



## SUCCESS STORY

### Civic Education Amid Religious Schools

#### **Madrassa students learn and discuss finer points of a democratic society**

A class of 35 girls, ages 14 to 17, at a madrassa in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan, is immersed in a debate on the merits of a democratic form of government. “Could a democratic society vote for Islam as its official religion?”, one student challenged her friends.



Photo: ABA/ROU

Female students discuss during a lesson on religious rights and tolerance in a madrassa in Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan.

***“For us, religious laws are above all, but still we want to know the laws of the country we live in to protect our rights,” said Kyz-Jibek, a female madrassa student speaking of street law classes.***

Scenes like this have grown increasingly common in Kyrgyzstan’s Islamic schools — madrassas — since February 2006, when USAID reached an agreement with an Osh imam, arranging for madrassa students to learn about religious rights and tolerance, democracy and the law, social norms, and constitutional and criminal law. Throughout the spring, a USAID-sponsored street law program has taught these topics to groups of girls and boys in separate classrooms at two Osh madrassas.

The first school to give approval for the program was the madrassa in Osh, the Islamic Institute of Osh. In the Osh madrassa, the program, together with law students from a local university, conducted 14 lessons for two classes - one with 30 male students and another with 35 female students - on topics such as constitutional rights and freedoms, constitutional obligations, the rights and duties of the police, and what citizens should do if they are stopped by the police.

The madrassa students became more active and engaged as the lessons progressed. “For us, religious laws are above all, but still we want to know the laws of the country we live in to protect our rights,” said Kyz-Jibek, a female madrassa student speaking of the classes.

Since February 2006, the program also expanded to 10 madrassas, two Islamic institutes and one religious female non-governmental organization. In addition, at the request of madrassa teachers, 30 of the teachers have been trained on interactive methods of teaching and on the legal content of the textbook *We and the Law*, specially designed for madrassas.