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Ideological threats in Uzbekistan: recent history and modern techniques

Amenazas ideológicas en Uzbekistán: historia reciente y técnicas modernas

Contenido

ABSTRACT	315
RESUMEN	315
1. INTRODUCTION	316
2. METHODS	316
3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION	316
3.1 The situation during the reign of the Russian Empire	316
3.2 The situation during the reign of the Soviet Union	317
3.3 The situation during the independence period	318
4. CONCLUSION	321
REFERENCES	321
AUTHOR	322
CONFLICT OF INTEREST	322

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on an approach to the history of relations between religion and the state in Uzbekistan and how the tense relationship has influenced the progress of Uzbekistan's independence. The research uses historical, comparative, deductive, and systematic methods of analysis. The discussions show that as a result of the obstacles to obtaining religious education in Uzbekistan during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the spiritual and religious needs of many people were met with very limited notions, which have led to greater religious ignorance and pseudoscience that ultimately played a major role in activating extremist religious movements after 1991.

Keywords: Religious education; Islamic extremism; Ideological threats; Uzbekistan; USSR.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo se centra en un enfoque de la historia de las relaciones entre la religión y el Estado en Uzbekistán y en la forma en que la tensa relación ha influido en el progreso de la independencia de Uzbekistán. La investigación utiliza métodos de análisis históricos, comparativos, deductivos y sistemáticos. Los debates muestran que, como resultado de los obstáculos para obtener educación religiosa en Uzbekistán durante el Imperio Ruso y la Unión Soviética, las necesidades espirituales y religiosas de muchas personas fueron atendidas con nociones muy limitadas, lo que ha dado lugar a una mayor ignorancia religiosa y pseudociencia que, en última instancia, desempeñó un papel importante en la activación de los movimientos religiosos islamistas extremistas en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Educación religiosa; extremismo islámico; amenazas ideológicas; Uzbekistán; URSS.

1. INTRODUCTION

Maintaining a balance between secularity and religiosity is an important factor in determining the future of any society. The imbalance between the two has caused confusion and benevolence in many countries. The period of the Inquisitions, which in medieval Europe became a symbol of brutal punishment and torture, can be a clear example of this. Giordano Bruno, Nicolas Copernicus and other great minds were victims of the tensions between religiosity and secularity in society. The research studies the attitude towards Islam in Uzbekistan during the reign of the Russian Empire (mid 1860-1917) and the USSR (early 1920-1991); as well as the activation of religious extremist groups and their techniques to recruit and train their members.

Many researchers attempted to analyze the attitude of the leaders of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union toward religion, particularly Islam. By way of illustration, Brower (1997), Crews (2006), Babadjanov (2004), Erkinov (2019), Shorish (1986), Sartori (2009), Dudoignon (2004) provide a broad overview of Islam during the Czarist period in Central Asia. Relevant information on the Soviet period can be found in the works of Kowalsky (2005), Husband (2000), Bennigsen (1986), Bräker (1994), DeWeese (2002), Günther (2012), Jansen and Kemper (2011), Tasar (2016) and others. The activation of extremist groups in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period is examined in documents such as Baran (2006), Chaudet (2006), Abdullaev (2003), Gunn (2003), Montgomery (2009), Laruelle (2007), McGlinchey (2011), Khamraev (2001), Omelchieva (2011), etc. The bibliography compiled by Aurelie Biard (2016) contains a complete list of documents devoted to religion in Central Asia from the Czarist period to the present.

Although the sources mentioned above provide comprehensive information on the status of Islam and Islamic education in individual periods, there are not many documents that establish links between attempts to eradicate Islam in Central Asia (particularly Uzbekistan) during Russian rule and the emergence of extremist Islamic movements in the post-Soviet period. The aim of this paper is to fill this gap by establishing a connection between the lack of religious education during the 130 years of Russian rule that resulted in limited, biased, incomplete, and distorted notions of religion among the population and the activation of extremist movements after the independence of Uzbekistan.

The document can be broadly divided into three main parts: the period of the Russian Empire, the period of the USSR, and the period of independence. The first two parts will demonstrate the efforts of the Russian Empire and the USSR to undermine Islam and their results; while the third part focuses on the emergence of extremist Islamic movements and the methods used by them in post-independence Uzbekistan.

2. METHODS

The paper uses historical, comparative, deductive, and systematic analysis methods. It employs secondary data in the form of articles, books, and data by several Uzbeks and international scholars to portray the attitude of ruling regimes towards religion and the condition of religious education during the past 150 years in the current Uzbekistan territory. The research draws parallels between various historical events to establish a cause and effect relationship between the lack of religious education and the emergence of extremist religious groups. The analysis has a purely qualitative nature.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 The situation during the reign of the Russian Empire

Most parts of Central Asia were conquered by the Russian Empire in the 1860s and 1870s. It became a part of the empire in the form of the Governor-Generalship led by Konstantin von Kaufman. The population of the region was almost entirely Muslim, similar to Caucasian mountaineers. The Russian leaders had opposing views on what position to take towards Islam in the region. Some supported the view of religious repression while others preferred a policy of mild religious tolerance (Brower, 1997). Although initially, the second alternative was chosen, de-Islamisation and the russification of the region's population were gradually implemented. To illustrate, professor Begali Kasimov, in his monography namely "Milliy uyg'onish" [National renaissance], provides lots of facts that reveal the attitude of the Russian empire towards a destiny, education, and enlightenment of Central Asian nations. For example,

...According to Ismoilbek Gasprinskiy (intellectual, educator, publisher and politician who inspired the Jadidist movement in Central Asia), the foremost priority for the Muslims in the Russian Empire must be education. Everything else follows, more clearly, starts from, education. However, the nation should first be literate in its mother tongue. National upbringing, sacred ideas should penetrate to people in their mother tongue...

What was the reaction of the Russian government and Russian intelligentsia to this idea? In 1882 they organized a meeting on this topic. The meeting was held on August 30 at the Teachers' Seminarium in Tashkent. The director of the Seminarium was a famous missionary N.Ostroumov. The meeting was attended by many regional senior officials who came with the command of the governor-general A. K. Abramov, religious leaders and parents of the students of the seminarium. History and geography teacher of the seminarium M.A. Miropiev gave a speech in the meeting. The topic of the speech was 'What principles should be the basis for the education of non-Russian Muslims'.

Miropiev dedicated his speech mainly to rejecting Gasprinskiy's ideas:

'By adopting the proposed project (teaching Muslims in their own language using traditional teaching tools – Begali Kasimov) we will revive the now-sleeping Muslim fanaticism ...Thus, the main principle in education of our Muslims must be their russification ...The second principle should be to eradicate Islam, getting rid of proselytism, in short, destroying the religious elements of our Muslims' (Kasimov, 2003, pp. 19-20).

Commenting on this, Begali Kasimov (2003) makes the following remark:

Russian chauvinism has created the notion of "inorodets" (non-gender, inhuman). According to Z. Validiy, the "chief specialist" in this area was Miropiev. According to him, there is no meaning in organizing education for "inorodets" Muslims (i.e. for Turkestan People). Their fate is the same as the American Indians... (p. 19-20).

Indeed, many historical and artistic sources about the life of the Turkestan during the Tsarist invasion show that the principles proclaimed by Miropiev were systematically, consciously, and strictly implemented in real-life, i.e. steps on Russification, destruction of Islam, and devaluation of the religious features of the population were actively taken.

Inhabitants of the region, who had already been living in deep ignorance during the period of three Khanates, were deprived of both secular and religious knowledge because of the systematic actions and clever plans of the invaders. Minds and intelligence of several generations developed in these circumstances. The daily, cultural and spiritual life of the population was shaped by this poor mind and captive thinking.

To visualize the most typical manifestations of the situation, the episodes of some literary works can be reminded. In particular, in Abdulla Kadiri's "Mehrobdan Chayon" [The Scorpion in the Pulpit], the chapter "Iflos bir moziy" [Dirty past] describes with great disgust Abdurahman, a madrassa student in Bukhara (the city which was once regarded to empower Islam) playing the role of a "bachcha" [the teenage homosexual boy who acts like a woman] to entertain the rich men. Or, remember the homosexual heroes of the story "Juvonboz" [Homosexual] (by the same author) who claimed, "thanks to God, we are Muslims".

In the narrative by Gafur Gulam "Shum bola" [The Naughty Boy] eshon (religious person), who pretends in the public as an honest, humble, and modest person, openly teaches Qoravoy (the main hero of the story) stealing and pickpocketing. Another religious man in the same story trades drugs right in the corner of the mosque.

Abdulla Qahhor's narrative "O'tmishdan ertaklar" [Tales from the past], stories "O'g'ri" [Thief], "Bemor" [Sick], "Mayiz yemagan xotin" [A woman who did not eat raisin] also demonstrate the ignorance, hopelessness and the scale of the ravine that the nation and country fell into.

3.2 The situation during the reign of the Soviet Union

Unfortunately, the next 70 years of the Uzbek nation have not been any better in terms of freedom of conscience and religious awareness. From the very first days of its rule, the Bolshevik government, with

various manifestations and decrees, embodying such values as freedom of people and nations, inter-ethnic equality and solidarity, freedom of conscience and religion, started destroying the same values.

Religion was presented as a harmful and hostile phenomenon to socialist society, while the believers were considered as retarded, passive and ignorant. They were often subject to laughter, humiliation, and restraint. To get a sense of the scale and horror of these events, one needs, for example, to go through the facts and figures cited in the book by the Russian publicist historian I. Bunich "The Party's Gold". During World War II, especially during difficult times, the situation in this area suddenly reversed. The government was aware of how dangerous the confrontation between believers and unbelievers, the government and religious organizations can be when the country is in war. In addition, it was impossible not to notice the fight of many religious associations and believers against fascism from the very first days. That is why in 1943 the patriarchy of the Orthodox Church, which had been abolished earlier, was restored, and in the same year, the Religious Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was established. The Mirarab Madrassah was opened in Bukhara, and Muslims were allowed to perform the hajj.

Even in the letters sent to the front on behalf of the people of Uzbekistan, soldiers' religious sentiments were paid special attention. They were specifically reminded of the fact that the enemy was attacking their faith, religion, cemeteries of their ancestors, and the purity of their women.

But when the danger was behind and the victory was achieved thanks to the lives of millions of believers, the situation changed again. Especially during the 1960s, the situation began to deteriorate. During the recession times, the registration of religious associations and the exercise of constitutional rights of believers were severely restricted. The issue of opening a simple mosque or temple was directly decided in Moscow. Over the twenty-five-year period (1961–1986), the number of Muslim religious associations in the country declined by 1546.

The efforts of the republic's leadership, especially those of the secretaries of the Central Committee on the ideology of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic during 1983-1989 to please the Moscow government were controversial. For example, the Navruz holiday which dates back to 3000 years was connected to Islam; mosques and memorials were closed in Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha; workers in many government organizations were forced to drink water during the fasting days; high-ranked communist officials were dismissed because of participation in the funeral of their parents, etc. During those years, hundreds of Komsomol boys and girls were taken to the markets of the Fergana valley regions to tear down headscarves of women from their heads and burned them, calling them "a dress of worship". There were efforts to establish international cemeteries in Uzbekistan following the logic that people who lived, studied, and worked together when they were alive should also lie together when they die (see, for example, Kasimov (2003), Crouch (2007), Kowalsky (2005)).

So far, the reader was reminded of the attitude towards religion, belief, personal freedom, and freedom of thought during the Tsar and the Soviet occupation. Now, keeping this situation in mind, was the study and exercise of old and relatively new religious doctrines feasible at that time? If feasible, what would its content be? Who would be involved in disseminating religious education and would this involvement be effective in the society where mosques and madrassas became a source of superstition (and later completely shut down and destroyed), religious scholars were persecuted, rare scientific and religious books were burnt or taken out of the country?

On the other hand, it was not possible for a man to survive only with material things. His spirit, soul, and mind also required constant nourishment. Unfortunately, at those times, the spiritual and religious needs of the people were met with very limited, biased, incomplete, and even distorted notions that have led to greater religious ignorance.

People's perceptions of religion were very shallow, mostly biased, and often based on myths and legends. Superstitious dogmas were regarded as religious values. Death and wedding ceremonies have suffered changes, distanced from originality. In some regions, women threw money on a coffin while in another province each visitor to the funeral was given a package with bread and money. Some artificially created ceremonies after the funerals such as "uch" [three days], "payshanba" [Thursday], "qirq" [forty days], "ellik ikki" [fifty-two], "yil" [a year] were wrongly regarded as Islamic requirements and people felt organizing these ceremonies for hundreds and thousands of people as their religious duty.

3.3 The situation during the independence period

If a flood suddenly lands on dry ground, the ground will not only enjoy the water but also get destroyed because of water. Similarly, the introduction of religious freedom into a society that was completely deprived of religious education brings a number of destructive streams along with positive changes.

On June 14, 1991, while the Soviet system was still in place, the Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” (<https://www.lex.uz/acts/65108>) was adopted in Uzbekistan to protect citizens’ freedom of conscience and to ensure that religious organizations act in accordance with the laws. This just one example demonstrates that the issue of religion has been a priority from the very beginning of the new government of the republic.

Unfortunately, many people abused these opportunities created by the government in this area. During a short period of time, the number of mosques increased from 89 to 5000 (!). Most of these mosques operated without the required documentation, qualified imams (95.8% without religious education), and proper facilities (Abboskhudjaev et al., 2005). Various “religious leaders” attempted to convert the mosques into centers to disseminate their destructive ideas to create a khalifate in the Central Asian countries.

Many candidates to become an imam moved from Tajikistan (where the civil war was taking place) to the southern regions of Uzbekistan while those from O’sh, Karasu, Djalalabad and Novkat cities of Kyrgyzstan moved to the eastern regions of Uzbekistan. They settled exactly in those pseudo mosques.

These foreign citizens with inadequate religious education took over the leadership of religious organizations by providing financial aid and began to engage in many destructive and inverse propaganda activities. Some new mosques built and renovated with the help of “donations” provided by former compatriots living in the Muslim countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, became a place for calls for jihad rather than worship. Their main purpose was to expand its network with local people using different techniques. Thus, the threat of religious fundamentalism and international extremism was emerging.

Hundreds of “religious education and upbringing” hujras (hujra – a place for male social gatherings) started appearing first in the capital, Tashkent, and later in other regions. They began teaching the ideas of extremist movements such as Wahhabi, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Nuri, and Akromiya using the most efficient and effective methods. Financial support to the students and teachers of these hujras was provided by some suspicious religious centers abroad and local investors who aimed at getting some government positions in case the current government is overthrown.

The hujras were different from government educational establishments in terms of the created facilities, the number of students in the classroom, and teaching techniques:

- The hujras were not only free to study at but also the students were provided free food and even clothing if needed (it is not difficult to imagine the attractiveness of such places in the early 1990s when the country was experiencing the shortage of food and clothing);
- In public schools and universities, one teacher taught students one subject for a maximum of two-three hours per week, while in the hujras one or two “mentors” taught five students four or five hours every day. This individual approach enabled the mentors to impact not only the minds but also the hearts of their students;
- The hujras were provided with free of charge literature, study materials, leaflets, and other resources which were prepared in such a way that they could be comprehended in three-four months;
- Not only the students of the hujras but also their family members received financial and moral support.

As a matter of fact, it is important to admit and recall one truth. There is a tendency in Uzbek mass media, books, articles, and conversations to generally describe the youth that joined the unofficial religious groups and movements as “immature, foolish, uneducated, naïve, trusting, etc.”. One of the reasons for the failure in some of the aspects of the ideological war against such movements is the underestimation of the enemy’s power and capabilities, particularly in personnel selection.

The fact is that such extremist movements and groups have strong professionals and psychologists who thoroughly study and analyze the life, character, temperament, interests, worldview, dreams, regrets, and aspirations of future members. They develop a personalized approach to each of these potential new members based on the gathered information.

To illustrate, some of the things they consider might be: who is suffering from what and to what extent

the government is involved in it; who is having troubles in achieving their aims, and how big is the impact of current problems in the society in it; who is facing barriers in self-expression and are formal institutions participating in erecting these barriers; who can defend its belief so strong that can even go against his/her father; who has a leadership potential; who will never betray other members of the group and leaders under any harsh circumstances; who can directly go to the death – jihad.

Here, it suffices to remember that the main executors of the bloody terrorist attacks in Tashkent on February 16, 1999, were young men who studied in England and had a very good command of computer technologies which was quite unique in those times. These groups are not interested in people with a weak personality, without deep knowledge and strong leadership skills, who get lost because of even a small problem. Because these movements and groups understand and foresee that it is impossible to reach their goals with such people.

Not only that, but they also think seriously about some small details as well. For example, they thoroughly choose the person who will first meet the “new joiners”. The student is met by his closest classmate, scientist by another scientist, businessman by another businessman, etc.

The lessons in the hujras are not restricted only to theory, but special attention is paid to connecting studied ideas to real life. To illustrate, when they teach what a Muslim community should look like, the student’s focus is directed on the most negative, defective, and ugly situations in the community. And, unfortunately, such situations in society are abundant and are readily available to the “mentor” at any time. For example, they show openly dressed women in the streets, on public transport and dancing in the luxurious weddings showing off their bodies and ask the students whether or not such cases are acceptable in the Muslim community.

In this way, the focus of a student is diverted from the subject of the study to “other issues”. Step-by-step his heart and mind are filled with hatred towards other members of society and their deeds.

The biggest scholars of the Islamic world are seriously concerned that extremist movements, possessing such forces and capabilities, are becoming more and more dangerous. One of them is Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of Sunni Islam’s most prestigious university, al-Azhar in Egypt. He was ranked number one in the list of the world’s 500 most influential Muslims in 2013. In February 2015, the scientist delivered a speech at an international conference on “Islam and Counterterrorism” in Mecca. In particular, he said:

Dear scholars! You are well aware that we face major international plots targeting Arabs and Muslims that want to completely transform them and break them up in their countries in a way that agrees with the dreams of the new world colonialism that is allied with those who do not support Islam hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder. We must not forget that the only method used by new colonialism now, is the same that was used by colonialism in the past century, and its deadly slogan is ‘divide and conquer’. It is now exploiting areas of turmoil and sectarian divides. Unfortunately, this time also they are manipulating this ummah as much as they want with slyness and treason. The results of this cunning tampering were that Iraq was lost, and Syria was burned, and Yemen is being torn apart, and Libya has been destroyed. There is still a lot up their sleeves that only God knows, and from which we seek refuge with God. (Adopted from “Dunyo ulamolari murojaati” [The Speeches of World Scholars], 2016, pp. 61-64)

These words remind of dangerous conflicts created between countries with a predominantly Sunni population led by Saudi Arabia and the Shia population led by Iran. (These countries are increasingly buying the most modern, deadly weapons of mass destruction for hundreds of billions of dollars to use against each other from the major powers that are interested in this conflict).

Here, it is worth reminding the reader of another historical parallel. The great Russian writer F. Dostoevsky in his novel “Besy” [Demons] reveals the true faces of the demons in the form of human beings who came from abroad to use the vast Russian territory as an experimental land to examine socialistic ideas.

Most of the heroes of the novel are nihilists who studied and learned certain ideas in Germany and returned to their country. They call for the total destruction of societies, the brutal slaughter of rulers, the overthrow of all values associated with the past, and the radical change of people’s and nations’ views in order to make everyone equally happy, prosperous, and free. In order to examine this idea, they select Russia, which, in their eyes, was far behind European civilization and was devastated by its rich people.

Today, extremist groups in the Islamic world are also using the same methods used by the “demons” in the novel. In the novel, demons from abroad operated secretly in a circle of five people each. Today’s extremist groups also work in groups of five people. Later, when these five people obtain proper training, they also create their own groups comprised of five people and they teach others in these groups. The process continues until the network becomes large enough for the “holy war”.

It is well known that F. Dostoevsky’s personality, works, ideas, and views were not welcomed by V. Lenin and his followers. The main reason is that the ideas in most of the works of the great writer were at odds with Marxist ideas. It was at odds with the plans and actions of Lenin, who learned Marxist ideas in Germany and, as it turned out today, was influenced by the political and military circles in Germany and received great financial aid from the financial groups of that country to create a “revolutionary movement” in the Russian Empire and fuel the civil war. Thus, the importance of the novel that tried to warn people of the political demons that were just emerging but quickly spreading around Russia will never fade.

Looking closely at the statements of arrested members of the illegal groups, one can see that their speeches are quite fluid, and their reasoning is also very logical. Thinking about the members of religious extremist groups as immature, foolish, uneducated, and naïve is an extremely biased and irresponsible attitude. It must be admitted that extremist organizations with such members would not have gone so far and would not have been able to expand so much. Therefore, the struggle against such extremist groups will be more efficient if one faces reality and correctly estimates the power and capabilities of the rivals, the demons, of these times.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussions showed that, as a result of the obstacles to obtaining religious education in Uzbekistan during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the spiritual and religious needs of many people were met with very limited, biased, incomplete, and even distorted notions that have resulted in greater religious ignorance and pseudoscience that ultimately played an important role in activating extremist religious movements in the post-Soviet period. To come to this conclusion, the article revisited the attitude of the leadership of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union towards religious education in Uzbekistan. As a result of their efforts to undermine Islam and its study in the area populated by Muslims, people’s perception of religion became very shallow, mostly biased, and often based on myths and legends. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the introduction of religious freedom into a society that was completely deprived of religious education brought several destructive streams in the form of various religious extremist groups.

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