

Changing Role of Islam in post-Communist Central Asia: the Case of Kyrgyzstan

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Paper abstract submitted to the first annual international conference “*Twenty Years of Central Asian Independence: Shared Past, Separate Paths?*” at the AUCA, Bishkek, 14-16 October 2011.

Religion was heavily suppressed in Central Asia during the communism. The communist *nomenklatura* saw religion as a challenge both to political authority and the state ideology. As a result, all religious denominations became the targets of the state and were to a great extent diminished from the public sphere. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave a new momentum for religious revival in post-communist societies. The new regimes changed a legal position of the churches allowing a multitude of denominations to compete for followers thus creating religious pluralism. The number of religious institutions and religious observance has substantially increased in Central Asian republics over the last two decades. However, can these developments suggest the resurgence of *religiosity* in the country, following the fall of Communism? They provide us with little empirical data on the *qualitative* aspect of the meaning and the role of Islam in the society. Can we assume that the society has become more religious or Islamic?

The goal of this paper is to examine the changing role of Islam in Central Asia in the case of Kyrgyzstan. It questions the extent of social significance of Islam in Central Asia societies. The paper argues that the societies have not necessarily become more religious or Islamic as a consequence of Islamic resurgence and that the impact of Soviet atheism still prevails to a larger degree. The paper is based on the findings of the field research conducted during 2010-2011 in Bishkek and Osh.