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## **KYRGYZSTAN: SHOCK BILLBOARD SPARKS RELIGIOUS DEBATE**

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Residents of Kyrgyzstan's capital woke up on July 13 to find stark and, to some, provocative billboards on some of the city's main thoroughfares.

The huge poster shows three groups of women in a variety of female head covers – some of them in the niqab veil that covers almost the entire face – and the words "Oh poor nation, where are we headed?"

The meaning of the image is slightly cryptic. But the arrangement of the pictures – traditional Kyrgyz dress on the left, niqabs on the right and something looking like a halfway version of those two forms of dress in the middle – would suggest that whoever is behind the stunt is concerned about the stealthy spread of ultra-orthodox Muslim customs in the country.

The first public reaction to the billboard came from prominent religious affairs commentators Kadyr Malikov, who has made a name for himself forecasting the rise of radical Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Malikov described the poster as a provocation.

Article 299 of the criminal code (on incitement to religious hatred and offending religious feelings) states that actions like this can lead to spread of hatred and cause divisions within the state. These are highly dangerous shenanigans, Malikov wrote in a public appeal calling for the authorities to get involved.

While Malikov is concerned about the potential for a surge in radical Islam, he has also registered anxiety about a concomitant increase in Islamophobic sentiment, which he sees in the posters.

The pictures were, in any case, misleading, Malikov wrote.

One photo is shot in Osh at an award-giving ceremony for women who have memorised the Koran □ these sisters are Hafizas. Those in the first rows have covered their faces with a veil. The status of Hafiza obliges them to cover their face during mass gatherings in the presence of men so as to preserve clean thoughts and prevent unneeded gazes. In everyday life, the Hafizas do not cover their faces, Malikov said. Judging by the scale of this provocation and the enormous expense involved, it is clear that whoever ordered this is no simple person.

At Malikovs behest, the State Committee for National Security has launched an investigation into the billboard to check it for signs of incitement to religious hatred.

News website Kloop.kg called the mayors office and found that the poster had been ordered by a foundation calling itself Patriots of Kyrgyzstan.

This is an education foundation. This head of it is Kyrgyz, a Muslim who prays five times a day. This is how he describes himself: I am a Muslim, I am a patriot of Kyrgyzstan and I see another kind of Islam for Kyrgyzstan. And we do not have the constitutional right to tell him that he cannot have his own opinion. That is pluralism and democracy, the city spokeswoman told Kloop.kg.

In its searches, Kloop.kg found no public foundation with that name, but it notes that there was a political party called Patriots of Kyrgyzstan headed by Almas Orozbekov. The partys main political platform was to register its support for President Almazbek Atambayevs Social Democratic Party, or SDPK.

The furor will blow over quickly enough, but the cracks in society that it has highlighted are real and are only likely to worsen with time as some sections of the population strays toward deeper conservatism.

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Kaynak/Source: