

## Table of Contents

- [MPs say no to banning underage Islamic marriage](#)

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### **MPs say no to banning underage Islamic marriage**

Eurasianet.org (27.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1VIPm4E> - Lawmakers in Kyrgyzstan have provoked outrage in some quarters by rejecting proposals to change the criminal code that would have outlawed the religious consecration of marriage rites for minors.

The phenomenon of the very young entering into marriages in Kyrgyzstan is not unusual. The National Statistics Commission estimates that 15 percent of married women between the ages of 25 and 49 sealed their nuptials before turning 18 — 1 percent did it under the age of 15.

The changes to the law rejected by parliament on May 26 specifically related to religious marriage rites (nikah), as opposed to nuptials registered with the state. The legal age of marriage in Kyrgyzstan is 18, although that can be lowered by special dispensation.

The broader ambition of the amendments proposed by Ata-Meken party deputy Aida Salyanova were to criminalize the forcible imposition of religious marriage rites before their official registration.

“The religious consecration of marriages before registration with authorized bodies is a crude violation of human rights. It is inimical to development and substantially increases the likelihood of a woman becoming a victim of (domestic) violence,” Salyanova was cited as saying by Zanoza.kg in a report on parliament’s vote.

By way of a regional comparison, Islamic authorities in neighboring Kazakhstan have as recently as last year issued orders for mosques to desist from performing religious marriage rites without a state-issued marriage certificate, but many have reportedly flouted that edict.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, a United Nations body that monitors implementation of international conventions protecting children’s interests, has in recent years voiced concern over what it termed “the widespread phenomena of child early and forced marriages” in Kyrgyzstan. That issue is often elided with the better-publicized practice of bride-kidnapping, which flourishes despite concerted awareness campaigns.

In addition to being patently illegal, women and young girls forced into marriages or subjected to bride-kidnapping are at a high risk of committing suicide.

Kidnapping and then forcing minors into marriages is already subject to penalties of up to seven years in jail, but the provision backed by Salyanova would have tightened this proscription further.

Salyanova’s bill was supported by 44 MPs and opposed by 61.

That vote provoked an enraged reaction from blogger Daniyar Aitman, who has waged an often lonely battle against the resurgence of conservative strains in Kyrgyz society.

"It is no news that there are many pedophiles in Kyrgyzstan. The news is that there are many pedophiles in the Kyrgyzstan (political party) and in many other factions in parliament," Aitman wrote in a column for Kloop.kg. "That much became clear after yesterday's session of parliament when a majority of MPs voted down a bill that would have made it a crime to seal the nuptials of underage children."