

Instrumentalization of Islam in Central Asia: Using Religion for Legitimizing the Governing Regimes

by Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Abstract

Governments in Central Asia recognize a „traditional“ or „official“ version of the Islamic faith to strengthen the national identity, but also to legitimize local authoritarian regimes. Officials justify structural and political grievances by referencing a ‘security discourse’ of „Islamic danger“. However, governmental repressions against „unofficial“ Islamic practices could have counterproductive effects.

Key words: Islam, Central Asia, Instrumentalization, Repression

The authoritarian governments of Central Asian states have relied on multiple means to sustain their power grip and maintain legitimacy. With some variation across the region, these regimes have derived their legitimacy from their ability to deliver on socio-economic promises, ensure state security and unity of the nation, and establish formal representative institutions covering these countries’ democratic deficit. Islam, too, has been co-opted by these governments in a process that I term the instrumentalization of religion. The latter refers to the discursive representation of Islam around certain themes for accomplishing specific political goals.¹

Any religion as a system of beliefs can lend itself to instrumentalization. Islamic tradition, which lacks a central organizational hierarchy and recognizes no authoritative source of doctrinal interpretation, is particularly open to divergent readings of religious texts and the deliberate manipulation of religious meanings. The relative freedom of interpretation of what counts as “Islamic” and what is “un-Islamic” and impious presents stakeholders, including the secular regimes, with an opportunity to assert their authority over religious practices

1 Mariya Y. Omelicheva (2016) “Islam and Power Legitimation: Instrumentalisation of Religion in Central Asian States,” *Contemporary Politics*, 122(2): 144-163.

and knowledge. In the remainder of this article, I review common themes and interpretations of Islam developed in the official discourses of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and illustrate how these representations have assisted the governing regimes in legitimizing their rule and policies.

The Discourse of “Traditional” Islam and Its Uses in Nation-Building and Nation-Branding

One of the defining features of Islam in Central Asia is its connection to ethnicity. For the majority of Kazakhs, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, ethnic identity is a Muslim one: “To be Kazakh means to be Muslim;” “There can be no *O‘zbekchilik* without *Musulmonchilik*.”² This correspondence of ethnic and religious identification has deep historical roots. Prior to the Russian conquest, large segments of the Central Asian population identified themselves as

2 See, for example, Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans (2009) “Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)Socialism.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 9 (2009): 1524. Muslims in Kyrgyzstan tend to emphasize relationships with their own kin, rather than all other Kyrgyz Muslims (Aurélie Biard (2010) “The Religious Factor in the Reification of “Neo-Ethnic” Identities in Kyrgyzstan,” *Nationalities Papers* 38, 3, 323-35).

Muslims, but derived this identity from communal practices and traditions rather than the mastery of Quran. The Soviet-era nationality politics strengthened this religious and national identification, and it has been reinforced in the post-independence period. Today, as centuries ago, Muslimness is viewed as intrinsic to the Central Asian peoples. Many Central Asian Muslims do not regard the strict observance of Islamic prohibitions as the exclusive marker of Muslim identity. Instead, their Muslimness is defined by virtue of birth into a family of Muslims and through the lineage in the communities where Islam constituted a central component of life.³

The official discourses of “traditional” Islam are best understood in this context. The Central Asian governments have creatively deployed references to the region’s rich Islamic heritage for accomplishing distinctive nation-building aims. Islam Karimov, the late president of Uzbekistan, anchored his legitimacy in Uzbek nationalism built on celebrating the cultural and Islamic heritage of Uzbekistan. The late president portrayed the “cultural” and “traditional” Islam of Uzbeks as a moral fabric for their national character and a depository of ancestral spiritual values transferred from one generation to another. Karimov drew discursive links between his own views and those of representatives of the Uzbek Islamic heritage, in this way defending his Islamic reputation, and conferring legitimacy on his policies.

Until recently, the nation-building efforts of Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon excluded all references to Islam. Instead, his government has drawn on the pre-Islamic and Persian heritage as a source of an official collective memory. Islam, however,

has been imperious to the stern anti-religious policies of the Rahmon administration. An increasing number of young Tajiks publically express signs of religious piety. There is a growing interest in Islamic knowledge and renewed debates about the essence of “genuine” Islam. Facing this Islamic resurgence, the Tajik government has begun embracing Islam by including selective references to the Islamic heritage as part of its nation-building agenda. In 2009, Tajikistan commemorated “Imami Azam”, the founder of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, and in 2010 Dushanbe was named the “Capital of Islamic Culture.”⁴ In 2016, in a striking change of his aversion to Islamic rituals, Rahmon has travelled to Saudi Arabia accompanied by his relatives and senior officials to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. All other Central Asian leaders have publically performed the Hajj.

Kazakhstan’s president, Nursulatan Nazarbayev, has also expressed his reverence for the national Islamic tradition, but deployed all references to Islam in the context of building Kazakhstan’s image as a peaceful and stable poly-confessional and multi-ethnic state. The idea of national unity has become a source of legitimacy for the Nazarbayev government, credited for intelligent policies responsible for inter-ethnic and religious accord. This model of peaceful religious co-existence in a modern and economically developed state has become Kazakhstan’s national brand flaunted to other Muslim nations.

3 Ro'i, Y. & Wainer, A. (2009) ‘Muslim Identity and Islamic Practice in Post-Soviet Central Asia’, *Central Asian Survey* 28, 3, pp. 303-22.

4 Tim Epkenhans (2011) “Defining Normative Islam: Some Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Thought in Tajikistan – Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda’s Sharia and Society,” *Central Asian Survey* 30(1): 81-96.

The Discourse of “Official” Islam: Legitimizing Control over Religion

Central Asian republics are constitutionally secular but predominantly Muslim states. By different estimates, Muslims constitute 52-65% of all believers in Kazakhstan, and 90-93% in Turkmenistan. In Kyrgyzstan, 75-86% of the population identifies with Islam, and around 88-90% of Uzbeks and 90-98% of Tajiks are Muslims. The majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis of Hanafi madhab, but there are also Sufi, Shia, and Salafi minorities across Central Asia.⁵

The constitutions of Central Asian states declare the separation of state and religion and enshrine religious freedoms. In reality, the regimes have exercised extensive control over religious practices through the mandatory registration of religious associations, determination of qualifications for clergy, censorship of religious literature and information, and even surveillance of mosques with security cameras. In 2016, Dushanbe banned Central Asia’s only legally operating Islamic political force - the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. Other Central Asian states outlawed the formation of religious parties immediately following their independence.

The regimes’ grip on the practice of Islam has strengthened in recent years. Tajikistan, for example, passed regulations of private celebrations, funeral services, and weddings in Tajikistan, banned female students from wearing hijabs and prohibited minors from participating in public religious rituals. Reports of forced beard-shaving and

new constraints on the travel to Mecca on the Hajj transpired in 2016. Kazakhstan, too, has tightened its restrictions on religious activities by summoning home Kazakh nationals who were studying at religious institutions abroad. In 2016, it created a new Kazakh Ministry of Religious Issues and Civil Society that barred women from wearing headscarves in educational institutions and announced its plans to ban Salafism.

The instrumentalization of Islam through the creation of a category of “official” religion has provided the governments with the necessary context for legitimizing state control of religious affairs. The vague category of “official” Islam has been linked to the corpus of texts, practices, institutions, and individuals sanctioned by the new religious administrations. Nominally independent, the new Central Asian Muftiates, which exercise monopoly over religious instruction and the organization of contacts with the rest of the Muslim world, act as organs of state. Furthermore, various agencies for religious affairs established in the structure of Central Asian governments have been responsible for overseeing the implementation of religious laws.

Islamic groups and movements practicing their faith outside the state-sponsored religious institutions have been regarded as pseudo-Muslim by the Muftiates and criminalized and prosecuted by the states. As succinctly stated by the late Uzbek president, “the wrong kind of Islam [must] be kept in check, by merciless means if necessary.”⁶ The “official” Hanafi Islam has been discursively linked to the region’s Islamic tradition and embedded with positive subjective evalua-

5 Mariya Y. Omelicheva (2016). “The Multiple Faces of Islamic Rebirth in Central Asia,” in *New Approaches to Area Studies in the Global Era: Community, Place, Identity*, edited by Edith Clowes and Shelly Bromberg. Northern Illinois University Press, pp. 143-158.

6 As quoted by Human Rights Watch (1998), “Crackdown in the Farghona Valley: Arbitrary Arrests and Religious Discrimination,” available from: <http://www.hrw.org/hrw/reports98/uzbekistan>.

tions, such as “enlightened,” “spiritual,” “authentic,” “moderate,” “tolerant,” and “sensible.” The unofficial Islamic practices have been portrayed as “alien,” “backward,” “fanatic,” “obscurantist,” and “dangerous.” Muslims practicing the “wrong” kind of faith have been labelled “barbarians” and “uneducated people” who seek to increase their power under the pretext of pseudo-Islamic beliefs.

**The Discourse on the Islamist threat:
Justifying Political Repression, Diverting
Public Attention from Socio-
Economic Concerns**

The discourse on the Islamist threat is neither new nor unique to the region. In Central Asia, it has been fueled by the emergence of a number of homegrown and foreign Islamist groups, including those propagating jihad, and a series of terrorist attacks blamed on Islamists.⁸ Overall, however, the fundamentalist expressions of Islam have been inimical to the majority of Central Asian Muslims, who view their religion as part of their ethnic identity, heritage and culture. Nonetheless, the Uzbek and Tajik leaders challenged by religious opposition at the dawn of their states’ independence have repeatedly warned about the existence of an imminent security threat from Islam and called for security policies on religion.

Although the Islamist groups operating in Central Asian exhibit considerable di-

versity in their religious beliefs, political goals, and strategies, the official discourse on the Islamist threat homogenizes them and renders them synonyms with “fundamentalism” and “Wahhabism”. The vagueness of these terms has allowed the government to employ them selectively to crack down on any dissent, including political, civil, and religious dissent. The emergence of dangerous variations of Islam has been blamed on external influences, even though the majority of analysts agree that the Islamic revival in Central Asia has been driven by local developments, rather than by foreign intellectual thought and proselytizing. Central Asia has not been immune to the influences that contributed to the appearance of radical Islamic groups. Still, it is the internal processes, including state repression that facilitated the emergence of radical Islamic groups.

All Central Asian governments have tried to externalize the structural and institutional failures produced by deficiencies in their rule onto the Islamist threat. The Islamist threat has been blamed for redirecting states’ efforts away from public and social programs and obstructing the governments in carrying out political and social reforms. To put it differently, by presenting Islamism as the source of national evils, the Central Asian leadership deflected their own responsibility for enduring socio-economic and political problems. The rhetorical hype about the governments’ efforts at protecting their citizens from the Islamist danger has been used to enhance the legitimacy of the governing regimes. In Uzbekistan, the late president Islam Karimov portrayed his country as the last bastion against the Islamist insurgency. The Tajik President has presented Tajikistan as a state on the frontlines in the fight against ISIS. The Kazakh government has emphasized its role in the

⁷ See, for example, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s speech on Islam, Orthodoxy and Protestantism delivered at the XVI Congress of Kazakhstan’s Nur Otan party in Astana on March 11, 2015, available from <https://en.tengrinews.kz/religion/Nursultan-Nazarbayev-speaks-about-Islam-Orthodoxy-and-259371/>

⁸ For further discussion see Omelicheva, “The Multiple Faces of Islamic Rebirth in Central Asia.”

global war against terrorism.

Conclusion

Islam in Central Asia is immensely diverse. It manifests itself in a variety of local practices and beliefs that have become intertwined with canonical Islam during the century-long history of Islamicization of the region. This richness and diversity of the Central Asian Islamic tradition cannot be reduced to simplistic presentations of Islam as “traditional,” “official,” or “radical.” Overall, Islam in Central is very moderate due to the prevalence of the indigenous forms of Hanafi madhab and strong association between religious and ethnic/national identity.

The Central Asian governments, however, have employed these categories as a tool for power legitimation. The rhetoric of “traditional” Islam has become a legitimizing instrument in the hands of the ruling elites in need of popular support. The leadership of Central Asian states has celebrated Islam as a national heritage and a moral compass, and employed their states’ Islamic identity for building productive relations with other Muslim states. The Central Asian governments have claimed the right, even a responsibility, to defend and protect the “traditional” and “official” Islam from the dangerous foreign influences detrimental to their countries’ progress. These characteri-

zations of Islam have been used to justify the homogenization of Islamic practices, imposing restrictions on religious expressions, and repression in the name of combatting violent Islamism. All in all, the instrumentalization of Islam has provided the Central Asian governments with an opportunity to clamp down on religious and secular dissent and to cover up the lingering deficiencies in their governance. The instrumentalization of Islam, although beneficial to the rulers in the short run, bears long-term repercussions. Seeking to control religion through restrictive policies and discourse, the governments inadvertently contribute to the emergence of social forces ready to embrace alternative expressions of Islam, which may be destined to transform themselves into radical forms. Rather than deterring Central Asian Muslims from turning to “unofficial” brands of Islam, state repression could have an opposite effect – strengthening the resolve of the most determined individuals and pushing the moderates onto a dangerous path.

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