



KYRGYZSTAN: Country dossier

March 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

| | | 1. Private Life | 2. Family Life | 3. Community Life | 4. National Life | 5. Church Life | 6. Violence | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014 |
|------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Rank | Country | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score |
| 1 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 10.6 | 94 | 92 | 92 | 92 | 90 |
| 2 | Afghanistan | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 10.0 | 93 | 89 | 88 | 81 | 78 |
| 3 | Somalia | 16.0 | 16.2 | 16.1 | 16.3 | 16.4 | 10.4 | 91 | 91 | 87 | 90 | 80 |
| 4 | Sudan | 14.2 | 14.5 | 14.3 | 15.6 | 16.0 | 12.0 | 87 | 87 | 84 | 80 | 73 |
| 5 | Pakistan | 14.4 | 13.5 | 13.8 | 15.0 | 13.1 | 16.7 | 86 | 88 | 87 | 79 | 77 |
| 6 | Eritrea | 15.2 | 14.5 | 15.8 | 16.1 | 15.2 | 9.4 | 86 | 82 | 89 | 79 | 72 |
| 7 | Libya | 15.2 | 15.3 | 14.2 | 15.7 | 15.5 | 10.4 | 86 | 78 | 79 | 76 | 71 |
| 8 | Iraq | 14.7 | 14.7 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 15.1 | 11.3 | 86 | 86 | 90 | 86 | 78 |
| 9 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.4 | 16.5 | 16.7 | 2.6 | 85 | 85 | 78 | 73 | 74 |
| 10 | Iran | 14.0 | 14.1 | 14.5 | 15.8 | 16.4 | 10.0 | 85 | 85 | 83 | 80 | 77 |
| 11 | India | 12.6 | 12.7 | 13.2 | 14.7 | 12.9 | 14.4 | 81 | 73 | 68 | 62 | 55 |
| 12 | Saudi Arabia | 14.9 | 13.7 | 14.2 | 15.5 | 16.4 | 4.1 | 79 | 76 | 76 | 77 | 78 |
| 13 | Maldives | 15.2 | 15.5 | 13.5 | 15.8 | 16.7 | 1.1 | 78 | 76 | 76 | 78 | 77 |
| 14 | Nigeria | 11.8 | 11.5 | 13.1 | 12.1 | 12.1 | 16.5 | 77 | 78 | 78 | 78 | 70 |
| 15 | Syria | 14.4 | 14.3 | 14.1 | 14.5 | 14.7 | 3.7 | 76 | 86 | 87 | 83 | 79 |
| 16 | Uzbekistan | 15.5 | 12.1 | 13.0 | 13.1 | 16.0 | 3.5 | 73 | 71 | 70 | 69 | 68 |
| 17 | Egypt | 11.3 | 12.8 | 12.2 | 11.7 | 9.5 | 12.4 | 70 | 65 | 64 | 61 | 61 |
| 18 | Vietnam | 12.4 | 8.4 | 12.7 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 7.4 | 69 | 71 | 66 | 68 | 65 |
| 19 | Turkmenistan | 15.2 | 10.3 | 12.9 | 12.8 | 15.2 | 1.9 | 68 | 67 | 66 | 63 | 62 |
| 20 | Laos | 12.9 | 8.6 | 13.6 | 13.9 | 14.9 | 3.5 | 67 | 64 | 58 | 58 | 62 |
| 21 | Jordan | 13.2 | 13.3 | 11.5 | 10.9 | 13.0 | 4.3 | 66 | 63 | 59 | 56 | 56 |
| 22 | Tajikistan | 13.3 | 11.3 | 11.8 | 11.8 | 12.9 | 4.3 | 65 | 58 | 58 | 50 | 47 |
| 23 | Malaysia | 12.0 | 14.9 | 12.8 | 12.4 | 9.3 | 3.9 | 65 | 60 | 58 | 55 | 49 |
| 24 | Myanmar | 11.6 | 11.1 | 13.2 | 10.4 | 11.0 | 7.8 | 65 | 62 | 62 | 60 | 59 |
| 25 | Nepal | 12.6 | 11.9 | 10.7 | 11.5 | 12.4 | 4.6 | 64 | | (not in WWL) | | |
| 26 | Brunei | 14.3 | 14.2 | 10.7 | 10.2 | 13.5 | 0.9 | 64 | 64 | 61 | 58 | 57 |
| 27 | Qatar | 13.4 | 12.9 | 11.7 | 11.3 | 14.1 | 0.0 | 63 | 66 | 65 | 64 | 63 |
| 28 | Kazakhstan | 12.8 | 10.0 | 10.2 | 12.2 | 13.7 | 3.7 | 63 | 56 | 55 | 51 | 49 |
| 29 | Ethiopia | 9.8 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 10.9 | 10.5 | 10.4 | 62 | 64 | 67 | 61 | 65 |
| 30 | Tunisia | 11.9 | 13.2 | 10.6 | 10.7 | 12.0 | 3.9 | 62 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 55 |
| 31 | Turkey | 12.5 | 9.7 | 9.8 | 11.7 | 9.6 | 8.7 | 62 | 57 | 55 | 52 | (not in WWL) |
| 32 | Kenya | 12.0 | 10.9 | 10.0 | 7.9 | 11.7 | 9.4 | 62 | 68 | 68 | 63 | 48 |
| 33 | Bhutan | 11.9 | 11.6 | 12.4 | 11.4 | 13.1 | 1.1 | 62 | 61 | 56 | 56 | 54 |
| 34 | Kuwait | 13.4 | 12.6 | 11.6 | 10.9 | 12.3 | 0.4 | 61 | 57 | 56 | 49 | 50 |
| 35 | Central African Republic | 9.0 | 8.1 | 10.1 | 8.9 | 8.8 | 16.1 | 61 | 58 | 59 | 67 | 67 |
| 36 | Palestinian Territories | 12.1 | 12.8 | 10.7 | 10.5 | 12.6 | 1.1 | 60 | 64 | 62 | 58 | 53 |
| 37 | Mali | 11.4 | 9.6 | 11.2 | 8.1 | 9.2 | 9.6 | 59 | 59 | 55 | 52 | 54 |
| 38 | Indonesia | 10.3 | 11.0 | 11.5 | 10.0 | 9.3 | 6.9 | 59 | 55 | 55 | 50 | 46 |
| 39 | Mexico | 8.3 | 7.6 | 12.1 | 10.7 | 9.7 | 10.4 | 59 | 57 | 56 | 55 | (not in WWL) |
| 40 | United Arab Emirates | 13.6 | 12.2 | 10.0 | 10.4 | 11.8 | 0.2 | 58 | 55 | 55 | 49 | 51 |
| 41 | Bangladesh | 10.4 | 8.8 | 11.4 | 9.6 | 7.5 | 10.0 | 58 | 63 | 57 | 51 | 46 |
| 42 | Algeria | 12.3 | 13.1 | 7.5 | 10.4 | 12.4 | 2.0 | 58 | 58 | 56 | 55 | 54 |
| 43 | China | 9.2 | 7.2 | 8.0 | 10.7 | 13.3 | 9.1 | 57 | 57 | 57 | 57 | 51 |
| 44 | Sri Lanka | 11.1 | 7.6 | 10.5 | 11.3 | 10.1 | 6.9 | 57 | 55 | (not in WWL) | 51 | 55 |
| 45 | Azerbaijan | 13.1 | 9.1 | 9.3 | 11.1 | 12.4 | 2.4 | 57 | (not in WWL) | 57 | 50 | (not in WWL) |
| 46 | Oman | 12.1 | 12.2 | 9.9 | 9.4 | 12.6 | 1.1 | 57 | 53 | 53 | 55 | 56 |
| 47 | Mauritania | 11.5 | 11.3 | 11.1 | 12.2 | 11.0 | 0.0 | 57 | 55 | (not in WWL) | 50 | 51 |
| 48 | Bahrain | 12.9 | 13.1 | 10.2 | 9.9 | 10.3 | 0.2 | 57 | 54 | 54 | (not in WWL) | 48 |
| 49 | Colombia | 7.9 | 7.6 | 11.9 | 8.6 | 8.5 | 11.9 | 56 | 53 | 55 | 55 | 56 |
| 50 | Djibouti | 12.2 | 12.2 | 10.3 | 9.9 | 11.7 | 0.0 | 56 | 57 | 58 | 60 | 46 |

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

| Rank | Country | 1. Private Life | 2. Family Life | 3. Community Life | 4. National Life | 5. Church Life | 6. Violence | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018 |
|------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------------|
| | | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score |
| 51 | Comoros | 11.7 | 11.5 | 9.1 | 9.4 | 13.9 | 0.4 | 56 |
| 52 | Kyrgyzstan | 11.7 | 9.5 | 10.0 | 8.1 | 11.6 | 2.8 | 54 |
| 53 | Tanzania | 10.1 | 10.3 | 10.1 | 9.5 | 9.0 | 3.9 | 53 |
| 54 | Russian Federation | 11.1 | 8.4 | 10.1 | 8.9 | 10.7 | 2.0 | 51 |
| 55 | Morocco | 10.4 | 11.5 | 7.6 | 8.8 | 12.0 | 0.6 | 51 |
| 56 | Cuba | 8.5 | 4.9 | 10.7 | 10.4 | 12.2 | 2.4 | 49 |
| 57 | Uganda | 10.9 | 8.7 | 9.5 | 8.7 | 4.8 | 3.9 | 46 |
| 58 | Niger | 9.9 | 9.7 | 9.0 | 7.0 | 7.1 | 2.6 | 45 |

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

Kyrgyzstan – Country dossier (March 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

| KYRGYZSTAN | | |
|------------------|-------|------------|
| World Watch List | Score | Rank |
| WWL 2018 | 54 | 52 |
| WWL 2017 | 48 | Not ranked |
| WWL 2016 | 47 | Not ranked |
| WWL 2015 | - | - |
| WWL 2014 | - | - |

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding KYRGYZSTAN

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16186907>

Recent country history

When Kyrgyzstan became an independent country in 1991 its ruling Communist regime remained in power. In March 2005 the people of Kyrgyzstan started to revolt against the regime in what became known as the “Tulip Revolution.” The result was a bloodless coup after which President Askar Akayev fled the country with his family. The subsequent democratically elected government was headed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev. These keywords “bloodless coup” and “democratic elections” need to be emphasized because this is unique in the entire region.

The new regime soon ran into the same issues that had ousted the Akayev regime, namely corruption, ineptitude, and heavy-handed rule. On top of that, Kyrgyzstan experienced an extremely weak economic situation, crime, and the growth of Islamic militancy in the Fergana Valley. In April 2010 this led to large-scale demonstrations organized by the political opposition. While the country was in uproar, violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz broke out in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad in the Fergana Valley. The clashes killed nearly 420 people, mostly Uzbeks, and another 80,000 were displaced. President Bakiyev fled with his family.

This time, a provisional government was formed, headed by Roza Otunbayeva, who became interim president, making her the first female ever to achieve such a high position in that region. The ensuing political changes turned Kyrgyzstan into the first - and so far only - parliamentary democracy in Central Asia.

Roza Otunbayeva announced that she did not intend to run for the presidential elections in November 2011. The election was won by Almazbek Atambayev, leader of the Social Democratic Party and prime minister at that time. Atambayev was sworn in as president on 1 December 2011 and Omurbek Babanov was appointed as new prime minister on the same day. The president is elected by popular vote for a single six-year term. Sooronbai Jeenbekov became Kyrgyzstan's fifth president after winning more than 54 percent of the vote in the October 2017 election to replace outgoing leader Almazbek Atambayev.

The religious landscape

Kyrgyzstan has a population of 6,125,000 according to World Christian Database (WCD) statistics. The biggest religion in the country is Islam. According to WCD 86.4% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. The influence of traditional Sufi Islam is considerable, especially in the mountainous countryside – you can see trees full of prayer flags etc. along most major roads and people visit the tombs of past Muslim leaders/saints regularly. The government of the country, however, is strictly secular.

It is reported that more than 330 Kyrgyz citizens joined the Islamic State (IS) militant group in Syria and Iraq. So the influence of radical Islam is growing as well, despite the efforts of the

regime to contain it. The second-largest “religious” group in Kyrgyzstan is that of non-religious or atheists, who account for 7.6% of the population (WCD). Representatives of this category are mainly to be found in the major cities. Rural areas tend to be more traditionally Muslim.

Christians account for 5% of the population. They are mainly to be found in the bigger cities. More than 77% of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). Russians also make up the majority of the non-traditional Christian communities – who include the communities of converts to Christianity. (It is impossible to separate these two categories.) As in many other countries in Central Asia, churches in Kyrgyzstan are experiencing the emigration of Russian, Ukrainian and German members. The biggest growth of Christianity in Kyrgyzstan has now come to a halt and numbers are declining again.

One of the major problems for Christians in Kyrgyzstan and the other countries in Central Asia is the fact that there is little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately there are but few exceptions to this. It plays into the hands of the government because a divided Church will always be weak.

Christians in Kyrgyzstan experience more freedom than those in other Central Asian countries. The laws may be restrictive, but congregations who do not manage to obtain registration can still often function as house-churches. They know their meetings may be stopped, but this does not occur too often.

The political landscape

Unlike all other countries in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has a democratically elected president and parliament, but this does not mean the country has freedom of religion. Many restrictive laws have been passed and implemented in Kyrgyzstan.

Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan’s parliament has been made up of representatives of five different political parties. A bad sign for Kyrgyzstan’s democracy, however, was the [arrest](#)⁴ on 26 February 2017 of the opposition leader Omurbek Tekebayev (belonging to the Ata-Meken [Fatherland] party) on suspicion of bribe-taking and fraud, which led to demonstrations in the country. Despite the protests, Kyrgyzstan’s Supreme Court upheld the order for his detention on 29 March 2017.

For Christians, the chaotic political situation has had a positive result: The planned new restrictions on registration were not yet implemented in 2017. Drafts for a more restrictive, new religion law were issued in 2014, the most important change being the requirement that 500 citizens need to sign registration applications, which would make registration as good as impossible for most churches, who do not have that many members.

The socio-economic landscape

Kyrgyzstan is the second-poorest country in Central Asia (after Tajikistan) - 33.7% of the population is living below the poverty line (2011 estimate). It is predominantly agricultural, but

⁴ See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-protests-tekebaev-detention/28334593.html>, last accessed 9 February 2018.

large parts are covered by mountains. It has huge potential for making use of the mountains for hydro-electric power, but damming the mountain-rivers for these purposes is a sensitive topic: The powerful neighbor, Uzbekistan, is vehemently against this as it will endanger the cotton production in that country. Uzbekistan has hinted at going to war about this.

Similar to Tajikistan, the country depends heavily on the remittances sent home by migrant workers, mainly working in Kazakhstan and Russia. According to several studies, up to more than one million Kyrgyz citizens are working abroad, making up to 50% of the country's GDP. This causes social problems on the one hand, as it is predominantly fathers and brothers working abroad. On the other hand, this is the only source of income for many families. But there are also positive effects: While they are working abroad Kyrgyz nationals are much more open to outreach by Christians ministering among guest workers.

Another consequence is that Kyrgyzstan is increasingly turning to Russia and away from the West. The country has joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EES), a cooperation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia. At the same time Kyrgyzstan has adopted legislation that requires Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that receive funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents" (the old Soviet term to describe spies). This will also affect religious organizations that receive funding from abroad.

Despite the considerable efforts to invest in the younger generation (the share of GDP spent on education reached a remarkable 5.9% in 2008), young people still lack any real perspective. Adequate employment is hard to find, and state administration posts are not available without the right connections or money. Hence, one of the major challenges for the Kyrgyz authorities is to develop economic perspectives. A change in Russian labor migration laws could, for example, have devastating repercussions for the country.

Corruption is endemic at all levels of administration and government. Kyrgyzstan is among the twenty countries in the world with the highest perceived level of corruption. Power groups within the regime have no interest in losing their ability to make money. Christians have to face the corruption issue on a daily basis – if they want to get anything done they must be prepared to pay bribes. Unregistered groups suffer most since they know that their activities are illegal and need to bribe officials to look the other way.

Thanks to the old Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Kyrgyzstan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can receive materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most of this work must be done unofficially.

Tension between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks lingers on. In June 2010 around 450 ethnic Uzbeks were killed and around 400.000 fled temporarily, about 10% even going abroad, which shows the depth of this ethnic division. Though Uzbekistan opened its borders quickly and received around 100,000 refugees for several days, relations with Uzbekistan remain strained. The ethnic issue has to be tackled one way or the other soon, since new minor conflicts continue to flare up, as it did most recently in August 2016.

A major factor that dominates social life in Kyrgyzstan is the culture that is founded on Islamic values and traditions. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have not succeeded in wiping this out. The Kyrgyz countryside is particularly affected by this. As a result, Christians in these areas - especially those with a Muslim background - not only have to cope with oppression from the government, but also from society around them. There have been various reports on burials for converts to Christianity being blocked by villagers.

Concluding remarks

Although Kyrgyzstan is one of the least difficult countries in Central Asia for Christians to live in and the pressure from the authorities is far less than in the neighboring countries, nevertheless the Church in Kyrgyzstan feels vulnerable. Both the ongoing chaotic political situation and the proposals for more restrictions makes life for Christians uncertain. The Church in Kyrgyzstan is also under pressure from the Islamic social environment, especially outside the capital Bishkek. Most of this hostility and pressure is aimed at converts to Christianity, but also at churches that are active in evangelism among Muslims. Finally, the constant emigration of Russians, Ukrainians and Germans poses serious problems for the churches in Kyrgyzstan. At present, they are not being replaced by Kyrgyz believers at the same rate that the others are leaving.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts KYRGYZISTAN

How many Christians?

| Pop 2017 | Christians | Chr% |
|-----------|------------|------|
| 6,125,000 | 309,000 | 5.0 |

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did the Christians get there?

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Central Asia and reached Kyrgyzstan. This was about the same time that Islam entered the country. After the invasion by the Mongols, Nestorian Christians continued to live in peace. This changed after the Mongol rulers converted to Islam. One of them was Timur Lenk (1336-1406) - also called Tamar Lane - and he eradicated Christianity from the region in the 14th century.

From the 16th century on, Kyrgyzstan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the two khanates. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who belonged mostly to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, various Christian denominations found their way into Kyrgyzstan.

Since the late 1980s, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the non-Kyrgyz Christians emigrated. This caused several churches to struggle for survival. But there was also a positive development: Since there was now much more religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, non-traditional Christian groups used the opportunity to reach out to the Kyrgyz. The outreach in Kyrgyzstan was much more successful than in other countries in Central Asia.

In 2005 Kyrgyzstan was the first country to replace its post-Soviet regime by a democratically elected government – unique in the entire region. Since 2009 more restrictive religious legislation has been implemented.

What church networks exist today?⁵

| Orthodox | Catholic | Protestant | Independent | Unaffiliated | Double-aff | Evangelical | Renewalist |
|----------|----------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| 240,000 | 500 | 26,100 | 45,900 | 16,000 | -20,200 | 2,800 | 47,300 |

Source: WCD, May 2017

The communities of expatriate Christians are visibly present, with several hundred from Asia, the Americas and Europe. They form less than 0.2% of the Christians in Kyrgyzstan. Most are “tentmakers” and need to minister with discretion. Several informal networks have been created focusing on Christian unity.

The historical Christian communities are still by far the largest category of Christians in Kyrgyzstan, despite large-scale emigration since the late 1980s. Examples are: Russian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians. Traditional Protestant churches include the Lutheran Church (mostly German) and the Korean Methodist Church. Altogether, this category accounts for more than 77% of all Christians in Kyrgyzstan.

The communities of converts to Christianity: Kyrgyz Christians are now a significant proportion of the nation’s total number of Christians, but numbers are hard to estimate. These Christians from a Muslim background are experiencing pressure from family, friends and community. Most of them attend non-traditional churches, many of which are home fellowships. More and more Christian leaders come from a Kyrgyz background, and an increasing number of church meetings are held in the Kyrgyz language. There is a growing interest to reach out to the Kyrgyz and other Central Asian peoples.

The non-traditional Christian communities (e.g. Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists) are all struggling with declining numbers through emigration. New denominations which entered the country after 1990 (e.g. Church of Jesus Christ) have grown with an increasing Kyrgyz

⁵ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in the Pentecostal/Charismatic/Independent Charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit.

component, but the biggest growth has now come to a halt and numbers are declining again. This category accounts for more than 22% of the Christians in Kyrgyzstan.

Religious context (selection)

| Christian | Muslim | Hindu | Buddhist | Ethno-religionist | Jewish | Bahai | Atheist & others ⁶ |
|-----------|-----------|-------|----------|-------------------|--------|-------|-------------------------------|
| 309,000 | 5,291,000 | - | 28,100 | 25,300 | 2,100 | 1,700 | 467,100 |

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to World Christian Database, 86.4% of the population are Muslim. According to the [2014 census](#), Kyrgyz form a majority (72.6%) of the total population. Other ethnic groups include Uzbeks 14.5%, Russians 6.4%, Dungan 1.1%, Uyghur 0.9%, Tajiks 0.8% and others 3.6%. Most Christians are Russian and Ukrainian. Since the 1980s there has been large-scale emigration of Russian Christians.

The [State Agency for Religious Affairs](#) (SARA), reported in May 2007 that there were 1,742 Islamic entities in the country, 46 entities of the Russian Orthodox Church, and 304 other "non-traditional" houses of worship, including 2 Russian churches of "Old Belief," 3 Catholic churches, 1 synagogue, 1 Buddhist temple, and 297 Protestant churches of varying denomination.

Notes on the current situation

- One of the biggest obstacles under the current legislation (2009) is that each congregation needs to have 200 members to be eligible for registration, and most churches do not have that many members. Since 2014 Kyrgyzstan is considering to harshen its Religion Law, and one of the consequences would be that the number of signatures would go up to 500. In 2017, these changes were still not yet implemented.
- Despite restrictions, Kyrgyzstan is still by far the least difficult country for Christian faith in the region. Most congregations can meet without problems, even if they are not officially registered. But open evangelization among Muslims is opposed – not so much by the state but by the community.
- The countryside of Kyrgyzstan is one of the areas in Central Asia where the influence of traditional Islam is a major factor, seriously affecting Christians with a Muslim background. One of the most visible problems encountered is when families need to bury a convert to Christianity.

⁶ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile – KYRGYZSTAN

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 54 / Position: 52

WWL 2017 Points: 48 / Position: not in Top 50

WWL 2016 Points: 45 / Position: not in top 50

Where persecution comes from

Most of the persecution of Christians in Kyrgyzstan comes from the Muslim environment (family, friends, community and local imams) that object to evangelism among Muslims. Another source of persecution comes from local authorities. Local administrative officials have close links to their surrounding communities and will often obstruct evangelism activities and impose restrictions on converts to Christianity. They may, for instance, refuse to allow the burial of converts from Islam to Christianity in local cemeteries.

How Christians are suffering

All Christian communities are experiencing some form of persecution. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kyrgyz population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

The government of Kyrgyzstan is the least oppressive of the five countries in Central Asia. This means that the local authorities have more influence and tend to be under influence of the local Muslim community. This has strong repercussions for converts to Christianity.

Examples

- Christian convert Kanygul Satybaldiyeva died on 13 October 2016. Mobs twice exhumed her body and local officials failed to prevent this. Her daughter only wishes to bury her mother in a graveyard with a Christian ceremony (Source: [Forum 18](#)).
- Proposed amendments to the 2009 Religion Law had their first Parliament reading in June 2017. It is therefore likely that full state censorship of all religious literature published and distributed in Kyrgyzstan or imported into the country, as well as a ban on sharing beliefs in public - particularly from door to door - could become law in the near future. (Source: [Forum 18](#)).
- In October 2016 a local believer from a village in Kyrgyzstan was severely beaten for his faith by villagers. He went to the local police station to report the incident but the police officer refused to make an official report. The Christian convert went to hospital to be treated for his injuries but the doctor on duty refused to provide any medical treatment. The Christian has since had to move and hide outside his village.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics KYRGYZSTAN

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018: Points: 54 / Position: 52

WWL 2017: Points: 48 / Position: not ranked

WWL 2016: Points: 47 / Position: not ranked

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 54 points, Kyrgyzstan shows a 6 point increase compared to WWL 2017, but remains a so-called Persecution Watch Country as it did not make the Top 50. Two factors are mainly responsible for the increase in points:

- 1) The situation has clearly become worse for Christians with a rise both in average pressure and violence. The biggest pressure is on converts from a Muslim background and is exerted by family, friends and community. There are also restrictive laws affecting all Christians such as the prohibition of working with youth under age 18 and the impossible requirement of collecting 200 signatures for a church to obtain official registration.
- 2) It was decided that expatriate Christians in the country were not to be counted as a separate category of Christianity since their communities are not involuntarily isolated. This meant they were not included in WWL analysis. This affected the final score, causing it to rise in the case of Kyrgyzstan.

Persecution engines

| Persecution engines ⁷ in Kyrgyzstan | Level of influence |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Islamic oppression | Strong |
| Religious nationalism | Not at all |
| Ethnic antagonism | Weak |
| Denominational protectionism | Not at all |
| Communist and post-Communist oppression | Not at all |
| Secular intolerance | Not at all |
| Dictatorial paranoia | Medium |
| Organized corruption and crime | Very Weak |

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Kyrgyzstan is much more traditional than many other countries in Central Asia. Pressure on Christians coming from Islamic circles is particularly aimed at Christian converts from a Muslim background. If indigenous people convert to Christianity, they will experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up for long periods by their families and beaten. Local Islamic teachers preach against them and may cause them to be expelled from their communities. The burial of converts is a major problem.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. In 2009, a new Religion law was introduced which imposed many restrictions. Pressure from the authorities was stepped up in 2015 and a new draft law on religion is under discussion. This new law would make the registration of church congregations almost impossible, as it would require them to have at least 500 church members.

Drivers of persecution

| Drivers of persecution in Kyrgyzstan | Level of influence |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Government officials at any level from local to national | Medium |
| Ethnic group leaders | Medium |
| Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national | Strong |
| Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national | Not at all |
| Violent religious groups | Very Weak |
| Ideological pressure groups | Not at all |
| Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs | Strong |
| Own (extended) family | Very Strong |
| Political parties at any level from local to national | Weak |
| Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups | Not at all |
| Organized crime cartels or networks | Very Weak |
| Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies | Not at all |

⁷ Scale for persecution engines and Drivers: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

The general Islamic environment, made up of ethnic group leaders, extended family, non-Christian religious leaders and normal citizens, particularly targets converts from Islam to Christianity for oppression.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

The government authorities and their officials oppress the Christian community.

Context

Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia where the head of state and the parliament have been elected democratically, but this does not mean that Christians and other religious minorities enjoy freedom of religion. In 2009 Kyrgyzstan introduced one of the most restrictive Religion laws in the region.

Although Kyrgyzstan does not have a dictator or government determined to stay in power at any cost, Kyrgyzstan is only minimally democratic. In December 2012, a new censorship law was introduced which affected the use of Christian literature. In March 2015 Kyrgyzstan's parliament passed the so-called "foreign agents" law, which marks all organizations that receive financial support from abroad as foreign agents.

In Kyrgyzstan, the local authorities and councils tend to have more power than in other Central Asian countries. This has a negative effect on Christians with a Muslim background since local officials often have strong relationships with the local community who are all Muslims.

Also, it is in the local councils that decisions about the burials of converts are taken. This has already resulted in a number of cases where families have had to travel all over the country to find a place to bury deceased Christian converts.

Concerning the persecution of other religious groups: Christians are not specifically targeted and the regime imposes the same restrictions on all religions. However, with a Muslim population of over 86% (according to WCD statistics), there is a natural tendency for government and society to favor Islam.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and - in line with WWL Methodology - are not treated as a separate category for WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These groups (of which the Russian Orthodox Church, ROC, is by far the largest) are not involved in evangelism among the Kyrgyz population and are not considered a danger by the

authorities. The government has no interest in provoking Russia by attacking the ROC – the events in [eastern Ukraine](#)⁸ have set an example.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

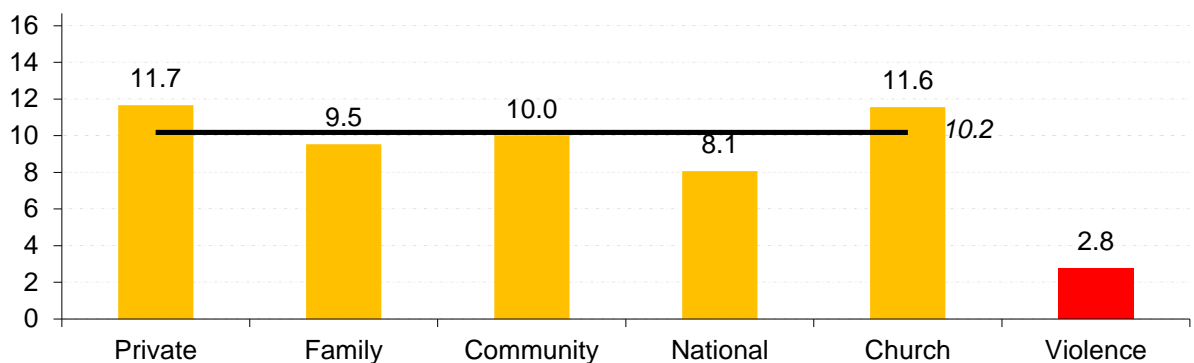
Because Kyrgyzstan's society is culturally Islamic, Christians with a Muslim background bear a large amount of persecution. They are under strong pressure from family, friends and community (including local authorities).

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These groups are persecuted mostly because of their outreach and youth activities. They suffer occasionally from raids, threats, arrests, and fines by the authorities.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Kyrgyzstan



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The Persecution pattern for Kyrgyzstan shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Kyrgyzstan is 10.2. The average pressure increased from 9.3 in WWL 2017.
- Pressure is highest in the Private sphere of Life (especially for converts) with 11.7 points and in the Church sphere with 11.6 points. This can be linked directly to the two Persecution engines that are present in Russia: *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- The score for violence rose from 1.9 in WWL 2017 to 2.8 in WWL 2018. More Christians were arrested and more converts had to go into hiding.

Private sphere:

Because the Kyrgyzstan population is traditionally Muslim (particularly in rural areas), the pressure on non-Muslims exerted by the ordinary inhabitants of villages tends to be higher than in other regions of Central Asia. Conversion to Christianity is resented by the people. It

⁸ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/crr7mlg0d21t/ukraine-crisis>, last accessed 9 February 2018.

means saying farewell to the faith and culture of the fathers. When people convert, they place themselves outside the community. It is also a question of family honor. Family, friends and community will do their utmost to make the converts recant their faith. As social pressure is high, converts will take care not to draw unwanted attention to themselves by openly praying, reading Christian materials, accessing Christian media, wearing Christian symbols or giving testimony about their new faith. Known converts and non-traditional Christian groups who are actively evangelizing will be monitored by the community. Converts have been locked up in their homes to pressurize them into recanting their faith.

Family sphere:

Since births, weddings and deaths are registered with the local authorities, converts may experience problems. Baptisms are often regarded as the final sign that one is breaking with his/her past. As burials are arranged at the local council level, this is one of the biggest problems. It is almost impossible to bury a Protestant Christian (even Slavic) at a cemetery. Converts from Islam regularly experience problems raising their children according to their new faith. Grandparents try to prevent their grandchildren from being raised according to the Christian belief. Additional pressure on raising children comes from the 2009 Religion law. When a wife in the Kyrgyz family becomes a Christian, it is common that relatives and friends of the husband would put him under pressure to divorce his wife. There have been situations where parents have denounced their children because they converted to Christianity. (However, some Kyrgyz parents will publicly denounce their children who have converted to Christianity, but later secretly re-establish relationships with them.)

Community sphere:

Converts from Islam and non-traditional Christians who are accused of evangelism are regularly monitored, threatened and harassed at the community level. Local authorities are usually made up of local Muslims and cause problems for converts. Kyrgyzstan has a long tradition of bride-stealing. This happens most frequently in the countryside and especially female Christian converts are vulnerable to this. Family members and local Muslim leaders see conversion to Christianity as treachery. That is why they try to convince converts to renounce their new faith - in most cases verbally, but sometimes with physical violence. Muslim teachers have been known to lower the grades of Christian students. For this reason many students keep their faith secret. Unregistered Christian leaders and pastors are regularly interrogated by the local police. From time to time, converts are ostracized from their community for refusing to recant their new faith.

National sphere:

There are two officially recognized religions: Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam. All other religions are basically regarded as "sects". The constitution provides for religious freedom for all citizens. Other laws and policies, however, restrict religious freedom - such as the 2009 Religion law. The government prosecutes conscientious objectors who refuse military service. Converts and non-traditional Christians have experienced problems in expressing their views in public and are referred to in a negative way in television programs. Many churches choose not to display Christian symbols because they wish to avoid unwanted attention from either the authorities or Muslims. When local authorities or community leaders have attacked or pressurized converts, they usually go unpunished.

Church sphere:

Registration is obligatory, but the biggest hurdle is that 200 signatures are currently required to obtain registration, a demand that practically no church can meet. Changes to the legislation are under parliamentary review, which would increase the number of signatures needed to 500. Article 4 of the 2009 Religion Law prohibits the involvement of children in religious organizations without their parents' consent. The production, import, export and distribution of religious materials by religious organizations is allowed, but these materials have to be approved by state experts and can only be used in places of worship and in special shops. Christians are not allowed to present their views on local radio or TV, however, they can use the Internet. A new addition to Article 12, Part 1 of the 2009 Religion Law declares: "Foreign citizens are banned from engaging in religious activity on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic without undergoing [personal] notification registration."

Violence:

In-country sources reported (in the WWL 2018 reporting period) that one girl was killed in Kyrgyzstan by her brother. One church was attacked in Tokmak. One pastor was arrested. There were no reports on Christians being sentenced to jail, kidnapped or sexually harassed. There were two reports on women being forced to marry – a common practice in Kyrgyzstan. Some 30 Christians were physically attacked – most by their families. 18 Christians had to go into hiding.

Examples:

- Christian convert Kanygul Satybaldiyeva died on 13 October 2016. Mobs twice exhumed her body and local officials failed to prevent this. Her daughter only wishes to bury her mother in a graveyard with a Christian ceremony (Source: [Forum 18](#)).
- Proposed amendments to the 2009 Religion Law had their first Parliament reading in June 2017. It is therefore likely that full state censorship of all religious literature published and distributed in Kyrgyzstan or imported into the country, as well as a ban on sharing beliefs in public - particularly from door to door - could become law in the near future. (Source: [Forum 18](#)).
- In October 2016 a local believer from a village in Kyrgyzstan was severely beaten for his faith by villagers. He went to the local police station to report the incident but the police officer refused to make an official report. The Christian convert went to hospital to be treated for his injuries but the doctor on duty refused to provide any medical treatment. The Christian has since had to move and hide outside his village.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Over the years, Christian women and girls are known to suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, home detention, forced marriage, family violence and rape, shaming, divorce, loss of possessions.

In Kyrgyzstan, the daily life of indigenous people is based on Islamic culture which puts women in an inferior position compared to men. Women are expected to show total submission to their parents and - if married - to their husbands. This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. The constant stress and fear in which women live affects their whole upbringing and marriage life.

Male:

Over the years, Christian men and boys are known to suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, arrest, interrogation, confiscation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, home detention, shaming, divorce, loss of possessions.

Men are usually the heads of their families and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution his whole family will suffer, for instance if he loses his job as a result of his faith. Church leaders are normally men and any persecution of them is likely to affect their church congregations and can instil fear.

Future outlook

[International Crisis Group](#)⁹ summarizes Kyrgyzstan's challenges as follows: "Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia's only even nominal parliamentary democracy, faces growing internal and external security challenges. Deep ethnic tensions, increased radicalization in the region, uncertainty in Afghanistan and the possibility of a chaotic political succession in Uzbekistan are all likely to have serious repercussions for its stability. The risks are exacerbated by leadership failure to address major economic and political problems, including corruption and excessive Kyrgyz nationalism. Poverty is high, social services are in decline, and the economy depends on remittances from labor migrants." Christians are likely to suffer from these upheavals and be caught in the crossfire. Converts will probably experience increasing hostility and violence. There is also a new draft legislation on religion pending which is likely to be implemented before long.

Policy considerations

No information available

⁹ International Crisis Group, Kyrgyzstan: An Uncertain Trajectory, 30 September 2015, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/kyrgyzstan-uncertain-trajectory>, last accessed 9 November 2016.

Links to in-depth reports

All in-depth reports are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

- Central Asia – The State and Islam – 2016

June 2016

This report offers a broad regional and historic overview and a brief synopsis of the situation in each of the five nations in Central Asia. It concludes with a regional summary of the effect on Christians and threats for the future.

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Kyrgyzstan available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/kyrgyzstan/>

- Kyrgyzstan Baptists repair church after arson attack

7 March 2018

An arson attack on a small Baptist church in Kyrgyzstan has not deterred the congregation from meeting.

- Kyrgyz church arson followed dispute over Christian's burial

29 January 2018

Christians in Kajisay, eastern Kyrgyzstan, have said opposition to the burial of a Protestant man in a nearby village could have led to the arson attack on their church earlier this month, despite official denials of "religious discord".

- Kyrgyzstan church set on fire

8 January 2018

A Baptist community in eastern Kyrgyzstan fears for its safety after unknown attackers set its church building on fire.

- [Kyrgyzstan: ‘We will kill you’ sprayed on church wall](#)

2 August 2017

A church in the northern Kyrgyzstan city of Tokmok had a death threat sprayed across one of its walls following a night-time robbery last week.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=kyrgyzstan> (password: freedom).

- [Kyrgyzstan: Forced marriages through kidnapping continue despite law](#)

29 November 2017

Thousands of Kyrgyz women are abducted off the streets each year and forced into marrying their attacker. The tradition of “bride kidnapping” or more literally “grab and run” (*ala kachuu*) was criminalized in 2013, but is still practiced.

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