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THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ISLAM IN POST-COLONIAL CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

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Abstract

The role of Islam and Muslim tradition in Central Asian societies is becoming increasingly important for assessing the situation in and around the region. More correctly formulated the object of research is not simply Islam per se but rather the 'Islamic factor', a nation that comprise: a) Islam's impact on social and political life, b) The use of Islam as a political instrument by the ruling elite as well as by the opposition, c) Islam as an instrument in foreign policy, d) Islam as a means to strengthen the authority of Central Asian states in the Muslim world. I cover these aspects in this article.

Key Words: Islamic Fundamentalism, Political Islam, Central Asia, Terrorism.

Introduction

Experts differ on the details of this multi- stage definition. Islam's impact on society can be assessed as an absolute or it can be disregarded. In other words, for some researchers the 'Islamic factor' is something artificial something through up by the scholars of oriental culture and cultivated by some politicians interested in continued socio- political tensions. For others, it is a natural dominant idea of Muslim society, something that determines material and spiritual life. All this has a direct bearing on the situation in the emergent states of Central Asia- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan- for which Islam is one of the factors regulating their internal life and to some extent their external orientations. This circumstance should be neither ignore nor considered an absolute- both extremes are dangerous, especially important to separate the spheres in which Islamic influence is limited from those in which its potential is far from exhausted.

Islam has always been a main factor of the religious and cultural identity of Central Asia, even if this self- identification existed unofficially under the Soviet Governor. In the official ideology, religious and national traditions were viewed separately. Today, dual self- identification as Uzbek Muslim, Tajik Muslim and so on, has come back with a vengeance and these terms sound as natural as Arab Muslim or Persian Muslim. In the mid- 1990s, 78.8% of the Kazakhs, 95% of the Kyrgyz and more than, 90% of the Uzbeks considered themselves Muslims.

Islam role as an ethnocultural factor of self- identification is axiomatic as is its role as one of the regulators of social relations. In the absence of this role, Muslim society loses its fundamental generic characteristics. Islam has always played this role, even under the communists. This is true of the countryside, which has preserved the rules of communal relations that became adopted to the collective farm system. It is also true of the towns, where the mahallah remained the smallest unofficial social unit in which traditions of relationship between people were made scarred by Islam, where people always performed the main religious observances, and where clerics enjoyed prestige and where influential by virtue of their knowledge.

The tremendous importance of Islamic tradition to families is sometimes overlooked in assessing the overall influence of religion on society and the political sphere. This is perhaps a mistake; the conviction is stamped into the mind of the individual from childhood that tradition is of absolute importance and cannot be broken, together with the belief that the right thing for the individual is to follow tradition. The growing individual extends the importance of tradition to family relationships and everyday life, to public and political spheres. We do not speak tradition as an absolute but rather of its being regarded as one of the appreciable legitimate factors underlying political affairs.

As society evolved, tradition could not remain the soul regulator of public life. Under the Soviet government, the political elite Europeanized in the Soviet fashion, and a stratum of technocrats emerged. These people, despite a considerable influx of personnel form of rural regions, comprise the 'first echelon' and the present-day elite. However, neither group has ever broken the cultural and generic look to tradition. Most of these people are characterized by a 'double standard' of conscience and thinking. Under different circumstances a politician or a public figure can be an equally sincere European and orthodox Muslim.



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The distribution of political and social roles between families, clans, tribes and regional group in Central Asia still relies strongly on tradition. Notably, all the medium and top ranks of the administrative hierarchy are broken by person originally from families and clans traditionally connected with religious cult. In particular, those having influence among members of the Tajik and Uzbek nomenklatura are Fergana khojas who are lineal descendants of the ‘rightly guided’ caliphs. The continued existence in the region of the Sufi Brotherhood merit separate mention, especially the biggest of them the Naqshbandi, whose members have great prestige and influence on decision making in secular spheres. Remaining one of the regulators of social relations Islam is inevitably a factor in political life. Drawing on the historical experience of Christianity and secularized Western societies many experts find this unnatural. The desire to see a strictly religious cult aspect of Islam is also characteristic of the proportion of Muslim clergy who are under the patronage of the authorities and fear that they may lose their influence in the event of Islam’s politicization. Nevertheless, the fusion of religion and politics is inherent in Islamic civilization and Islam lack the division into things religious and secular that is typical of Christian societies. Islam is complete religion, in the sense that it covers all aspects of social existence and incorporates its own regulating prospects. The Shari’ah- a code of law grounded in divine revelations and holy books, laws that regulate the life of the individual and society- is unique to Islam. History indicates that the tendency to build an Islamic state has existed in Muslim societies at various stages of their development. Rooted in Islamic values and ideas economic and political programmers and activity intended to bring them into effect are an inalienable part of the sociopolitical life of the entire Muslim world. Central Asia is hardly an exception.

Alongside the general reasons rooted in the special nature of Muslim civilization there are concrete short- term reasons for the strengthening of the Islamic factor- the state of society, the objectives and tasks of some political forces or other, and so on. Every political group, be it the establishment or the opposition, is guided by its own egoistic considerations. They are all active in a social and cultural environment which has to some extent been prepared to accommodate Islam in politics and which too sensitive to Islamic slogans. At the same time, Muslim society is not homogenous. The predisposition to Islamic motives in politics varies according to social affiliation, occupation, gender and age. Sociological studies of views of Islam and how far it is a political factor have been conducted in all Central Asian countries except perhaps Turkmenistan, where this sort of survey is rather difficult to conduct because of the extremely tough regime, even by the standards of the region. Studies reveal a recognition of the steady growth in the role of Islam in the public and political affairs of the countries and that fears are being voiced in this connection. For example, 86% of the population in Kyrgyzstan polled in the mid- 1990s were sure that Islam’s role in public affairs would grow and more than 50% of Uzbeks believed that ‘Islam alone is the solution of Uzbekistan’s many problem’.

The social reason for politicizing Islam lies in the general crises in the system, the difficulties of economic rebuilding of the society and the lowering of the status of the entire social strata. This leads to persistent disaffection among the people and spurs them to look for a way out of the current situation via the authentic ethnic and religious values that were lost in the Soviet era and have not been reconstructed in the post- Soviet period. We speak of a search for an ‘Islamic alternative’. While this seems to be a utopia, more and more people for many different sectors of society are turning to it. The tendency is based on the desire to restore social justice backed by strong authoritarian ‘genuine’ Islamic tradition of the prophet appeals to which Muslims believes, social justice and strong religious and political authorities are inseparable.

The turning to Islam by the establishment has a complex and controversial character. On the one hand, all Central Asian states are secular accordance with their constitution. Religion is separated from politics. In response to the question on whether Uzbekistan corresponds to ‘the standards of the Muslim world’, its earlier president Islam Karimov said a categorical ‘no’: ‘We are out of keeping with the Muslim standards because we are a secular state’. Turkmenistan’s head Saparmurat Niyazov thought along the same lines: ‘We have family proclaimed the principle that Turkmenistan is a secular state, we have no grounds to think that someone intends to change this principle’. The resolution approved by the conference of religious figures to Turkmenistan in 1994 speaks of the inadmissible of interference of religion in organizational and state affairs.

As Kazakh researcher Alma Sultangaliyeva rightly observed, ‘practically none of the countries have avoided registering a special attitude to Islam on the part of the official authorities, including the top- level people of the states. There are three circumstances that impel the ruling elite to turn to Islam. First, the desire to press religion into service to consolidate the indigenous Muslim people and simultaneously use it as a source of a national ideology. This is more characteristic of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where it should be noted the size of the non- Muslim population has shortly and steadily declined. The use of Islam in the official ideology is virtually ruled out in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the Russian speaking community is almost as numerous as the Kazakh ethnic group and the cosmopolitanism and pro-western views of the local top people led by Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan are well known.



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Second, the ruling elite is trying to seize the initiative of using Islam from their opponents, whose increasing criticism of the authorities stems precisely from religious positions. The ruling quarter of Uzbekistan are making the greatest efforts in this regard because the religious movement of there is gaining more influence. The desire to monopolize Islam in the early 1990s emerged as one of the main tendencies in the development of the internal Tajik conflict, during the course of which the Islamic opposition succeeded in getting seats in the government and became a legitimate part of the establishment. It can be assumed that the ruling quarter of Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser degree, those of Kazakhstan are getting gradually involved in the ‘Struggle for Islam’. A characteristic sign that Islam is being used for political ends in the establishment of state control over the activity of the Muslim clergy. Authorities middle in the appointments of the imams and mullahs and try to ‘edit’ their sermons. The conformist part of the clergy is paid salary by the state. One of the tried and tested methods in this regard is the creation of institution under state patronage, such as those founded in Turkmenistan in 1994, the Gengeshi (council) for religious affairs under the country’s president, the Interdepartmental Council for Religious Affairs founded in Kyrgyzstan in 1997 and the Council for Religious Affairs in Kazakhstan.

Third, the authorities turn into Islam in order to firm up their prestige in the Muslim world. Contact between the former Soviet republics Muslims in other countries have appreciably strengthened in the post decade. The Central Asian leaders are constantly obliged to refer to their shared religious identity and sometimes to demonstrate, albeit in a specific form, adherence to the idea of Islamic solidarity (This subject arose in April- May 1999 in connection with the conflict in Yugoslavia during the course of which Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan went record to say that, unlike Russia, they shared the cause of the Muslims in Kosovo). The Central Asian Countries, members of the influential Islamic Conference, are trying to get financial assistance from the Islamic Development Bank, and so on. Another significant fact is that, without exception, all the president of Central Asian States has been on the pilgrimage (the Hajj) to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which every Muslim must make.

Such appeals to Islam by Central Asian politicians are a way to flaunt their independence from Russia. Former Turkmenistan is returning on the historical landscape from which it was plucked in Soviet times. At the same time, this departure is by no means always a sure sign of worsening interstate relations. Paradoxically, under certain circumstances the Islamic factor com promote closer relations between Russia and Central Asia, for example, in the case of the threat of Islamic radicalism spilling over from neighboring Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan fears in 1996 of Taliban expansion. The 1998 joint statement by Russian and Uzbek presidents referred to the ‘explosive situation’ in Afghanistan and said that further escalation of tension in that country fought with then spread religious extremism and terrorism, the growing arms and drug smuggling, refugee exodus threaten the national interests and security of the states in the region.

At that time this view was shared by the other presidents of the Central Asian republics with the exception of Turkmein leader Niyazov, who hoped for normal relations with the Taliban movement and to be able to act as mediator in the internal Afghan conflict. People of this region seem less afraid of Afghan Taliban campaigns of conquest than of their successes in setting an example to local Islamic and spurring them into more resolute action.

We can assume that Central Asian States have an axe to grind in cooperation with Muslims in other countries or we can interpret this primarily as a diplomatic game or the contrary, as a sincere desire for cooperation. At any rate, Central Asian identifies itself with the Muslim world which for its part recognizes Central Asia as its component part. Whereas for the ruling circles turning to Islam is probably tactical in character the Islamic factor is decisive for some parts of the opposition. These groups openly state that the above mentioned ‘Islamic alternative’ is the only possible solutions if the present situation in society is to be radically improved. This opposition is variously described as fundamentalism, Islamism, extremism or Wahhabism. Analyzing the overall Islamic movement (not in Central Asia alone) shows clearly what is behind these terms. Fundamentalism implies attitude that idealize the ‘golden age of Islam’ and an ideology that gives reasons to believe in the inevitability and need of going back to the past, restoring values and rules of social and personal behavior on the basis of the Shari’ah, which in the final analysis is only possible in an Islamic state. Nevertheless, a lifelong fundamentalist can be simultaneously a law-abiding citizen who does not participate in any political activities. Islamism is political action that aims to establish an Islamic state, that is, to achieve the main goal of the Fundamentalist ideology. Are Fundamentalism and Islamism present in the society and on the political stage of Central Asia? They are, beyond any doubt. Their followers are shaping a trend in public opinion and are fully fledged participants in the political process. It is useless and even dangerous to try to ignore this fact and even more so to fight Fundamentalism and Islamism as a sociopolitical and ideological phenomenon. We know from the experience of Muslim countries- Algeria, Turkey, Sudan, Egypt, Indonesia and others- that persecution of political Islam result in the radicalization of its followers and the appearance of extremists. This destabilizes the situation in society and can never lead to civil war, as happened in Algeria in the wake of 1992 attempt by the authorities to destroy the Islamic Salvation Front, the leading opposition force.



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The word ‘Wahhabism’ originated in the 18th- 19th centuries and is connected with the name of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who conceived the idea of recreating an Islamic state of the prophet Muhammad times in Arabia given the entirely specific nature of his ideology and practices, this can be described as a special case of ‘Proto- Fundamentalism’ and ‘Proto- Islamism’.

Islamism in Central Asian States and regions is of an enclave nature. The extent of the influence of Islamic opposition in society depends on traditionalist society is, on the opportunities to conduct corresponding propaganda and finally, on the opposition’s ability of self- organization. It is possible to single out three broad stages of Islamist activities during the 1990s. The first stage was the start of the 1990s, when political Islam was developing in the general context of an Islamic renaissance. It was a time before the disintegration of the USSR, when Islamic political organizations were being created, including republican branches of the All-Union Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) founded in Astrakhan in 1990. In addition to the local IRP branch in Uzbekistan, there was the ‘Adalat Movement’, the Islamic Party of Turkmenistan and the Party of National Freedom and the Islamic Culture in Kazakhstan- it proved impossible to found an Islamic organization only in Turkmenistan and a harsh regime was established almost immediately after the declaration of an independent state.

The majority of the Islamic structures of those times were not fated to become stable political organization. Some proved no more than educational groups, while others could not establish a strong organizational center. Still others did not go beyond one-time actions, even if they were rather clamorous. Some organizations disbanded with others were crushed by the state. The Islamic Renaissance party in Tajikistan proved the most successful of all making it to the government in 1992 and later playing a key role in opposition. The Adalat Movement, for example enjoyed great popularity in the Fergana valley but was finally brought down by president Karimov.

The second period, between 1992 to 1996, led to the impression that Islamists were unable to really compete against the ruling regions anywhere but Tajikistan. This was actually a lull during which Islamism was retracting. The breeding ground the Islamism remained however- the worsening economic situation, growing unemployment general disappointment caused by failed reforms and the renaissance of Islam was only a matter of time. The beginning of the third period, marking a fresh spiral of Islamist activity, come somewhere between 1996 and 1997. This was a time of success for the United. Tajik opposition (UTO) in which Islamist form the foundation. As a result of a negotiating process, the UTO won the number of key positions in the coalition government. At the same time, in Uzbekistan the radical organization ‘Warriors of Jihad’ ‘Hezbollah’ and ‘Akramiyya’ grew more active. The section of non-conformist clergy was consolidated and many mosques, primarily in the Fergana ally, became centers of political Islamic opposition. Islamism began to be strengthened in Tashkent. One can endorse the view of reputable journalist Igor Rodar, who believes that Islamists are the ‘main competition’ to the Uzbek establishment.

Be that as it may, Islamists and generally all those who occupy the position of non-conformist Islam are being systematically harassed. They faced criminal trials, many clergymen who crossed over to join the opposition are in prison and some have vanished without trace. The authorities have closed down several mosques which they claim hard become centers of anti-government propaganda, furthermore, Oliy Majlis, Uzbekistan parliament passed a law in 1998; ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations’ and on stricter punishment for violating the rules of teaching religious subjects and for preparing disseminating materials containing ideas of religious extremism. The regional committee of the authority received lists of questions to help identify ‘Wahhabites’ or those sharing; Wahhabite convictions’ in the different regions. Item 6th of this this document, for example, requires the committees ‘to discover residents connected with Wahhabites, determines the composition of their families who of them are employed, where or what they do to report sources of their sustenance’.

Political Islam is gradually gaining a foothold in Kyrgyzstan and southern region of Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, primarily in the cities of Osh and Dzalal-Abad, as well as in Batken, a number of Islamist groups were trying to secure official registration with the Justice Ministry. In and around Osh where according to official figures there are more than 1000 mosques, there is a perceptible influence of fundamentalist ideology, transmitted mainly by the local Uzbeks and agitators from Tajikistan. In 1996-1997 there was a propaganda campaign in the republic from founding an Islamic party. In Kazakhstan, although the majority of specialists agree that ‘the Islamic fundamentalist idea have so far not become widespread’, many indicates that the tendency towards political Islam is becoming more and more evident in the south of the country, in Chimkent, Turkestan and other towns and regions.

The activity of political Islam is hampered by the absence of the single guiding or coordinating center in individual countries, let alone in Central Asia as a whole. It is also important to note that in order to be successful any Islamic political movement needs authoritative, or better still, charismatic leaders. There are not such leaders to be found in Central Asia today, and there is no suitable candidate. This is mainly because the Islamic movement and organizations currently active there are practically national, that is to say,



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their objectives do not go beyond their own countries or even regions. Nevertheless, Islamism in Central Asia is stable and relatively dynamic. It is obvious that the current unwillingness on both sides to reach a compromise could culminate in a conflict.

The importance of the Islamic factor for the sociopolitical affairs of Central Asia is limited and there is sphere in which it plays no appreciable role. First, it is not a unifying factor for the overall society. The ethnic Russian population accounts for nearly 34% in Kazakhstan, 17% in Kyrgyzstan, 6.5% in Uzbekistan, 8% in Turkmenistan and 4% in Tajikistan. If in the name of national-state consolidation, the ruling elites starts systematically and intensively sour its relation with the non-Muslims population but also prove to be yet another irritant for Russia and cause bewilderment abroad, where mixing Islam and politics provokes negative reactions.

Second, Islam is unable to play a consolidating part on the ethnic and national levels. Regional clan, ethnic and tribal interests nowadays have precedence over adherence to a common religion. For example, the civil war in Tajikistan was between Muslims from various regions and clans. In Kazakhstan, to be member of the Zhuz is in practical life incomparably more important than professing Islam. Finally, in the interethnic conflicts in Central Asia, in Fergana in 1989, in Osh in 1990 and so on, those involved were Muslims. Naturally, as society and ruling elite go back to their traditions the Islamic factor will contribute to a consolidation of society.

Third, Islam is not a factor of organizational development of the state. The Central Asian republics are secular states. The problem of recognizing Islam as the official religion is being debated only in Tajikistan. Religion is separated from the state and it is impossible to speak of the participation by the religious institutions- councils of 'Ulma, Shari'ah courts' and so on- in state activities. On the other hand, legitimation of some Shari'ah laws and blending them with secular norms is most likely a matter for the near future.

Fourth, Islam is not a factor of political stabilization. There are two approaches to Islam in society, one reflects the views of the political and Europeanized (mostly Soviet style) intellectual elite, which confines Islam's role to the religious and cultural sphere and as a regulator of relationships between people in everyday life. The other reflects the views of the former and cooperate with them. Those advocating other approach are so far in opposition to each other, and tensions in society will continue unless both reach a compromise.

Fifth, Islam is not a factor for the mobilization of Central Asian societies for purely secular accomplishments the creation of modern economy, infrastructure, expansion of agriculture, etc. as compared to Algeria, Libia, Iran and many other Muslim states in which Islamic rhetoric was widely used to interpret their economic and social strategies. Many people know that Algeria's former president Houari Boumediene (1965-78) proposed that economic reform be seen in the context of 'big Jihad' or activities directed at improving the position of the Muslim community. The five-year development plan drafted in the 1960s opened the b-ismil-lah, in the name of God prayer formula. No Central Asian States has a similar interpretation of economic development, and it is impossible in the lifetime of the current elite. Sixth, appeals to Islam do not promote consolidation between states in the region. The elite discuss the religious commonality of Central Asian States on extremely rare occasion and the subject practically never arises in the foreign affairs.

Conclusion

Central Asian republics accepted almost similar approach regarding the Muslim faith. They have implemented an ethnicized and nationalized form of Islam to strengthen their grip on power. The authorities also implemented secularism as a tool for social control and for suppressing Islamic radicals who have challenged the states power structure. In Central Asia, the emergence of new political Islam shows a big failure of its governments who cannot provide a political vision that could inspire a new hope for a better future.

As a result, what should be the Western response to Central Asia's moderate Islamists? WikiLeaks have indicated that Washington has already considered the possibility of supporting them. Western countries, however, should refrain from the open endorsement of moderate Islamists. Such a move may prove counterproductive by inflaming anti-Western sentiments in Central Asian societies. The new political Islam should be allowed to develop on its own by adapting to modern needs without impairing its virtues. This may be a case in which the best the West can offer is benign neglect.

Despite its limited role, the Islamic factor is a social and political reality in Central Asia which cannot be denied today. Its importance varies from country to country. Islam is constantly influencing the sociopolitical processes, shaping the concepts of values



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and regulating relations between people. Islam is undoubtedly a political tool, whose role will grow to probably intensify the struggle between the various parties and groups, primarily between the regimes and oppositions. On the other hand, there are influential forces in Central Asia which insist abridging the role of religion and taking it out to the sphere of politics. The best solution to this dichotomy is to reach a compromise between things purely secular and Islamic, in the absence of which the worsening of social, interethnic and religious conflict will constantly threaten Central Asian societies.

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