

Kyrgyz Republic 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

During the year, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic passed the Law on Foreign Representatives hampering the ability of civil society organizations to operate freely, detained journalists arbitrarily, and targeted independent media organizations for prosecution and liquidation.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, and censorship; crimes, violence, or threats of violence motivated by antisemitism; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; violence or threats against labor activists or union members; and the significant presence of the worst forms of child labor.

While the government took steps to investigate and prosecute or punish some officials known to have committed human rights abuses, official impunity remained a problem.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media; however, the government occasionally limited this right. Self-censorship increased during the year, and pressure from editors and political figures reportedly led to biased reporting in some cases. Media organizations reported online harassment and hate speech directed towards independent media outlets continued to increase.

During the year civil society groups and activists reported an increase in the application of the charge of “inciting mass riots and calls for violent

overthrow of government.” Observers criticized the use of these criminal charges as illegal and politically motivated and called for the release of all who were detained or imprisoned under various charges.

Throughout the year, the government arrested several critics, who were subsequently convicted and fined or sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In October, a Bishkek district court upheld the guilty verdict of Askat Jetigen, a poet, composer, and political activist, who was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of calling for the violent seizure of power. Authorities arrested Jetigen after he posted an online video in March criticizing Ministry of Culture reforms.

The government generally allowed access to the internet, including most news sites and social media applications. The Law on the Protection from False Information, however, empowered the Ministry of Culture to issue content-removal demands and subsequently order the blocking of websites and platforms that refused to comply.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Journalists reported harassment by police and intimidation and pressure by local and national authorities to avoid reporting on sensitive topics, including ethnic conflicts and nationalism, corruption, border violence with Tajikistan, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and political figures.

Journalists and human rights activists assessed that the new Law on Foreign

Representatives, which included nonprofit media outlets among those required to register as “foreign representatives” if they received donor funding or external financial assistance, gave the government broad discretionary powers to further harass or control independent media and civil society organizations.

In January, the government launched a crackdown on independent reporting by carrying out raids on media outlets and detaining journalists. On January 15, the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) raided the office of online news outlet *24.kg*, confiscated their equipment, detained the outlet’s general director and chief editors, and blocked employees’ access to their office. The website’s general director, Asel Otorbaeva, later resigned and handed over control to a former government press secretary. On January 16, the Ministry of Interior raided the office of YouTube-based investigative outlet *Temirov Live* and arrested 11 former and current employees on charges of calling for disobedience and mass riots. On October 10, seven employees were acquitted and four were convicted, with two receiving probation and two others receiving prison sentences of five and six years.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Journalists reported practicing self-censorship to avoid reprisals for their

reporting. Several admitted to preemptively liquidating or reregistering their independent media outlets as limited liability companies to avoid the registration and reporting requirements of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under the Foreign Representatives Law. Journalists and NGO leaders alleged some news outlets instructed their reporters not to report critically on certain politicians or government officials. They also reported some news outlets received requests from government offices to report in a particular way or to ignore specific news stories.

The government continued its tight controls over news content on state television. NGO leaders and media sources reported state-owned broadcasters remained under pressure to transmit stories promoting government policies and initiatives and develop narratives critical of NGOs, opposition figures, and civil society activists.

In August, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling to liquidate the investigative news outlet Kloop Media Public Foundation on charges of disseminating information aimed at discrediting representatives of state and municipal bodies. The Supreme Court waited a month to communicate its decision, bolstering concerns about transparency and freedom of the press in the country.

NGO and media observers frequently reported being contacted and threatened by suspected members of organized crime groups, and alleged these individuals often acted on behalf of the government. Media members

also reported other nonstate actors such as politically connected and wealthy individuals harassed them for reporting on those individuals' alleged corruption or wrongdoing. Journalists reported an increase in online harassment and attempts to hack into their private online accounts.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join trade unions, except domestics. The government effectively enforced these rights, but unions were subject to political influence and pressure to conform to the government's political agenda. The law provided for the right of unions to organize and bargain collectively and conduct their activities without interference. Workers could strike, but the requirement to receive formal approval made striking difficult and complicated. The law did not prohibit retaliation against striking workers. Penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Many unions reportedly operated as quasi-official institutions that took state interests into consideration rather than representing workers' interests exclusively. The Federation of Trade Unions of Kyrgyzstan (FTU) remained the only umbrella trade union in the country. Most unions were affiliated with the FTU, although the government did not require such

affiliation. Labor rights advocates reported the existence of several smaller unaffiliated unions.

In December 2023, IndustriALL Global Union reported that trade union leader Eldar Tadjibaev, chair of the Mining and Metallurgy Trade Union of Kyrgyzstan, was arrested together with several other union leaders. They asserted these arrests were largely politically motivated so the government could confiscate land owned by the unions. The FTU held elections in February and labor activists argued the government influenced the election process so individuals aligned with the government were put in power.

Union leaders generally cooperated with the government. There were reports of government interference with union activities. International observers judged that unions represented the interests of their members poorly.

According to labor activists, workers in mines (primarily gold and coal) owned and operated by Chinese firms were not provided the same rights of freedom of association or collective bargaining. Strikes by workers at these mines, often demanding higher wages or safer working conditions, were organized ad hoc and without official representation or mechanisms for negotiating with mine owners. Local authorities were less inclined to interfere with the operations at these mines, including enforcement of workers' rights.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy that was less than the government's official 2021 poverty line. The law on minimum wage stated it should rise gradually to meet the cost of living. The government did not effectively enforce laws related to minimum wage and overtime. There was limited employer liability for late payment of wages, allowances, or other social benefits. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. The standard workweek was 40 hours, usually with a five-day week. For state-owned industries, there was a mandatory 24-hour rest period in a seven-day workweek. According to the labor code, overtime work could not exceed four hours per day or 20 hours per week. The labor code also stated workers engaged in overtime work had to receive compensatory leave or premium pay of between 150 and 200 percent of the hourly wage. Compliance with these requirements differed among employers. For example, large companies and organizations with strong labor unions often abided by these provisions. Employers of small or informal firms where

employees had no union representation often did not enforce these legal provisions.

In July, parliament approved amendments to the labor code requiring government-registered employers that were legal entities to pay wages exclusively in a cashless form.

Occupational Safety and Health

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were appropriate for the main industries in the country, but the government generally did not enforce them; the mining industry, construction, transport, and energy sectors were considered the most hazardous. The law did not clarify that occupational safety and health experts, rather than workers, were responsible for identifying unsafe situations. The government usually responded to complaints of unsafe conditions and did little to proactively identify these conditions. The Ministry of Labor conducted raids to identify unsafe working conditions. Factory operators often employed workers in poor safety and health conditions. Penalties for violations of the law, which ranged from community service to fines, were commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The law provided workers the right to remove themselves from a hazardous workplace without jeopardizing their employment, but it was unclear whether this happened.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The Ministry of Labor, Social Security, and Migration was responsible for protecting workers and carrying out inspections for all types of labor problems. Government enforcement of wage requirements was somewhat effective; employers often chose to negotiate directly with employees rather than face potential fines. Occupational safety enforcement remained weak, and penalties were rarely applied against violators. The government announced in December 2023 the extension of a moratorium on unannounced labor inspections following the expiration of a previous three-year moratorium on all state inspections.

The National Statistics Committee defined informal economic activity as household units producing goods and services primarily to provide jobs and income to their members. In 2023, an estimated 30 percent of the population worked in the formal economy, while the rest worked in the informal economy, which the International Monetary Fund estimated to be equivalent to more than 40 percent of GDP. The government did not enforce labor laws nor provide for occupational health and safety standards for workers in the informal economy.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not observe these requirements. Human rights organizations reported authorities unfairly targeted and arrested ethnic Uzbeks for alleged involvement in banned religious organizations and for alleged “religious extremism activity.” On February 9, the government passed a Law on Amnesty that pardoned approximately 600 persons, many of whom were convicted of possessing material deemed extremist by government authorities. Civil society organizations reported security services monitored the social media accounts of ethnic Uzbeks and arrested individuals whom they alleged were associated with “extremist groups.” Attorneys reported police would often file false charges and then solicit bribes from the accused in exchange for their release.

According to the criminal procedure code, only courts had the authority to issue search and seizure warrants. Activists frequently reported detention

without a warrant or in contravention of regulatory standards. NGOs reported police targeted vulnerable defendants from whom they believed they could secure a bribe. Authorities could legally hold a detainee for 48 hours before filing charges. Experts on torture and abuse reported police and security services often chose not to register criminal cases to avoid the procedural requirements limiting the period of detention; they would then apply harsh interrogation methods and torture to extract confessions or bribes. The law required investigators to notify a detainee's family of the detention within 12 hours. While the legal restriction on the length of investigations was 60 days, the law provided courts the discretion to order a suspect held in pretrial detention for as long as one year, depending on the severity of the charges. Judges could, at their discretion, extend the period of arrest for more than one year, depending on the severity of the charges. Once a case went to trial, the law permitted courts to prolong detention until the case was closed, with no time limitations. The judicial system operated a functioning bail system. The law allowed courts to use alternative measures instead of detention, such as restrictions on foreign travel and house arrest.

Persons arrested or charged with a crime had the right to defense counsel at public expense. By law, the accused had the right to consult with defense counsel immediately upon arrest or detention, but in some cases the first meeting reportedly did not occur until the trial. As in past years, human rights groups noted incidents in which authorities denied attorneys access to

arrested children, held them without parental notification, and questioned them without parents or attorneys present, despite laws forbidding these practices.

The law authorized the use of house arrest for certain categories of suspects. Reports indicated law enforcement officers selectively enforced the law by incarcerating persons suspected of minor crimes while not pursuing those suspected of more serious offenses or those with significant political connections.

As in previous years, NGOs and monitoring organizations, including Golos Svobody and Spravedlivost, recorded complaints of arbitrary arrest, with Bir Duino Osh documenting at least 18 cases in the southern part of the country. Observers asserted it was impossible to know the exact number of cases because most of these individuals did not report their experiences. According to local human rights organizations, arrests and harassment frequently took place in the southern part of the country, predominately among ethnic Uzbeks allegedly involved in extremist religious groups.

Local and international observers said the GKNB and law enforcement officers engaged in widespread arbitrary arrests, including some alleged to be politically motivated, detainee abuse, and extortion, particularly in the southern part of the country.

Defendants frequently suffered lengthy pretrial detention for periods

exceeding the maximum possible sentence, according to civil society groups. Political influence, complex legal procedures, poor access to lawyers, and limited investigative capacity often lengthened defendants' time in pretrial detention. Judges had discretion to extend detention for more than one year, depending on the severity of the charges. As of January 1, authorities held approximately 1,720 persons in seven pretrial detention facilities.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials employed them. Physical abuse, including inhuman and degrading treatment, reportedly continued in prisons. Police abuse

reportedly remained a problem, notably in pretrial detention and detention facilities under the control of the GKNB.

Defense attorneys, journalists, and human rights monitoring organizations, including Golos Svobody, Bir Duino, and international NGOs Human Rights Watch and Transparency International reported incidents of torture by police and other law enforcement agencies. Through September the Antitorture Coalition (an NGO) reported 66 allegations of torture registered in the National Unified Crime Register. According to the Antitorture Coalition, none of the allegations of torture went to court. NGOs stated the government established torture-monitoring bodies but that influence from some parts of the government threatened the independence of these bodies. Through September, the Prosecutor General's Office conducted 1,472 unannounced inspections in temporary detention facilities, buildings, and offices of investigative and operational staff of internal affairs agencies. Based on the results of these inspections, the Prosecutor General's Office filed 12 cases resulting in convictions and disciplinary action for six officers. Additionally, Prosecutor General's Office staff conducted 17 joint inspections with representatives of the ombudsman and the National Center for Prevention of Torture. The Antitorture Coalition also accepted complaints of torture and passed them to the Prosecutor General's Office to facilitate investigations. According to members of the Antitorture Coalition, however, the cases it submitted against alleged torturers did not lead to convictions.

In cases where prosecutors tried police on torture charges, judges and defendants routinely raised procedural and substantive objections. These objections delayed the cases, often resulting in evidence deteriorating, and ultimately contributed to the courts' dismissing cases or reducing the original charges to "abuse of power" or similar lesser charges.

NGOs reported courts regularly accepted confessions allegedly induced through torture as evidence. The human rights NGO Bir Duino reported police continued to use torture to elicit confessions, and that courts often dismissed allegations of torture, claiming the defendants were lying to weaken the state's case. Defense lawyers stated that once prosecutors took a case to trial, a conviction was almost certain.

According to Golos Svobody, investigators often took two weeks or longer to review torture claims, at which point physical evidence of torture was often no longer visible. Defense attorneys presented most allegations of torture during trial proceedings, and the courts typically rejected them. In some cases, detainees who filed torture complaints later recanted, reportedly due to intimidation by law enforcement officers.

On January 29, the National Center to Prevent Torture stated that further detention of 11 Temirov Live journalists in the temporary detention facility would be considered torture. Although seven journalists were released under house arrest, four were held in pretrial detention from January 17 until a final verdict was issued on October 10, exceeding a 10-day maximum

legal limit.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

Children ages 16 and 17 could legally marry with the consent of local authorities, but the law prohibited civil marriages before age 16 under all circumstances. Although illegal, the practice of bride kidnapping continued. The kidnapping of underage brides remained underreported.

In 2021, the United Nations estimated that 13 percent of girls under 18 were married. The law criminalized religious marriages involving children; however, prosecutors did not file any cases of criminal charges for religious marriages involving children.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government sometimes cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing some protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. UNHCR reported

there were 25,476 persons in refugee-like conditions in the country because they lived outside their home country or territory of origin and faced protection risks but for whom refugee status was, for practical or other reasons, not ascertained. UNHCR estimated most of these individuals fled conflict or conscription in Ukraine and Russia. In September, UNHCR reported 113 refugees, mostly from Afghanistan, who had been granted UNHCR mandate status; 272 convention refugees, including 188 from Afghanistan and 20 from Ukraine; and 2,482 asylum seekers in the country, including 220 from Afghanistan.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. The Law on Refugees included nondiscrimination provisions covering persons to whom UNHCR did not grant refugee status when they left their country of origin and extended the validity of documents until a final decision on status was determined by a court. Despite the law, the government granted refugee status to very few asylum seekers and often ignored asylum requests from asylum seekers likely to be tortured upon their return to their home country. National asylum procedures did not consider and recognize UNHCR mandate refugees, who lacked legal status as refugees in the country.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The size of the Jewish population was approximately 1,300. Bishkek's only Jewish school endured online and social media harassment following the start of the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023, including calls for the school to be burned down. The Bishkek mayor's office continued a long-standing legal challenge to the ownership rights of the school's building, which was a former kindergarten converted to a Jewish school by a previous Bishkek mayor in 1993. The Supreme Court ordered a detailed review of the case that continued at year's end.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

The government engaged in transnational repression.

Bilateral Pressure

On February 5, authorities secured the extradition of Kanykei Aranov from Russia three weeks after she allegedly created a Facebook post that authorities said incited hatred and called for the violent seizure of power. She claimed someone else created the Facebook account where the post appeared. On June 28, a Bishkek court sentenced Aranov to three and half years in prison. In August, the Supreme Court rejected her appeal and sentenced her to 42 months in prison.