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US Commission on International Religious Freedom alarmed by regressive amendments to the religion laws

[USCIRF](#) (31.01.2025) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) decries recent amendments to the religion law and related legislation in Kyrgyzstan. The amendments exacerbate an already burdensome registration process for religious organizations. They also impose the quasi-independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan as the governing body for all Muslims and ban the wearing of face-coverings in public, which could restrict religious garb. By signing the amendments into law, President Sadyr Japarov is expanding regulations that infringe on Kyrgyz citizens' right to freedom of religion or belief.

"The Kyrgyz government is chipping away at religious freedom and other human rights in the country," said USCIRF Chair [Stephen Schneck](#). *"These new amendments indicate a further regression in already-poor religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan, with violations of this fundamental right continuing almost entirely unchecked."*

Over the past few years, USCIRF has documented increasing religious freedom violations in Kyrgyzstan. These include mass inspections and closures or suspensions of independent Islamic institutions, raids on minority religious groups, prison sentences for those opposing official religious policies, and detentions and forced renunciations of faith of individuals from banned but peaceful religious groups.

"If enforced, these amendments will create further obstacles for the Kyrgyz people to practice their faith according to their conscience, especially independent Muslims and members of other disfavored religious groups," said USCIRF Commissioner [Vicky Hartzler](#). *"The U.S. government must not overlook the Kyrgyz government's increasing religious freedom violations."*

In its [2024 Annual Report](#), for the first time, USCIRF recommended Kyrgyzstan for inclusion on the State Department's Special Watch List for the government's ongoing and systematic violations of religious freedom. In December 2024, USCIRF released an [issue update](#) on the abuse of extremism laws in Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan. In November 2024, USCIRF discussed the Kyrgyz government's treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in an [issue update](#). In October 2023, USCIRF released a [country update](#) on the state of religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan bans islamic niqab as critics warn it could alienate some women

By [Farangis Najibullah](#)

[Radio Free Europe](#) (01.02.2025) - Kyrgyzstan has become the latest country in Muslim-majority Central Asia to ban the Islamic niqab, a long garment that covers the body, hair, and face, except the eyes.

Effective February 1, the ban imposes a fine of 20,000 som (\$230) on women who wear the niqab in public places.

Female Islamic clothing and men's beards have long been the focus of government campaigns and public debates in Central Asia, where staunchly secular governments fear the growing influence of Islam.

Kyrgyz lawmakers have said the ban is needed for security reasons -- so people's faces can be seen and individuals identified. But opponents say the ban deprives women of the freedom to choose what they want to wear.

'Part of our traditions'

The ban is part of an amendment to the Religious Sphere Act. Signed [into law](#) by President Sadyr Japarov on January 21. It does not explicitly mention the niqab, locally known as "parandzha."

But it bans "clothing that makes it impossible to identify a person in government offices and public places," a euphemism used in Central Asia to describe the niqab. Face coverings that are required as part of work or worn for medical reasons are exempt.

Lawmakers and government-backed religious figures insist the ban does not extend to the hijab, the Islamic head scarf that covers the hair and neck but leaves the face visible.

Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia that allows hijabs in schools and offices.

"There will be no restrictions on the head scarf. Our mothers and sisters have always worn head scarves as part of our traditions and religion," parliament speaker Nurlanbek Shakiev told lawmakers when he presented the bill last year.

The niqab is common in the Arab Gulf states. Although there is no tradition of wearing the niqab in Kyrgyzstan, the garment has become increasingly popular among some conservative women in recent years.

Intense debate

There has been intense public debate over the niqab in Kyrgyzstan for years. Its growing popularity prompted a state-backed campaign called Where Are We Headed? nearly a decade ago.

In 2023, lawmaker Sharapatkan Mazhitova spearheaded a new campaign against the niqab after visiting the southern region of Osh, where she said she was shocked by how many local women were donning the all-encompassing niqab.

"Every fourth woman in Osh wears the niqab, and their number is growing by the day," Mazhitova claimed during a parliament session.

Mazhitova's campaign also targeted men's beards, which are widely seen as a sign of religious conservatism. She called on the government and parliament to ban the niqab and long beards, calling them "security" threats.

The state-backed Kyrgyz Muslim Spiritual Directorate has publicly [stated](#) that "the hijab is obligatory [for Muslim women] but the niqab is not."

But critics have warned a ban will alienate and isolate women who wear the niqab.

A 38-year-old housewife who wears the niqab told RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service that the ban will complicate her life.

The mother of two, speaking on condition of anonymity, said she began wearing the niqab at the request of her husband, who works in Russia, when she got married six years ago.

"Now there is a ban, and I don't know what to do. I don't know what my husband will say when he returns home," said the woman, who lives in the southern town of Kara-Suu.

"Since I read about the ban on the Internet, I'm trying not to leave the house anymore. [When I must go out] I'm covering my face with a medical mask," she added.

In the name of security

Other Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, have banned the hijab in schools, offices, and government buildings.

Police in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have conducted raids in the streets and bazaars to round up men sporting long beards and forced them to shave off their facial hair.

The clampdowns on any outward signs of Islam are often carried out in the name of preserving security and upholding traditional values.

Authorities in Central Asia insist their national attire meets the requirements of Islamic clothing for women.

Turkmenistan has not officially banned the hijab, but it demands women wear Turkmen national clothing to work and at public events. There have been [reports](#) that several hijab-wearing women have been ordered by the authorities to remove their head scarves.

Tajikistan routinely [promotes](#) Tajik traditional clothing for women, while outlawing what it calls outfits "alien" to Tajiks, in reference to Islamic clothing.

