

Revisiting Islamism

A FACTOR FOR DEMOCRATIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA?

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This memo hopes to revisit the old Islamism/democratization paradigm in Central Asia and to provide some new avenues for debate. It sets out from three hypotheses:

- 1) Generational changes underway in the region are giving rise to new ways of formulating the place of Islam in the public space;
- 2) these new ways are vastly in favor of giving Islam an increased role, whether Islam is understood as an alternative ideology to the post-Soviet consensus still in place, or as a social practice to rival the operations of ruling regimes; and
- 3) these new kinds of Islamism and their proponents will likely be called upon to play a role in the upcoming broader ideological diversity of Central Asian public spaces.

Islamism and Democracy: Old Debates, New Contexts?

Policy and scholarly debates around the role of Islamism in the democratization of societies with a Muslim majority is an old subject dating from the 1960s, a time of great polemics between socialist-minded Arab nationalism and Islamism in the Middle East. The topic underwent a revival in the 1980s after the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the rise to power of jihadist ideologies in the subsequent decade. The Arab Spring of 2011 has quite obviously re-injected some vigor into the debate, as has the patent failure, in 2013, of the Islamic Tunisian and Egyptian governments to build a consensus among those who supported them against the previous secular authoritarian regimes.

But what definition might be given to Islamism? Islamism is a political ideology that aims for the capture of power, but the methods of capture can differ, from democratic competition to violent overthrow. Far away from internationalized jihadism, the majority of Islamisms believe in the nation-state, and their references to a global caliphate are merely rhetorical arguments in the same vein as the universalism of values in Christian cultures. They endorse a state in which reference to Islam is official – but the

degree of Islamization of state organs can be very divergent, ranging from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's still largely-secular Turkey to countries like Saudi Arabia where Sharia law forms the basis of the legal system.

The way I use Islamism here does not refer to a literal reading of the Koran or the transposing of religious transcendence into the political sphere, but to a political ideology based on identifiable actors, with their own social niches and practices, and who are able to articulate them with theoretical arguments.

Central Asia: from Democratic Islamo-Nationalism to Illiberal Salafism?

In Central Asia, the debate about the relationship between Islamism and democratization is not a recent one. From its creation clandestinely in 1973, the Party of Islamic Rebirth of the Soviet Union presented itself as the Muslim version of dissidence. In the *perestroika* years, many political movements with Islamo-nationalist leanings took up common cause with liberally-oriented pro-democratic groups in order to combat the Soviet regime and the apparatchiks who inherited it at the moment of independence: the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan (IRPT) got involved in the civil war alongside liberal-oriented parties such as Lali Badakhshan; in Uzbekistan, Birlik and Erk cooperated with pro-Western groups looking to counter Islam Karimov; and in Kazakhstan, Azat and Alash remained allied with the anti-Nazarbayev opposition alongside the Russian ethnic minority, the Communist party, the Greens, and the pensioners' movement, before being ultimately liquidated. The Tajik case remains exemplary: even today, despite its weakening both from external pressures at the hand of President Emomali Rakhmon's regime and from internal contestations by more radical tendencies, the IRPT constitutes a major element of Tajik political life and has obliged the authorities to be more liberal than their Uzbek, Turkmen, or even Kazakh counterparts.

In the 2000s, the Islamism/democratization paradigm seemed to disappear: Central Asian political diversity became reduced to a minimum with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, where political opposition forces expressed themselves through an ethnic prism more than a religious one. Media discussion on Islamic radicalism—aptly managed by the established regimes and based on the unique example of the alliance of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to the Taliban and then to Al-Qaeda—dominated policy analysis and partially also scholarly study.

However, the internal evolutions of Central Asian societies urge us to re-open the debate on the relationship between Islamism and democratization. During the first two decades of independence, three main trends of Islam could be identified. The first of these are official representatives of Islam—elites trained in the mold of the Spiritual Boards and lower-ranking imams or muftis. These cannot be considered Islamist as they defend the *modus vivendi* of the secular state controlling spiritual power in a more or less authoritarian way.

Faced with these, supporters of Islamism as an alternative have been divided into two major categories. The first, educated between the 1960s and 1980s in dissident circles, was sometimes linked with Sufi tendencies but more often inspired by non-

Hanafi schools of thought, in particular by Hanbalism. Its members were at the core of the Islamo-nationalist political parties built in the *perestroika* era and tried to participate in political life at the start of the 1990s by putting forward alternative models of the future. Most of their leaders are exiled or were liquidated in the second half of the 1990s and the early part of the 2000s.

The second category, formed after independence, gathers movements of more Salafi persuasion that endorse a literal reading of the Koran, a re-Islamization of society from below, and campaign in favor of a more internationalized Islam. Most of their members have studied abroad in the large Islamic education centers, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo or the Sunni universities of Zahedan or Mashhad in Iran; have visited the main centers of the reformist proselyte movement Tablighi Jamaat in New Delhi, Deoband, and Lucknow; or have been to Pakistan or to Malaysia. These groups are in close contact with the increasingly active Muslim proselyte strands: Tablighi Jamaat and Ahmadiyya from the Indian subcontinent, the Suleymanci from Turkey, the Salafi groups from Russia (either from the Volga-Ural region or the North Caucasus), as well as Hizb ut-Tahrir. Added to this second category are groups that call for violent jihad, but these are very weak numerically.

New Central Asian Islamisms as a Sign of Democratization?

This binary division distorts the analysis, since it presupposes an almost mechanical transition from the Islamo-nationalism of the 1990s to the more internationalized Salafism of the 2000s, whereas the ideological spectrum is actually much more diversified and the transitions from one to the other are complex. The IMU, originally called Adolat, had Islamo-nationalist goals before some of its members converted to jihadism. Its remaining legitimacy in Uzbekistan is clearly more centered on its Islamo-nationalist heritage than on its rallying to the Taliban, which no one else in Central Asia takes as a model. Hizb ut-Tahrir, despite its internationalist rhetoric, is also itself above all rooted in national and not international debates.

More importantly, this binary division does not take into consideration the emergence of a third wave of Islamic movements. Although works to support the analysis are still rare, I classify them here into two major trends.

A new Islamo-nationalism

A new Islamo-nationalism is to be found among the tens of thousands of young people coming out of the Turkish schools and universities in Central Asia who have been initiated to a moderate Islamism through Nurcu rhetoric, as well as among youth groups with ethno-nationalist sensibilities, present in particular in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These latter do not necessarily have associations that represent them officially; instead, it is a matter of youth sociability practices and narratives which spread via the Internet, social media, and blogs.

On the ideological level, this new Islamo-nationalism combines features of ethno-nationalism (pride in one's ethnic group, criticisms of the rights the state gives to minority groups, denunciation of "internationalized" elites, explicit rejection of Russia

as a colonial power, popular mythology on the historical exploits of one's nation, and conspiriological interpretations of the past and present) and of Islamism (state support for a growing role of Islam in public space and the denunciation of the secular character of the elites, who are held responsible for their corruption). It is distinguished from Salafism in the sense that its call for state support for Islam is intrinsically linked to national identity and to the "revival of traditions," not to a mythical return to the original purity of Islam. Its ideological borders are flexible, however: secular ethno-nationalist movements also exist, pan-Turkic statements can also be affirmed or rejected here, and the relation to the West can be positive (liberal convictions at the economic or political levels) or negative.

On the social level, this Islamo-nationalist movement is to be found essentially among the new small middle-classes, educated in vocational schools, technical institutes, and countryside universities, and employed professionally in the private sector (businessmen, as well as employees of large companies with a legal or technical background) or low-ranking administration (teachers, provincial university professors, and state employees at the local and regional levels).

Grassroots Islamist activists

Under this vague term I classify two major (but relatively different) movements that are nonetheless united by two shared elements: a critique of state inefficiency due to its secular nature and a focus on community-based justice.

First are businessmen who act as religious patrons, sponsoring mosques and madrasas, and do not hide their Islamic convictions (with notable ideological divergences). These groups were in the media spotlight in 2005 at the time of the Andijon repression against the Akkromiyya group, a business association practicing Islam's principles of solidarity that had considerable popular support and financial capabilities outside of official streams. In Kazakhstan, Kayrat Satybaldy, former head of the Muslim party Aq Orda, is considered an influential pro-Islamic leader, who offers his protection to any network of Islamist businessmen. This model of Islamic business associations is spreading in Central Asia, whether underground or public depending on the country but always with the central idea that economic success goes hand-in-hand with piety and ought to serve the community. In contrast with Islamo-nationalism, these movements can be more inspired by Salafism.

Second is a mushrooming Islamic civil society, which operates on an issue-based advocacy system, with the goal of improving specific issues: defending property rights and housing in rural and urban contexts, delivering charitable services for the poor, accessing healthcare for the elderly or children, settling peaceful community or family conflicts, and campaigning for the improvement of women's rights within the framework of the Islamic legal system. Such groups assert that Islamic values are compatible with a state governed by the rule of law and appeal to a form of civic engagement in harmony with Islamic values. These groups are mainly active in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where there is more room for maneuver than in the other Central Asian states.

It is also possible to observe timid attempts at transforming this grassroots activism into a political instrument. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, Tursunbay Bakir Uulu, a former deputy ombudsman and president of the small democratic party Erkin, and businessman Nurlan Matuev created first the Congress of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan and then the Union of True Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Both called for economic development consistent with the canons of Islam by strengthening the fight against corruption and by making public life more moral. Among the Central Asian diasporas settled in Russia, in particular the Tajik and Kyrgyz ones, several businessmen aiming to transform their economic success into political leverage also appear to be soliciting the emerging Islamic vote.

The Effect of These Two Trends on the Islamism-Democratization Debate in Central Asia

First, statements in favor of a state support for Islam as a national or state ideology are today practically the only such *political* statements, as Central Asian political life is largely de-ideologized. By undermining the current *modus vivendi* of the state-religion relationship bequeathed by the Soviet regime, these movements provide a new avenue of debate concerning the interaction between state and society, and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of current regimes. They contribute to the democratization of public debate by giving voice to a greater diversity of arguments.

Second, these new Islamic actors are not political or Islamic ‘professionals’ but average citizens. They occupy professional niches, many of which emerged from the transition to the market economy in the 1990s. They generate alternative revenues to the established elites, and they often question the post-Soviet consensus of public rent redistribution through practices of social justice. They embody the growing economic and social diversity of Central Asian societies.

Third, both trends reveal the ideological evolutions underway in the region due to generational change. Islamo-nationalism; the link between economic success, piety, greater moral conservatism; and the question of social justice and citizen accountability are part of the new givens which will no longer be ignored. In need of new political legitimacy, the regimes that will emerge in future years in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but also in other forms in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, will have to take into account these new sensibilities and the social influence of their actors.

These Islamist sensibilities, whatever they become—political parties aiming at power or otherwise—will contribute to a greater democratization of Central Asian societies. The debate on Islamism and democracy would thus do well to get out of the stranglehold pertaining to the IMU legacy and the risk of violent overthrow by Salafi radicals. Instead, it ought to move closer to this everyday Islamism, which is leaving its stamp on a rising number of young Central Asians.

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