

Kyrgyz Prisons Becoming 'Universities of Religious Extremism'

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Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA — Just as tsarist exile served as the training ground for many Marxist-Leninists and as the Soviet camps became schools for the dissident movement, prisons in post-Soviet states now form "universities of religious extremism," where the increasing number of people convicted on such charges are then able to recruit others.

In an [article](#) published over the weekend entitled "The Prison as the High School of Religious Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," Kalysbek Zhaparov provides details on this phenomenon, one in which not only radical Muslims but Christian Protestants sentenced to jail continue their efforts at proselytism and recruitment behind bars.

And he argues that unless the penal authorities there take steps to prevent religious "extremists" from using the prisons and camps in this way, the result, on the basis of earlier experience, could be a threat to the future stability of that Central Asian country and perhaps

its neighbors as well.

"Instead of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and others," Zhaparov writes, the courts in independent Kyrgyzstan are sending to prison religious extremists of all kinds — from Wahhabis and Hizbut-Tahrirists to Ismailis, Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses."

While the treatment of members of Protestant groups that the Kyrgyz powers that be have defined as extremist has attracted more attention, Zhaparov suggests, the way in which Islamist groups, whose members have been sentenced for extremism, are using prisons there as recruitment centers and training groups may be more important.

In Kyrgyzstan at the present time, there are 1,300 registered mosques and at least another 3,000 unregistered ones, nearly as many as the total number of middle schools in the country. Many of the mullahs trained domestically lack knowledge of the canons of Islam, and they are seldom in a good position to respond to challenges posed by those who have studied abroad.

The latter, of course, often import "extremist" doctrines, and just as "the entire world is concerned with the problem of religious extremism," so too the powers that be in Kyrgyzstan are nervous about the activities of "the so-called 'missionaries'" from abroad and routinely turn the law enforcement bodies on them.

But that approach is not working out as intended, Zhaparov says. Last week, Kapar Mukeyev, the head of the country's penal system, not only acknowledged that "the museum of the central penal administration had been converted into a prayer house" but indicated that the institutions that he is in charge of are spreading religious radicalism, not restraining it.

At a press conference in Bishkek, Mukeyev said he "had tried to reduce the number of mosques and preachers in the prisons to a reasonable level but had not been able to do so!" Why? Because the religious leaders inside the prisons said they would "organize disorders among the prisoners" if that were to happen. And so he backed down.

Is it any surprise, Zhaparov continues, that Kyrgyzstan is gaining the reputation of being "a paradise for criminals, terrorists and extremists?" After all, the journalist points out, "religious extremists have penetrated not only the law-enforcement system but the penitentiary system as well."

What kind of "punishment" for extremists is possible, he asks, if those who have inspired their extremism continue to operate in prisons and jails and "so successfully interfere in the work of such a closed system" as Kyrgyzstan's penal institutions? Or if those convicted are thus in a position to dictate to their jailers the conditions of their incarceration?

Zhaparov concludes by asking with obvious bitterness and concern, "What kind of future awaits Kyrgyzstan if the powers that be not only don't control the capital and distant villages but don't even control criminals, recidivists, rapists and murderers who are sitting behind bars" after being convicted of their crimes?

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