

Evangelical groups protest religion law in Kyrgyz Republic

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(ABP) — Evangelical leaders in the Kyrgyz Republic are protesting a new religion law they say significantly restricts religious freedom in the officially secular country.

A new law titled "On the Freedom of Worship and Religious Organizations" took effect Jan. 16. The measure's stated intent is to address concerns about terrorism and other illegal activity by groups posing as religious organizations.

The former Soviet republic's constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government has largely avoided meddling in religious affairs since the Central Asian country — formerly called Kyrgyzstan — gained independence in 1991. In recent years, however, officials have begun to restrict radical Islamic groups considered to be threats to security.

Evangelical leaders, however, say the law ostensibly aimed at curbing religious extremism goes too far in restricting religious freedom.

[\(Map by Philippe Rekacewicz, Emmanuelle Bournay, UNEP/GRID-Arendal\).](#)

The Evangelical-Christian Churches of the Kyrgyz Republic released an open letter March 15 voicing concern about the new law. The coalition, which includes the Kyrgyz Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, said its members repeatedly offered suggestions and proposals to government officials that were completely ignored in the new law.

The evangelical groups said the law infringes on religious liberty and contradicts the Kyrgyz Constitution. The leaders highlighted several concerns with the legislation. They include:

— *Its definition of rights and duties of local government to include ensuring "spiritual safety," a concept that evangelical leaders said is "too indistinct" and could open the door to excesses by local officials.*

— *Its definition of a "sect" as a religious movement that separates from a confession for "reasons of dogma" in a way that "contradicts the interests of society." Evangelical leaders said the term "sect" has no place in a secular state and puts the government in the position to differentiate between legitimate and unacceptable doctrines.*

— *Its ban on the involvement of children in religious organizations. Evangelical leaders said that is the same tactic used during Soviet times to forbid children of believing parents from attending church services, robbing children of religious freedom and denying parents the right to bring up their children according to their beliefs.*

— *Its ban on "persistent activities directed at the conversion of believers from other faiths (proselytism)." Evangelical leaders said that flatly contradicts the Kyrgyz Constitution, which says the government will establish no state religion and that individual liberties include the right to change one's religion or belief.*

— *Its increase from 10 to 200 the number of members that a religious body must have before it can be officially registered. Evangelical leaders said that, in the past, it was difficult even to ask 10 people to publicly state their creed, because it made them subject to difficulties. Increasing that figure, they said will make it impossible for many Kyrgyz religious organizations to register and operate legally.*

It is current form, evangelical leaders said the law will "cause tension and conflict in local situations," put the republic behind other nations in church-state relations and make it harder for religious organizations to gain or retain registration.

Bordering China in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz Republic is about the size of South Dakota. About 80 percent of its 5.3 million citizens are Muslim. Estimates of the Russian Orthodox population range from 11 percent to as low as 8 percent. A small Protestant population includes 48 registered Baptist churches, [according](#) to the United States State Department.

Islam is practiced widely in both urban and rural areas around the country, while Orthodoxy is predominantly practiced in Kyrgyz cities with larger ethnic Russian populations. Tensions exist in some rural areas between conservative Muslims and foreign Christian missionaries, as well as members of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups who convert to another religion.

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