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## Religion as a contribution to peace or driver of conflict?

### Youth perceptions in Kyrgyzstan

**This briefing explores the role that young people's religious beliefs and perceptions of religion play in contributing to peace or driving conflict in Kyrgyzstan.**

Given that 80 per cent of the population identifies as Muslim,<sup>1</sup> religion has been seen as a unifying factor and one which can be drawn upon for peacebuilding – for example, to bridge community divides along ethnic lines. Yet in recent years and through our work with communities, Saferworld and partners encountered increasingly divisive narratives around religion. The research findings suggest a polarisation of views among young people, challenging the assumption that religion always acts as a unifying force. In fact, many young people we spoke with held quite prejudiced and intolerant views of people they perceived to have different religious beliefs. Fear of religious diversity appears to have had an influence on young people, leading to a greater dissatisfaction with the govern-

ment's promotion of religious freedom and to calls from young people to instead put controls on religion and religious institutions. This briefing concludes with implications of the research findings and provides recommendations to a range of state and non-state actors working on increasing religious tolerance among youth to contribute to peace and security in Kyrgyzstan.

This briefing is based on research conducted by Saferworld and partners Civic Union and Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) from April to May 2017 as part of a project focusing on youth engagement in peacebuilding and supported by the United States Government Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

#### INSIDE

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Polarised perceptions of the role of religion in young people's lives
- 3 Young people's perceptions of those with different religious beliefs
- 4 A 'shared religion': what does it mean?
- 5 Young people's perceptions of the state's policy on religion
- 6 Conclusions and recommendations



# Introduction

Kyrgyzstani society experiences divisions along ethnic, sub-national, and kinship lines – in both visible and hidden ways. One issue of concern which Saferworld has seen across many communities is division based on identity – including religious identity. This research was designed to better understand the role that religious identities and perceptions of religion currently play in contributing to peace or driving conflict. It aims to further inform Saferworld’s work with young people in Kyrgyzstan by providing first-hand information and contextual evidence. The findings outlined in this report will help those working with youth and on youth-related issues to promote more youth-sen-

sitive peace and security initiatives. It also aims to help young people to participate more effectively in peacebuilding decision-making processes in their communities and the wider country.

The research involved 246 young women and 160 young men between the ages of 16 and 28. Most of the respondents were high school students or recent high school graduates. Additionally, 50 young people were randomly selected for focus group discussions (FGDs), based on a three-stage cluster sample of respondents from Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces, as well as Bishkek. In-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted

with 19 representatives of various national academic institutions and state and municipal government offices that work on youth-related issues.

This briefing explores young people’s perceptions of: positive and negative functions of religion in young people’s lives; the potential of religion to promote tolerance and build peace; fear and insecurity linked to people with different religious beliefs; and state policy on youth issues. The last section concludes with implications of the findings and recommendations for increasing religious tolerance among youth in order to contribute to peace and security.



# Polarised perceptions of the role of religion in young people's lives

According to the state authorities we interviewed, religion has a large influence on the young generation. "Currently, interest in religion in the republic has significantly increased," said one official we interviewed. "Young people are more religious, [yet] they need to better understand their religion<sup>2</sup>. Today, young people experience so many problems – mainly high levels of unemployment in the country, and they do not see any prospects for the future. As a result, they fill in this gap by seeking guidance through religious knowledge"<sup>3</sup>. Our research confirmed that young people are interested in religion and that they consider it to be a guiding influence in their lives. Yet, there were stark differences in how urban and rural youth perceived religion's guiding role.

The majority of young people in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces perceived religion to be the basis of human life. For example, they believe that religion has a 'healing' quality and that it 'purifies' the soul of all bad things. As one respondent said: "With the help of religion, a human-being knows who he or she really is, and why he or she lives."<sup>4</sup> These young people perceive religion as a 'guide' for life, passed down from father to son or mother to daughter. They also see religion as having a positive influence on certain practical outcomes in their lives. One interviewee noted, "After reading the Qur'an, my business has improved [as] I began to treat people with more respect".<sup>5</sup>

Some of the young interviewees hold the view that religion leads to personal development and helps them make better life choices. The prevailing opinion among the young people we interviewed in rural areas was that religion acts as a shield, protecting them from harmful habits and illegal activities, and directing them to the 'right' path. For example, some respondents said that religious teachings keep young people from smoking, drinking alcohol, or committing crimes. Youth perceive religion as an educator, which establishes 'rules' of human behaviour according to the Qur'an. According to them,



religion gives them a cultural-spiritual foundation; religion is 'food for healthy thinking', helping people to refrain from committing crimes or acting irresponsibly.

Key informants expressed similar opinions, mentioning that religion has become a way for youth to meet their practical needs and to get

answers to some of their questions and concerns. This was confirmed by youth interviewees: youth attend Friday prayers and sermons in mosques, where they "hear about ethics, values, and the negative consequences of criminal acts from a religious point of view".<sup>6</sup> According to a secondary school teacher, young people listen attentively to religious leaders: "Imams



are more respected today by young people than teachers." A representative of the Kyrgyzstan's People Assembly (KPA) said that religious young people are more tolerant than those who are non-religious: "They respect their elders, are tolerant towards other ethnic groups...they also feel responsible for their own actions, and know how to behave in public spaces."

While such positive views were prevalent in Kyrgyzstan's provinces, young people in Bishkek were more critical of the role of religion. In particular, they cited the limitations that religion places on lifestyle choices, the way it is used as a control on society, and the vulnerability of their peers to the risk of manipulation by those who use religion to further their own interests. Some young people spoke of religion with discomfort. They saw it as a tool for families

and elders to control the behaviour of young people in their communities. Many interviewees suggested that during their childhood, they had "unpleasant" experiences with religious norms that put restrictions on their desires and freedom. In their opinion, religion restricted them by saying what was right and what was wrong. "During my school years, I made a lot of mistakes, and was told that I would be punished in my after-life; so I was frequently intimidated by religion", said one FGD participant.<sup>7</sup>

Some young interviewees were also concerned about how religion is used as a tool through which young people are manipulated – not only by family and elders, but also by outsiders and through social media. "Social networks such as Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter have a negative impact

on youth. Through these networks, youth get unreliable and incorrect information concerning religion. Interpretation of religion varies significantly from site to site".<sup>8</sup>

According to the majority of respondents (56 per cent), Kyrgyzstan should continue to develop as a secular state. These young interviewees explained that the country should be free, that people should think independently and be tolerant. However, 33 per cent of respondents said that they wanted to live in a religious or Islamic state – this would include observing traditional practices concerning dress, appearance, and rituals. "I hope in the future, when Azan (a call for prayer) is recited, everyone leaves work and prays together", said one FGD participant.<sup>9</sup>





# Young people's perceptions of those with different religious beliefs

Many of the young people we interviewed were somewhat fearful of religion in general and displayed quite prejudiced views about people who they perceived to have different religious beliefs and values than their own. Many of these prejudices were based on stereotypes or outward expressions of religion (through, for example, clothing, facial hair, and headwear). The latter appears to be a significant factor in how opinions about other people are formed and is linked to the portrayal and association of outward expressions of religion (beards and hijabs) with violent extremism in the mass media and in public discourse. Often assumptions are made about people's morality, faith, and customs based on their appearance – for example, people with beards are thought to abstain from drinking alcohol. When these assumptions are found to be wrong, mistrust and suspicion can take over because of the perception of someone not conforming to a stereotype.

There is another debate taking place among young people of various ethnic backgrounds, focusing on religious people and their perceived association with radicalism as equating to being violent. For instance, one respondent noted a prevailing stereotype that, "If you put on a veil, then you are perceived as a terrorist".<sup>10</sup> During our FGDs, participants also acknowledged that some people associate 'bearded believers' with radicals because of how the media portrays them. "The mass media report on radicals and terrorists. People have formed perceptions, so that if they see a believer with a beard, or someone rigorously practicing religion, they think he is a terrorist."<sup>11</sup> This perception has become so strong that some people who live together on the same street are afraid of their neighbours who they see as 'too religious'. Some parents even forbid their children to play with their neighbours' children. One respondent remarked, "Recently I went to my village. One family became very religious, with the [woman] dressed in a hijab and her face covered up. I do not want Kyrgyzstan to turn into Afghani-



stan."<sup>12</sup> Representatives from Kaziya<sup>13</sup> noted that now people, "including youth, are afraid of religion (particularly Islam), associating it with radicalism, extremism, and terrorism."<sup>14</sup>

One of the other issues that causes disputes in communities is religious proselytising. Efforts by Christian missionaries to convert people is not welcomed by the majority of young people interviewed; it is seen as harmful to community cohesion and a threat to their own religious identity. For example, they see those who proselytise as 'buying' converts through providing financial and material assistance to poor and vulnerable community members. Moreover, it causes practical problems for families, such as with burial rights. For example, in 2016, several conflicts broke out when the local Muslim community prohibited burying people who converted from Islam to other religions. Accord-

ing to a respondent, one recent example in Ala-Buka involved a person being buried twice because a Muslim cemetery did not accept a non-Muslim. "A similar case occurred in Olgur, Osh city: a person was not allowed to be buried in the Muslim cemetery because he changed his religion", said a representative of the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA). He believed that proselytisation is not a reason for these conflicts in itself, but merely serves to show the level of intolerance when it comes to changes around traditional religious identity. People do not fully respect freedom of religion, and conversion is considered an offence which cannot be tolerated. Attitudes toward those who converted from Islam to another religion tend to be prejudiced, because converts are perceived to be unreliable and a "threat to Muslim customs and norms".



# A 'shared religion': what does it mean?

Young people's perceptions of their own identities – as well as how they see themselves in relation to others in their community – can help promote or impede tolerance and respect for diversity. According to our research findings, some young people feel that religion plays an important role in the formation of their identities. For example, some respondents from Batken noted the power of shared religion as a unifying factor, suggesting that peacebuilding activities can be developed around religion based on the call for peace in Islamic teachings. However, due to the complex formation of young Kyrgyzstani identities, which include factors such as ethnicity, religion, regional affiliation, clan identity, urban and rural divides, social class and family, this cannot always be used as a common basis for understanding. Other young people pointed out a different hierarchy of identities – for example, "first Kyrgyz, and then Muslim" –

showing that even a shared religion could not always be relied upon for building bridges between communities divided along ethnic or other differentiating lines. However, as young people negotiate their multiple identities they may develop skills for resolving conflict and building peace.

The civil society representatives we interviewed also believed that there are two ways in which youth experience religiosity. The first involves young people who practice their religions while at the same time identifying as part of a secular society. This group tends to follow both secular and religious rules and norms. In the second group, a strict adherence to religion means that Islamic norms and rules take precedence over secular ones. This group of young people does not recognise the secular part of their environment and tend to isolate themselves, creating a 'state within the state' – leading to hostility and marginali-

sation and further deepening social divisions.

This indicates that even though a shared religion might help bridge some social divides between those who identify first with their religion and those who identify along other lines, it does not help in all cases due to the multiple layers of identity-related perceptions of young people. The disputes over what is a 'right' and 'wrong' way of practicing Islam also contributes to the complexity of the issue, including different views of religious practice such as appearance and dress. Peacebuilders need to further explore alternative ways of breaking down barriers between strict religious adherents and other groups, supporting the participation of all groups and facilitating dialogue to increase tolerance and respect for diversity. This might include a focus on the role of religion within secular society or on how Islamic and other religious beliefs can fit within a democratic society and its institutions.





# Young people's perceptions of the state's policy on religion



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**The Kyrgyz Republic is a secular state; as such, there is no formal recognition of any official religion. Currently, the Law on Freedom of Religions and about Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic and the State Concept of State Policy in Religious Affairs for 2016-2020 in the Kyrgyz Republic lay out the laws and regulations around religious issues in the country. According to these laws, every citizen has the freedom to be a part of any religion he or she chooses. The government's liberal policy, along with the growing public need for spirituality and interest in religion, have led to the emergence of new religious**

**movements, organisations and schools, along with local traditional ones, which have created the basis for various interpretations of religion.**

To address these growing tensions and to complement existing laws, the State Confessional Council was established under the SCRA. The Council operates with the participation of Muslim, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Jewish communities to promote ideas of religious tolerance between and among various communities. Another pilot initiative has introduced a new subject to select schools focusing on the history and culture of religions. One repre-

sentative of a youth-led NGO believes that this subject "will properly educate young people on how to accept others...this will help to avoid disagreement or clashes. If you identify as a Kyrgyz[stani] citizen, you have to know all this. Next year, this subject will be introduced in 56 schools"<sup>15</sup>.

Religious organisations and state authorities at the provincial and local levels understand the role of the government, are aware of its initiatives to promote religious tolerance, and have positive opinions of their efforts. According to our research many young people are not aware of the government's efforts to promote





religious tolerance and believe that the government is not doing enough. A smaller number of those interviewed held generally positive views on these state initiatives. Fifty-eight per cent of respondents said they supported initiatives to introduce classroom material that covers the history and culture of world religions. They believed that such a subject would 'fill the gap' by providing reliable information about different religions and create more interfaith relationships among young people. At the same time, they believed that these measures did not go far enough. Many believed there is a need for an overarching identity (a national identity around being Kyrgyzstani) that unites all young people.

However, those with strong secular views believe that the government's initiatives to promote freedom of religion have been counter-productive thus far, and that there should be greater control of religious institutions and movements by the state authorities. Many are concerned that religious literature is published and distributed without state control. One respondent said, "There is a need for strict control and discipline from the Muftiyat and other stakeholders in order not to distribute books without approval from the Spiritual Religious Department".<sup>16</sup>

Some young people with more secular views also expressed negative attitudes towards the

idea of the introduction of religious traditions (such as Friday prayers, or khutba) to the parliament, because they see this as undermining the foundations of the secular state. As one respondent put it: "Nothing is done to solve problems in the field of religion. On the contrary, civil servants [members of the parliament] are susceptible to religious influence. For example, they wanted to introduce Friday prayers, despite living in a secular state".<sup>17</sup> Another research participant supported this view: "Even though the government declared itself as secular, there are some issues that need clarity. For example, the issue of religious clothes at schools and in work places"<sup>18</sup>.



# Conclusions and recommendations

**Saferworld's earlier research<sup>19</sup> on and work in Kyrgyzstan has revealed that young people often feel excluded from political, economic, and cultural decision-making and peacebuilding processes, receive inadequate security provision, and experience barriers in accessing quality public services. Although young people are often seen as 'troublemakers' by the public, Saferworld believes that – if provided the right opportunities and their skills and capacities are strengthened – young people have great potential to influence change by con-**

**tributing to improved religious tolerance and inter-faith relations in their communities, and sub-national and national peace and security.**

This study, which explores young people's views and perceptions of religion in their lives and as part of their identities, has shown that there is significant work to be done to help them promote acceptance and understanding between youth from different backgrounds and faiths. Even amongst those young people who identify as Muslim, it cannot be assumed

that religion will always play a unifying role for peacebuilding efforts. Positive messages about acceptance and peace, which are based in religion, can be harnessed to support work across other social divides (while at the same time taking care not to exclude people with other religious identities). Moreover, there is a pressing need to promote informed debate and dialogue on the role of religion in a democratic state to help overcome the perception that only through greater state control can religion be practiced peacefully.







The recommendations below, based on the research findings, should help a range of stakeholders working with youth on peace and security issues.

Government, international and national NGOs, civil society networks and movements, and the media should focus on the following:

- Provide young people of different ethnic, sub-national, and religious backgrounds with

opportunities to participate actively in public, social, economic, and cultural activities. Participation will help them to overcome divides and to engage them in building more tolerant, respectful, cohesive, resilient, and safer communities. It is essential for all relevant actors to challenge harmful stereotypes and fears about people who have different views and to ensure that people with different backgrounds or identities continue to interact with each other.

- Ensure that policies and programmes are conflict sensitive at all stages (from assessment and planning to design and implementation and to monitoring and measuring), so that interventions targeting youth in Kyrgyzstan carefully consider different aspects related to youth concerns and their perceptions of identity. In particular, it is important to ensure sensitivity across all communications to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and inciting fear and hatred.



- Increase collaboration and coordination between all relevant actors, including state and non-state actors working with youth. The resulting work should be shared with the public in a non-inflammatory way through both social and mainstream media. If local governments, authorities, civil society, businesses, and the media promote a greater respect for diversity, this will go a long way to challenging negative stereotypes that lead to intolerant attitudes, divide communities and drive conflict.

- Support collaboration between different religious groups to jointly address shared concerns, such as burials of those who have converted to different religions, and improve trust and respect between members of different religions as well as between 'secular' and 'religious' sections of society.

- Raise awareness of the values of different religions and the central tenets of democracy among youth in Kyrgyzstan. Other topics to

cover could include the history of peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds, tolerance and respect for diversity in society, and respect for religious freedom and peaceful co-existence. As part of these efforts, the media should be actively engaged to ensure reporting that takes account of (and seeks to address rather than exacerbate) tensions and differences – in particular of people of different religious backgrounds.



## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We

believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

Saferworld has been working in Kyrgyzstan since 2010, supporting community policing and community security to enable communities, civil society, and local authorities (including police) to jointly respond more effectively to conflict and insecurity issues. We work to empower young people to voice their security

concerns and needs, to learn from each other's experiences, and to become leaders. Central to our work is helping young people from different backgrounds to become active members of their communities, to jointly identify and prioritise issues of concern to young people, and to work together, with to resolve them in order to help bridge divisions in society.

## Notes

1 As the population of Kyrgyzstan is predominantly Muslim, most of the youth who were interviewed consider themselves Muslim; therefore, the attitudes and views considered in this research concern mainly Islam. Further research is needed to understand perceptions of other religions in the country.

2 Whilst religiosity is on the rise, especially amongst youth, many have limited knowledge of the basic principles and practices. This can result in young people judging others' beliefs and actions as right or wrong, which leads to intolerance and reinforces social divisions.

3 KII, Representative of the State Committee on Religious Affairs, Osh Province, May 2017.

4 FGD with youth, female participant, Osh, May 2017.

5 FGD with youth, female participant, Jalal-Abad, May 2017

6 Ibid

7 FGD with youth, male participant, Bishkek, May 2017.

8 Ibid.

9 FDG with youth, female participant, Osh, May 2017.

10 FGD with youth, male participant, Bishkek, May 2017.

11 FGD with youth, male participant, Bishkek, May 2017.

12 FGD with youth, female participant, Osh April 2017.

13 A Kaziya is a representative of Muftiyat (an administrative territorial entity under the supervision of a mufti – an Islamic scholar who interprets and expounds Islamic law) at the provincial level, and under the supervision of a Kazy (which originates from Qadi, the magistrate or judge of the Shari'a court).

14 KII with Kaziya Representative, Osh, May 2017.

15 KII with Institute for Youth Development Representative, Bishkek, May 2017.

16 FGD with youth, Batken, May 2017.

17 FGD with youth, male participant, Bishkek April 2017.

18 FGD with youth, female participant, Jalal-Abad, April 2017.

19 Saferworld (2012), 'Nobody has ever asked about young people's opinions: young people's perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future in Central Asia', March (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/640-nobody-has-ever-asked-about-young-peoples-opinions>).