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The Evolution of Secularism in Kazakhstan: Legal Frameworks and Official Discourses

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Abstract:

This article examines the evolution of secularism in Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2023. The Constitution of the Republic affirms secularism by guaranteeing neutrality and freedom of conscience, yet the state actively endorses Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school and Russian Orthodoxy. Previous research on Kazakhstan has primarily focused on state control of religion and the securitization of Islam, while the legal framework and political discourse remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the implementation of secularism in public rhetoric and legal documents over time. In addition, it relies on a qualitative analysis of the Constitutions, relevant laws, and key statements by national leaders. The study reveals that secularism in Kazakhstan has evolved. It has shifted from a neutral approach in the 1990s to an ideological framework that primarily associates secularism with state-approved religions. In this context, the authorities support certain denominations while displacing alternative faiths. Thus, Kazakhstan's approach to secularism maintains the official separation of religion and state while supporting religious groups that align with state-approved beliefs and values.

Keywords: *Secularism, Kazakhstan, State-Religion relations, Qualitative Analysis*

Abstrak:

Artikel ini mengkaji evolusi sekularisme di Kazakhstan dari tahun 1991 hingga 2023. Konstitusi Republik Kazakhstan menegaskan prinsip sekularisme dengan menetapkan netralitas dan kebebasan berkeyakinan, namun negara secara aktif mendukung Islam Sunni mazhab Hanafi dan Ortodoksi Rusia. Penelitian sebelumnya tentang Kazakhstan umumnya berfokus pada isu-isu seperti kontrol negara terhadap agama dan pengamanan terhadap Islam, namun jarang menelaah kerangka hukum dan wacana politik. Studi ini mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menganalisis penerapan sekularisme dalam retorika publik dan dokumen hukum dari waktu ke waktu. Selain itu, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis kualitatif terhadap Konstitusi, undang-undang, dan pernyataan penting dari para pemimpin nasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sekularisme di Kazakhstan telah berkembang: dari pendekatan netral pada tahun 1990-an menjadi kerangka ideologis yang terutama mengaitkan sekularisme dengan agama-agama yang disetujui negara. Dalam konteks ini, otoritas negara mendukung denominasi keagamaan tertentu sambil mengesampingkan kepercayaan alternatif. Dengan demikian, pendekatan terhadap sekularisme di Kazakhstan mempertahankan pemisahan resmi antara agama dan negara, namun memberikan dukungan kepada kelompok agama yang sejalan dengan nilai-nilai dan keyakinan yang disetujui negara.

Kata Kunci: *Sekularisme, Kazakhstan, Hubungan Negara dan Agama, Analisis Kualitatif*

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Introduction

Kazakhstan, having gained independence in 1991, declared itself a secular state – a principle enshrined in the 1993 Constitution of the Republic and reaffirmed in the current 1995 Constitution (Vasic et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of secularism in Kazakhstan has been marked by contradictions. Formally, the state declares neutrality towards all faiths, but in practice, it regulates the religious sphere and promotes "traditional" forms of faith, notably Hanafi Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. Simultaneously, the authorities restrict alternative religious groups, often labeling them as radical or extremist. Islam, as one of the "traditional" religions, occupies a special place in the interpretation of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) – the official institution defining "correct" religiosity (Beisenbayev et al., 2024a; Khamzina et al., 2025). Given the growing interest in religion and existing threats from radical movements, official rhetoric increasingly emphasizes that secularism entails not only neutrality, but also about security, stability, and spiritual values. Consequently, secularism in Kazakhstan has become selective, applied according to the extent to which particular forms of religiosity align with state ideology (Karimov et al., 2024a).

Several scholars have examined religious politics and the transformation of secularism in Central Asia. Akiner (2003), Bratsev et al. (2021), and Verkhovskyi, et al. (1999) investigated how religion was used to legitimize power (Lemon, 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Omelicheva (2011) proposed the concept of "securitization" of Islam, whereby religion is perceived as a matter of state security. Yemelyanova (2014) and Sultangaliyeva (2011) analyzed how official notions of "traditional" and "non-traditional" religiosity are shaped through narratives and societal expectations (Bedford et al., 2021).

However, research on how official rhetoric in Kazakhstan has evolved remains limited, particularly regarding which concepts have become central over time and how this relates to the support of certain religious forms and the restriction of others. However, similar processes have been analyzed in other countries. For instance, Türkiye, which structurally resembles Kazakhstan, has been examined in this context. Farha (2012) describes the Turkish model as an example of forced secularization, in which the state imposed cultural homogenization under the pretext of modernization. Öztürk (2016) analyzes the role of Diyanet as an institution of centralized control over religion, which secures its legitimacy in the eyes of society. Suslova et al. (2024) emphasize that such measures in other countries are commonly accompanied by the exclusion and suppression of religious practices beyond what is officially permissible. Thereby, this study aims to fill this gap by tracing the evolution of state rhetoric in Kazakhstan and uncovering its underlying ideological emphases.

The study is relevant from both scientific and applied perspectives. First, it provides insight into how public policy is formed in the context between formal commitment to secularism and the actual support for specific religious ideology. Second, analyzing rhetoric and legal frameworks reveals internal contradictions in approaches to religious policy and its implementation. Third, the findings may inform the development of more balanced and inclusive policies that account for the diversity of religious views. Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of selective

secularism by demonstrating how formal principles can be adapted to political goals. In this sense, it builds on José Casanova's (2011) distinction between secularism as a neutral principle of statecraft and secularism as an ideology. Selective secularism reflects the latter, where the state not only separates itself from religion but also defines and promotes particular interpretation of religion, thereby instrumentalizing secularism for political purposes.

Thus, this study aims to identify how secularism is presented in public discourse, which forms of religion are supported, and which are restricted. It assumes that Kazakhstan's rhetoric and lawmaking reveal a tendency to institutionalize only one form of so-called "traditional" religiosity, contradicting the declared principle of neutrality. The research question is: Does secularism in Kazakhstan function as a universal principle or as an instrument for legitimizing the state's religious choice?

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing legal acts and public statements by political leaders (Bowen, 2009; Zabirova et al., 2025). The topic is motivated by the need to critically examine how the formally proclaimed principle of secularism is implemented in Kazakhstan's public policy. The study examines the interplay between legal frameworks and political discourse in shaping the state's ideological stance on religion and secularism.

This qualitative study relies primarily on textual data. The materials analyzed include the Constitutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" (2011), strategic policy documents, presidential speeches, and programmatic writings of the presidents, focusing on religion, secularism, and national identity (Beisenbayev et al., 2024b). The principle of representativeness guided the selection of sources: only official texts with normative authority or high symbolic value in shaping state ideology were included.

The data were collected mainly from official legal documents, online archives of presidential speeches, publications by government bodies, and reports from state news agencies. This ensured that the sources used were authentic, reliable, and directly linked to state discourse. Special emphasis was placed on documents and speeches explicitly mentioning secularism, "traditional" religions, spirituality, and nationhood.

The analysis was conducted in two distinct stages. First, a legal analysis of key regulatory documents identified the vocabulary and provisions defining the status of religion and the principle of secularism in Kazakhstan (Shapoval, 2020). Second, a critical analysis of the collected data traced recurrent themes, concepts, and rhetorical strategies in political discourse. This dual process enabled the observation of both the normative framework and its discursive interpretation.

The analysis results were organized into tables that highlight recurring narratives, ideological shifts, and the interaction between rhetoric and legal norms. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how the declared principle of secularism is selectively implemented in Kazakhstan's public policy.

Results and Discussion

Result

Secularism in the Legislation of Kazakhstan

The secular nature of the Republic of Kazakhstan after independence was first

enshrined in the Constitution of January 28th, 1993, where Article 1 defined Kazakhstan as an "independent, democratic and secular state" (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1993). Further, Article 13 of the Constitution guaranteed every person the right to freedom of conscience, while Article 55 prohibited the activities of public and religious associations preaching religious hatred. These provisions established a new secular order, distinct from the Soviet model of militant atheism yet retaining state control over the religious sphere. The current Constitution, in force since September 5, 1995 (as amended and supplemented on September 19, 2022), likewise affirms the state's secular status. Article 1 declares the Republic of Kazakhstan a "democratic, secular, legal, and social state, the highest values of which are man, his life, rights and freedoms" (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995).

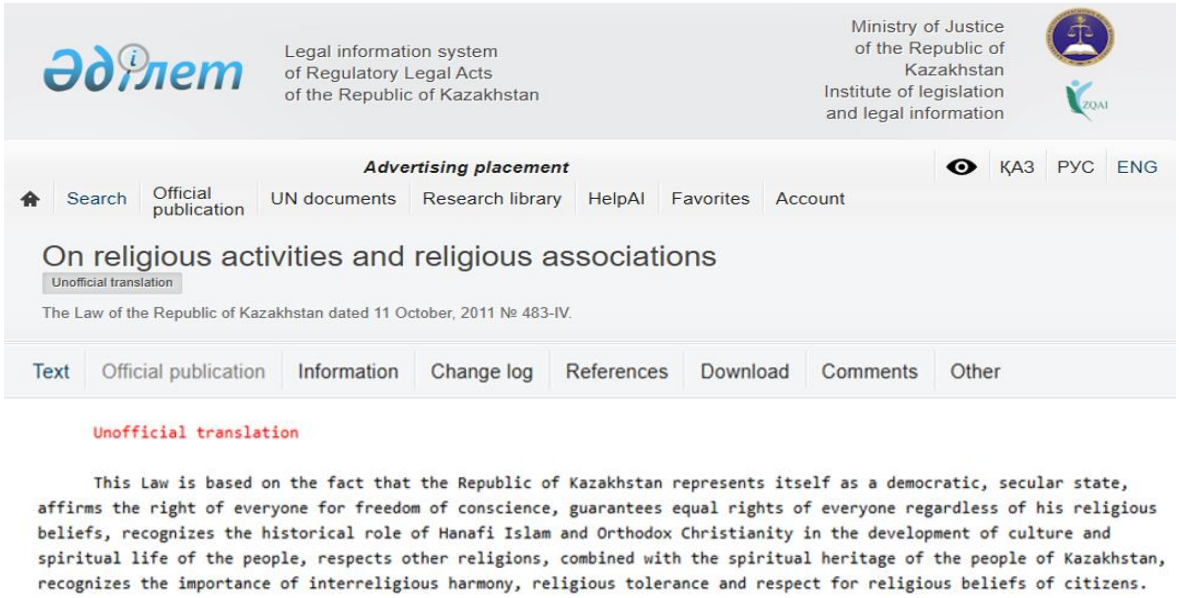
Article 5 prohibits the establishment of political parties on a religious basis and the activities of religious associations that undermine public order or violate citizens' rights. Article 5.4 regulates the activities of foreign religious associations and the missionary activity of foreign citizens. Article 22 of the Constitution reaffirms the right of every individual to freedom of conscience (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). Overall, the Constitution defines secular status of the state as neutrality toward religious associations and guarantees their equality before the law.

Since the late 1990s, a special interpretation of secularism emerged in official rhetoric and individual regulations, combining the principle of non-interference with selective support for "traditional" religions. This shift was most clearly manifested in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" (October 11, 2011). In its preamble (see Figure 1), secularism is defined not only as neutrality but also as reliance on historical and spiritual heritage: "This Law... recognizes the historical role of Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the development of the culture and spiritual life of the people, [and] respects other religions that are compatible with the spiritual heritage of the people of Kazakhstan" (Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations," 2011). Unlike the Constitution, which emphasizes equality among religions, the 2011 law introduced, for the first time, the idea of a privileged status for certain religious traditions. Similarly, the *Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2017–2020* affirms the need to "preserve and strengthen the traditional spiritual values of the Kazakh people" (Concept, 2017).

The provisions of the 2011 law also introduced additional restrictions on the activities of religious associations. Article 3 requires all religious associations to undergo state registration, declaring any unregistered activity illegal. Article 4 further prohibits associations from engaging in activities aimed at violently altering the constitutional order, violation of sovereignty, promoting discrimination, or inciting religious hatred (Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations," 2011).

Figure 1

Preamble of the Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations."



Note. Information and Legal System of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2011).

However, in law enforcement practice, certain religious organizations were not recognized as "traditional" and were subjected to persecution and closure. For instance, Shiite, Sufi, and Ahmadi associations failed to re-register under the new requirements (Kikimbayev et al., 2021). Furthermore, the 2011 law emphasizes that religious practice must align with the historical and cultural traditions of the Kazakh people, particularly aligned with the position of the SAMK. Since then, Kazakhstan's legislation has shifted from secularism as neutrality to secularism as selective support for certain religious forms.

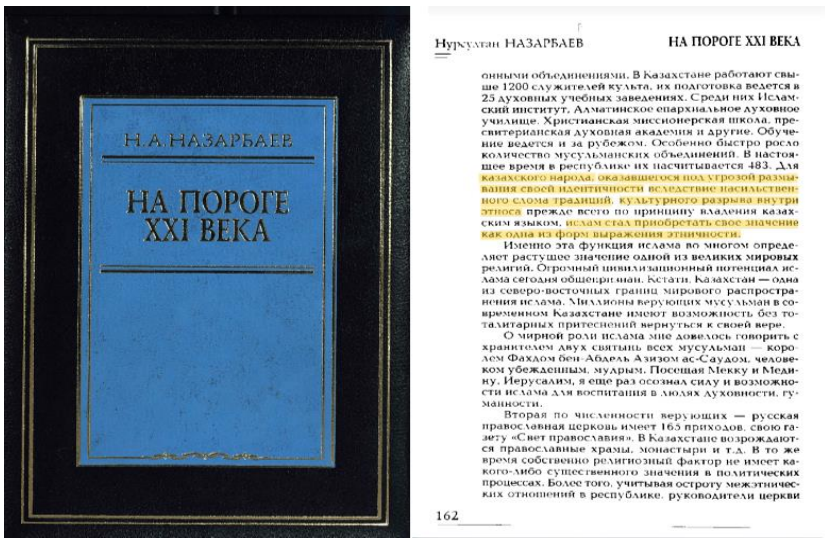
Official Discourse on Secularism in Public Speeches and Strategic Documents

In the early years of independence, Kazakhstan's leadership actively formed the image of a secular state in official rhetoric. A special role was played by the first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who not only confirmed his commitment to secularism, but also introduced the concepts of "national unity", "spiritual heritage" and "traditional values". Over time, these concepts reshaped secularism into a framework that combined neutrality with controlled religiosity. One of the earliest programmatic statements on this issue appeared in 1992 in the presidential document – the *Strategy for the Formation and Development of Kazakhstan as a Sovereign State*. In this text, religion was mentioned only in the context of combating religious intolerance, aligning with the broader agenda of strengthening pluralism (Nazarbayev, 1992). However, by the mid-1990s, rhetoric changed. In his 1997 *Message of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. A. Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan*, the President stated: "We are proud to be part of the Muslim Ummah. This is part of our tradition. But we should not forget that we also have secular traditions, and Kazakhstan is a secular state" (Nazarbayev, 1997).

In his programmatic book *On the Threshold of the 21st Century* (1996) (see Figure 2), Nazarbayev emphasized that Islam "has become a form of expression of ethnicity" for the Kazakh people, who suffered from a "cultural rupture" and "destruction of traditions" during the Soviet period (Nazarbayev, 1996).

Figure 2

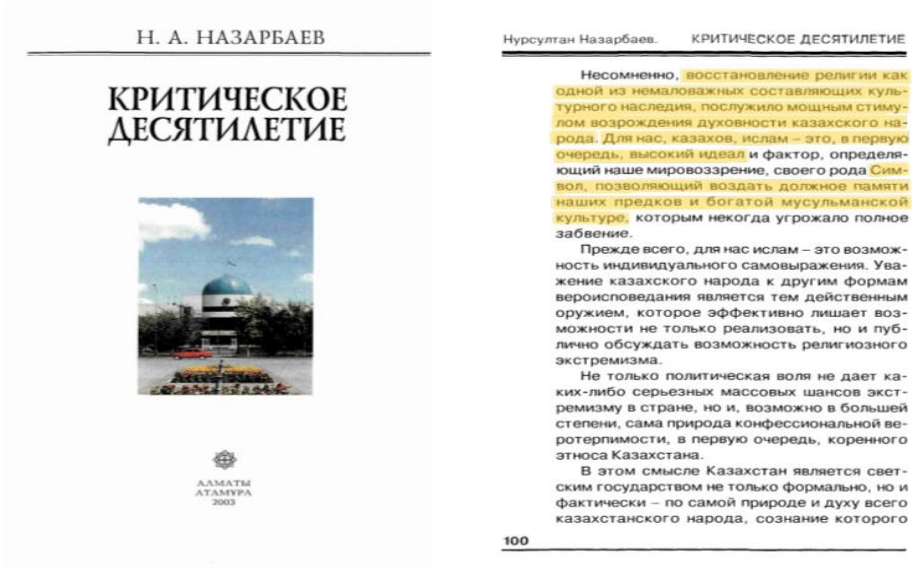
On the Threshold of the XXI Century.



Note. Nazarbayev, N. A. (1996).

In *The Critical Decade* (see Figure 3), he further articulated the connection between Islam and national identity, describing Islam as a "high ideal" and "a symbol that allows us [Kazakhs] to pay tribute to the memory of our ancestors and the rich Muslim culture". He emphasized that "the restoration of religion as one of the important components of cultural heritage served as a powerful stimulus for the revival of the spirituality of the Kazakh people" (Nazarbayev, 2003).

Figure 3
The Critical Decade



Note. Nazarbayev, N. A. (2003).

Thus, as detailed in Table 1, since the late 1990s, presidential rhetoric has shifted from a neutral interpretation of secularism to a model in which secularism permits state support of "traditional" religions as part of Kazakhstan's national identity. This transformation became particularly evident in the 2000s.

Table 1
Key Theses on Secularism in Official Speeches.

Year	Source / Document	Key Thesis on Secularism
1994	Speech by President N. Nazarbayev at the Council on Religious Associations	The state does not interfere in religious affairs, guarantees freedom of conscience, and observes the secular principle
1997	Doctrine of National Unity and Public Accord	Secularism is seen as the basis for stability and interfaith peace
2003	Speech at the 1st Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions	A secular state must rely on the spiritual values of "traditional" religions
2011	Preamble to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations"	Kazakhstan recognizes its historical commitment to the "spiritual traditions and cultural norms of traditional religions"
2022	Message from President K. Tokayev to the People of Kazakhstan	Secularism is not a rejection of spirituality, but a guarantee of the rights of believers and a tool for protecting against radicalism

Note. Authors' qualitative analysis (2025).

In 2003, the First Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions was held in Astana, initiated personally by President Nazarbayev. In his welcoming speech, he emphasized that Kazakhstan, as a multinational and multi-confessional society, regards secularism based on respect for traditional values as the key to stability (Khabar, 2021).

During this period, the president's rhetoric shaped a new type of secularism: the state distances itself from radical movements while promoting "historical Islam", identified with the Hanafi madhhab and the practices of the SAMK. In this context, secularism appears as a tool for containing religious threats and supporting ideologically loyal forms of faith.

In 2017, *The Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere* defined it as follows: "the state recognizes the special role of traditional religions in the formation of the spiritual culture and historical identity of the Kazakh people" (Concept, 2017).

The next and current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has continued this approach. In 2022, at the Congress of World Religions, he declared the state's commitment to secular principles while respecting traditional religious values as the basis of morality and spiritual development (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). A comparative analysis of official speeches, presented in Table 2, reveals an increased emphasis on "traditionality" and "historical identity". While in the early 1990s secularism meant non-interference, by the 2010s it had evolved into a regulatory doctrine justifying the selection of "correct" religious forms.

Table 2

Evolution of the Official Discourse on Secularism in Kazakhstan.

Period	The main characteristic of discourse	Key elements
1. 1992–1995	Secularism as Neutrality	Constitutional provisions on freedom of conscience and non-

		interference of the state in religious affairs; distance from religion
2. 1996–2003	Secularism as an Element of Stability and Interfaith Peace	Emphasis on interreligious dialogue, conflict prevention, formation of the image of Kazakhstan as a tolerant state
3. 2003–2017	Secularism in Combination with "Traditional Religiosity"	Active promotion of "traditional" Islam and Orthodoxy as pillars of spirituality and patriotism; SAMK as a partner
4. 2017–present	Secularism as the Basis of Moral and Spiritual Order	Ideologization of secularism: emphasis on spiritual and moral values, patriotism, strengthening of cultural identity through "correct" religiosity

Note. Authors' qualitative analysis (2025).

The Role of the SAMK in Supporting "Traditional" Islam

From the first years of independence, Kazakhstan actively supported Islam in its "traditional" form, primarily at the institutional level. This was achieved through assistance to the SAMK activities and promotion of the Hanafi madhhab as the only acceptable version of Islamic practice. Support included state involvement in the administrative development of religious institutions, financing, political patronage, and the construction of an official discourse contrasting "traditional" Islam with "non-traditional" movements (Bissenova, 2016). The creation of the SAMK in 1990 marked the first step in the institutionalization of Islam in Kazakhstan. Before that, the republic's Muslims were subordinate to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In November 1989, during a meeting of imams in Alma-Ata, a demand was raised to create an independent Kazakh muftiate. On January 12, 1990, at the first Kurultai (gathering) of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the SAMK was officially created, with Ratbek Hadji Nyssanbayev as its first head *mufti* (Muminov, 2012). In its early years, the SAMK's experienced significant interference of state structures in religious affairs. According to Verkhovskyi et al. (1999), in 1992–1993 mosque construction was actively financed through state and quasi-state sources. In Karaganda (Central Kazakhstan), 4 million rubles were allocated for the construction of a mosque and madrasah. In Tselinograd (present-day capital, Astana), the city administration and state enterprises financed a new mosque, while in South Kazakhstan, more than 70 enterprises contributed to building religious facilities (Akiner, 2003). President Nazarbayev personally supported Islamic infrastructure. In spring 1992, he allocated 10 apartments for an Islamic educational institution in Alma-Ata (Almaty), and in May 1993, he donated funds for the construction of the central mosque. That same year, 1 billion rubles were allocated for a mosque in the Mangistau region, along with 150 million from the Alma-Ata city budget (Verkhovskyi et al., 1999).

From the mid-1990s, the state effectively delegated to the SAMK the role of Islam's official representative (Nurmanova & Izbairov, 2009), while maintaining control through informal political patronage. A key mechanism of this control was the promotion of a single madhhab model. A recent example is the controversy over the public utterance of "Amen" in mosques. In 2017, four people in Zhanaozen (West

Kazakhstan) were fined for loudly pronouncing "Amen" – a practice permitted in other madhhabs but not in the Hanafi school (Toiken, 2017). In 2024, a similar conflict occurred in Shymkent (South Kazakhstan), escalating into a physical clash between parishioners (Sputnik, 2024). The SAMK justified these measures by referring to the "internal rules of mosques", citing that "Amen" should be said quietly in accordance with Hanafi madhab (Narimbetova, 2022).

Figure 4

Poster "Abu Hanifa Madhhab," Displaying the Procedure of Prayer According to the Hanafi School, Ar-Rahman Mosque, Astana.



Note. Official website of the SAMK (2023).

Since the adoption of the new religion law in 2011, the SAMK's powers have been further institutionalized. It has effectively gained a monopoly over religious education, the appointment of imams, international relations, mosque registration, and control of internal worship practices. Other forms of Islamic practice have been harshly discredited in official documents, speeches, and media materials.

As Bissenova (2016) observes, the standardization of religious practice is visible in major mosques, where stands and brochures outline prayers procedure exclusively according to the Hanafi school. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate such materials displayed in a mosque.

Figure 5

Poster "Procedure for Prayer According to the Hanafi Madhhab", Nur-Ghasyr Mosque, Aktobe.



Note. Official website of the SAMK (2017).

Thus, from 1992 to 2024, Kazakhstan established an institutionalized system of supporting and promoting a single model of Islam, controlled by the state through the SAMK. This system combines the ideological legitimization of "traditional" Islam as part of national identity with administrative and legal mechanisms regulating the religious sphere. To illustrate the patterns between Kazakhstan's proclaimed principles of secularism and its actual practices of regulating religion, Table 3 is presented.

Table 3
Summary Table

Proclaimed principle	Actual practice
Secularism as the neutrality of the state in the religious sphere	Support and promotion of certain models of religion (Hanafi Islam through the SAMK)
Equality of all religions before the law	Privilege for "traditional" religions (Islam and Orthodoxy), others are marginalized
Prohibition of state interference in religious activity	Appointment of a mufti and control over the internal life of the SAMK; interference in mosques
Freedom of religion (including choice of form and practice)	Persecution of alternative Islamic movements; administrative fines
Right to missionary activity according to the law	Practical barriers to registration, especially for "non-traditional" groups
Secularism as a guarantee of tolerance and diversity	Discursive division into "correct" and "radical" Muslims

Note. Authors' qualitative analysis (2025).

Discussion

A primary analysis of official documents, legal acts, and speeches by political leaders in Kazakhstan from the 1990s to the present demonstrates that secularism is formally proclaimed as a key principle of Kazakhstan's state structure. The country's Constitution, the laws of 1992 and 2011, and numerous strategic documents affirm state neutrality toward religion, proclaiming freedom of conscience and equality of religious associations. However, these principles are implemented with a significant emphasis on supporting only those forms of religiosity officially recognized as "traditional". An analysis of presidential speeches and state programs reveals a shift from neutrality to a normative model of the "correct" religion, embedded in the project of national identity. Secularism in the Kazakh context is gradually infused with ideological content, positioning "traditional religion" not as an object of equal treatment but as a state partner in ensuring spiritual stability, morality, and order.

This development is primarily attributed to political objectives aimed at ensuring national unity and internal stability amid religious diversity and a growingly religious population (Burova et al., 2023a). After the collapse of the USSR and the liberation of the religious sphere from strict control, risks of radicalization, fragmentation, and competition between various religious movements emerged (Zakhay et al., 2024a; Zhandossova et al., 2025). To prevent such processes, the state

established an institution of "official" religion based on culturally acceptable forms of Islamic tradition (Kozhbankhan & Kaldybekova, 2021; Malik, 2023a). Supporting only "traditional" forms - primarily Hanafi Islam within the framework of the SAMK – allowed the authorities to control religious infrastructure, limit the influence of external movements, and build the image of a loyal citizen (Karimov et al., 2024b). However, this selective support and the strengthening of a normative interpretation of the "correct" religion generated contradictions with the proclaimed secular model.

The result of this policy was a paradoxical situation in which a formally secular state, in practice, privileges one religious tradition, thereby violating the principle of neutrality. This practice creates dual expectations within society: on the one hand, religious organizations are expected to be loyal and conformist, while on the other, those that do not align with the state's interpretation of "traditionality" are excluded from full participation in public life (Fox, 2023; Kusack, 2024; Omidi et al., 2024; Thompson & Modood, 2024; Zakhay et al., 2024b). This leads to the institutional marginalization of religious minorities, declining trust in official institutions, and growing interest in alternative sources of religious knowledge, particularly through informal and online communities (Deroo & Mohamud, 2022; Gamza & Jones, 2021). In the context of digitalization, this widens the gap between official religious discourse and the actual practice of believers, especially among young and urban populations for whom Islam represents not merely cultural heritage but a personal choice of identity (Zaid et al., 2022).

As Casanova (2011) emphasizes, secularism functions not only as a principle of neutrality but also as an ideological system with its own ideas about the role of religion in society (Burova et al., 2023b). A comparison of the present findings with earlier studies supports existing scholarship on Kazakhstan's selective approach to secularism (Omelicheva, 2011; Yemelianova, 2014). Cornell et al. (2017) noted the state's "skeptical" attitude toward religion and the formal proclamation of secularism despite actual interference in the religious sphere. This study expands that understanding by tracing how the rhetoric of secularism has evolved from neutrality to normative support for "traditional" Islam (Zabirova et al., 2025). This shift is reflected in legislative changes such as the Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations (2011), which explicitly distinguishes "traditional" religions, and in public speeches by state leaders, where the President emphasized the role of Hanafi Islam and "national spiritual values" as integral to Kazakh identity (Zakhay et al., 2024c).

Unlike radical models of laicism (as in France), the Kazakhstani model of secularism combines state control with the functional integration of religion into the nation-building project (Malik, 2023b; Tungatarov & Zholdybalin, 2025). This aligns with Cesari's (2014) concept of the "governance of Islam," which suggests that the state defines acceptable forms of religious expression in line with political objectives. A similar logic underlines the "managed secularity" of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, where secular authorities selectively engage with religious institutions to strengthen legitimacy (Stepan, 2010). In addition, Hassan (2023) examines how secular nationalist regimes strategically involve religious organizations to extend their influence in the public sphere. Moreover, Karimov (2018) notes that the state-sponsored "Hanafi project," as he terms it, not only contradicts declared secular principles but also goes beyond the classical Hanafi tradition. The state's version of the

Hanafi school is a selective, politicized construct aimed at legitimizing a secular national ideology (Beisenbayev et al., 2024c). These approaches call into question the authenticity and sustainability of the official concept of "traditional religion" within the region's historically pluralistic Islamic heritage.

As Jahanbegloo (2011) notes, this study highlights the importance of critically reflecting on how secularism is implemented in diverse political and cultural settings. In Kazakhstan, given the identified characteristics, it is necessary to reconsider both conceptual and political approaches to secularism. First, a clearer distinction between the state and religious spheres must be ensured, especially in rulemaking and personnel policy. Second, the concept of "traditional religion" should be clarified, and the practice of institutional preference, undermining the equality of religious associations should be abandoned. Methodologically, this requires regular monitoring of public speeches and political documents to identify hidden mechanisms of normative pressure. Conceptually, it calls for the development of pluralistic models of secularism that enable religious actors to participate in public life without institutional inequality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study confirms that despite Kazakhstan's proclaimed secularism, state policy in the religious sphere is selectively secular. The 1995 Constitution enshrines freedom of conscience and the separation of religion from the state, yet its implementation is accompanied by institutional support for a specific religious tradition. Through regulations such as the 2011 Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations", whose preamble emphasizes the value of traditional religiosity, as well as through the institutionalization of the SAMK and the rhetoric of political leaders, the state consolidates a narrow understanding of "traditional" Islam. The analysis indicates an evolution of secularism discourse: from neutrality in the 1990s to linking the secular state with moral and spiritual order in 2017 and beyond. This dynamic illustrates the increasing instrumentalization of religion for nation-building and increased control over religious diversity.

The significance of this study lies in its conceptual contribution to understanding how secularism adapts to state-building tasks, formally maintaining neutrality while de facto supporting a specific religious model. It expands the theoretical understanding of selective secularism, in which legal framework and discursive practices operate synchronously to support the "correct" religion. Methodologically, the study offers a replicable model that combines a legal analysis with discursive examination of public speeches and visualization of results in tables. Thematically, it highlights the concept of "traditional religion" and its political instrumentalization, with implications for freedom of conscience and interfaith relations. This makes the study particularly relevant in the context of the post-Soviet transformation in religious policy.

However, this study has certain limitations. It focuses exclusively on official discourse and legal documents, while civil society perceptions and the regional implementation of religious policy remain beyond its scope. Future research could employ qualitative methods – such as interviews and field observations - to examine how believers perceive selective secularism and how it affects their religious practice. In addition, comparing Kazakhstan's experience with that of neighboring Central Asian countries would help identify common trends and distinctive features.

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