involved in social projects and charity events. The population is sparse and not very religious. Nevertheless, since 2006-2008 the jamaat *Daavat Tabligh* has begun developing its activities in Naryn, and *Adep Bashaty* opened a branch here in the same year, starting active charity and religious education work among the believers of the province.

6.2.4. Chui province and Bishkek

Bishkek is the center of social activity of Kyrgyzstan's Muslim community. Internal migration has influenced the religious composition of the population of the capital and Chui province as a whole, with a considerable number of Muslims coming from the south of the country. This has led to the emergence of many Muslim public organizations promoting social, legal, and human rights and economic issues, and representing the interests and rights of believers. In Bishkek there are a growing number of small and medium-sized Islamic businesses involved in manufacturing and selling food products (*halal* products), and providing a wide range of services.

Different foreign foundations, commercial companies and education institutions from Turkey and the Arab states have contributed much to the social activation of Muslims in Bishkek. For example, businessmen from the Turkish Diaspora are actively involved in charitable activities, especially during the religious celebrations of *Orozo Ait* and *Kurban Ait*. The government, in turn, is attempting to introduce Islamic financing principles into the country's banking sector, and regulate *halal* production.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In general, religion and Islamic religious institutions are developing in a peaceful and progressive way in Kyrgyzstan, and the Muslim community is committed to constructive cooperation with the state. The state should use the potential of the Muslim community to implement joint social projects. Not only will this help harmonize the relations between Islam and the state, but also will solve a number of important problems, such as poverty alleviation, for example. Although the general level of social responsibility of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan remains very low, their activity has been growing with each passing year, and charitable giving by Muslims representing medium-sized businesses has also been increasing.

One of the problems impeding the participation of Islamic organizations in the social life of the state is confusion in terminology in legislative acts regulating the activities of religious and charity organizations. According to Article 161 of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, religious organizations are non-commercial. On the other hand, the activities of religious organizations are regulated not by the law on non-commercial organizations, but rather by the Law "On Freedom of Faith and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic." According to the latter, charity may be one activity of a religious organization, but it does not give it the status of a charitable organization. At the same time, the initial registration of any religious organization is done by SARA and is viewed as record registration without giving the status of a legal entity.⁶ Any religious organization may obtain the status of a charitable organization provided it complies with the requirements set out in the law on charitable activities, which is not possible even for charitable organizations in their pure form.⁷ Thus, the applicable legislation not only fails to provide favourable conditions to religious organizations in the form of benefits and simplified registration procedures, but in fact it prevents them from carrying out charitable activities.

Based on the results of interviews conducted with many religious leaders and representatives of religious communities, we may assume that many view the record registration with SARA as the status of a legal entity. As reported by many imams, as mosques do not have any independent legal status, they stay outside the social security system.

Some religious leaders mentioned during interviews that the Muslim community remains cautious regarding cooperation with international organizations. They suggested that the authorities act as a kind of "guarantor" in selection of the "right" donors by religious leaders. On the basis of the above, a conclusion can be made that the following problems exist:

- a) fear of religious leaders of selecting the "wrong" donors and thus spoiling their relations with the state;
- b) poor knowledge about the situation and inability of religious leaders to work with the donor community.

The main difficulties in improving the relationship between religion and the state are associated with enforcement of the laws enacted over the past few years (from 2006 to 2009), their lack of uniform interpretation, and the lack of mechanisms for interaction between religious and government structures. Other problems preventing the Muslim community from becoming more socially active include the financial weakness of Islamic institutions, low-skilled staff and poor management, lack of clearly developed social programmes, and ineffective communication with the public, state bodies, international organizations and the media. There is also a general mistrust between the religious and the secular parts of society.

6 Para. 1, Article 10 of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Freedom of Faith and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic," Ref. No. 282, of 31 December 2008

7 Sections 3-4, Article 9 of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Sponsorship and Charitable Activities," Ref. No. 11, of 6 November 1999; Nookatbek Idrisov, Analytical article on "Taxation of Non-for-Profits in the Kyrgyz Republic: Recommendations to the New Draft Tax Code" (available at http://src.auca.kg/images/stories/files/Policy_briefs_rus_NGO_Idrisov_1.pdf)

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

For public authorities


- The legislation regulating religious organizations engaged in charitable work, and public charities founded on Islamic values, should be simplified. These organizations are currently regulated by several legislative acts with many cross-references, creating difficulties and obstacles even just to register. Failure to attain charitable status reduces opportunities for organizations to obtain funding and limits their social activity.
- The responsible governmental bodies should explain the difference between registration in SARA records, and registration in the Ministry of Justice, to representatives of religious organizations and mosques. They should also explain the importance of obtaining the status of a legal entity in the departments of justice.
- To strengthen trust between the authorities and the Muslim community, joint activities should be organized, focusing on common interests and objectives, civic responsibility and shared values. Round tables, meetings and discussions should be held with representatives of the clergy, government agencies, business circles, and international organizations, to coordinate activities, to exchange experience and to juxtapose positions on social issues.
- The state should use the human potential and influence of religious communities to address major state tasks such as poverty and unemployment, and to work with external and internal migrants.

For the Spiritual Board of Muslims and *kazyyats*

- SBM, *kazyyats* and Muslim communities in the regions should make government bodies and society more aware of their social activities and charitable projects. Transparency of the Muslim community should be improved through more open information on the activities of the SBM, mosques and religious organizations, in particular the distribution of income from the *hajj* and other activities.
- Province-level *kazyyats*, mosques and IELs should be more active in building partnerships and direct links with local business communities and large enterprises to ensure long-term funding.
- SBM and Muslim communities should be more open to cooperation with national secular NGOs and international organizations; for example taking part in training and seminars on capacity building regarding fundraising, project management and public relations, and participating in exchange events.

For international organizations

- A series of roundtable meetings and panel discussions should be organized on various issues with the participation of Muslim community representatives, government bodies and international organizations. These events should help all parties define their positions and investigate further opportunities for cooperation.
- International organizations should be aware that some members of the Muslim community may find participation in some activities and projects unacceptable, because of ideological principles and differences in approach.

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- International organizations should increasingly support Muslim communities and IEs in the fields of information outreach and education. This will enhance the openness, modernization and democratization of Muslim communities, and improve the transparency of their activities.
 - International organizations should be more active in inviting representatives of the Muslim community to participate in their various social projects and training events. Especially important are agricultural projects and income generation activities, training on project management, and initiatives to share experiences and best practices in social activities.

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