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Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia: Evaluating Uzbekistan's Response

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AGNIESZKA PIKULICKA, MAR 6 2011

Tilting at windmills? Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia: Evaluating Uzbekistan's Response

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Islam has undergone a revival among Central Asian societies. The hitherto communist and atheist states in the region with arbitrarily imposed constraints on the freedom of worship, started referring to their religious roots as a step in national identity formation. Although all of the newly independent political entities remained secular in form, they all admitted the importance and prominence of Islam as a dominant religion. However, the growing influence of the religion in the region has been accompanied by the emergence of fundamentalisms, which Central Asian governments have sought to suppress using tough measures. The effectiveness of the tactics employed is a matter of debate, along with the extent to which Islamist movements de facto jeopardize the stability in the region.

This essay seeks to address the debate. Adopting a social movement approach to the emergence of Islamist groups, it argues that the primary reason for the development of fundamentalisms have been the autocratic policies of the Central Asian governments, in particular Uzbekistan. Moreover, by analyzing the societal factors, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the Islamist threat has been largely exaggerated, which serves the purpose of consolidating presidential powers rather than addressing the problem. With the primary focus on Uzbekistan, the essay will argue that the anti-Islamist policies of the Central Asian governments have been largely ineffective and in a long term can lead to the factual radicalization of regional populations.

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the emergence of new states in Central Asia with no previous experience of sovereign governance. These former Soviet republics, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, left without a 'patron', experienced severe economic and social problems, characteristic for newly independent entities.[1] Insecurity and uncertainty about the territorial and political integrity of these states, combined with the growing number of oppositional forces, resulted in the willingness of the regional leaders to construct and promote national and historical identities among their respective societies in order to stabilize their leaderships.[2] The references to Islam constituted an entry point of such process, given its revival among regional populations. However, the Central Asian governments fearing the potential instability caused by more radical Islamic movements, adopted a peculiar and traditional version of Islam, seen as the only correct one to preserve their secular form.[3] Moreover, given their Soviet heritage, governments sought to secure the only form of governance they were familiar with, characterized by a strong hierarchical structure of the state, substantial leadership powers and control of the opposition.[4] The post-independence survival of the Soviet-era elites on the top leadership positions also meant the preservation of the old clan thinking in national politics, particularly notable in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where regional clans compete for power and wealth in a closed political and economic systems.[5] All the above factors together with the fears of sharing Tajikistan's 1992 – 1997 civil war experience resulted in strengthening presidential powers and consolidation of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. Curtailing oppositional forces and civil liberties became a norm and a way to preserve the status quo. Importantly, in the official rhetoric, Islamic fundamentalism became the primary scapegoat to be blamed for unpopular policies and worsening economic situation of the populations.[6] Moreover, all the versions of Islam alternative to the officially promoted one have been outlawed by

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local governments and highly politicized in their rhetoric, especially in Uzbekistan.

It is not to say that radical Islamist movements do not operate in Central Asia, or that they do not have a potential to affect the regional security. However, in evaluating the policies of the regional governments, in particular Uzbekistan, it is important to look at the root causes of the emergence of Islamist groups. According to numerous scholars, such as Eric McGinchey[7] and Anne Marie Baylouny[8], Islamic radicalism in Central Asia has primarily local causes, mainly autocratic policies of local governments, and although the impact of ideologies imported from neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran shouldn't be underestimated, it would be difficult to attribute a particular importance to the 'spillover effect'. Following Baylouny's theory, Islamist movements, similarly to other social movements, emerge locally and are mostly concerned with problems of their neighbourhood, town or local economy.[9] Their emergence reflects the grievances of particular parts of the society, which are either invisible or neglected by governments. In case of authoritarian regimes, the development of such movements might be associated with using violent means, which itself is symptomatic for oppressed and marginalized opposition.[10] Curtailing oppositional movements very often leads to their radicalization, which is clearly the case of Islamic groups in Central Asia.[11] One might ask, however, why oppositional forces in the region refer to radical Islam instead of remaining secular in form, which might arguably increase the support for their actions. According to Baylouny:

'Islam provides a frame for solidarity, particularly when other organizing is forbidden. Not only can religious movements monopolize the organizing field, due to harsh restrictions on mobilizing, but religion also provides symbols of justice extending beyond the individual's rational cost-benefit calculus.'[12]

Interestingly, the goals of highly radical movements might undergo a clear verification, while incorporated into the democratic system. As the cases of Lebanon's Hizbollah and Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party suggest, radicalism is often the implication of the lack of freedoms and alternative ways of expression. Thus, where governments allow for the existence of even moderate opposition, the influence of fundamentalisms is limited.[13]

This situation is definitely not a case in Uzbekistan, which has become the main battleground for numerous Islamist movements of Central Asia, with Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizbut ut-Tahrir (HT) constituting the most important ones. Both movements refer to Salafi principles (literary reading of Koran, importance of tradition – *hadiths*, practicing Islam in the way corresponding with the first few generations of Muslims), however there are significant differences between them.

IMU has emerged as a local phenomenon in Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan, and its roots can be found in the regional Salafist tradition, dating back to at least 1940s.[14] Although with time it became more international in focus, its regional provenance cannot be denied. The main goals of IMU, at least until its relocation to Afghanistan, have also been locally focused. In 1999 the group has proclaimed the removal of Islam Karimov's government its main objective, along with the establishment of Islamic state of Uzbekistan.[15] According to Krzysztof Strachota and Maciej Falkowski, IMU remains one of a few militant Islamist organizations in the region, which openly admit their involvement in violent actions.[16] The main terrorist incidents involving the group have been the series of bombings and hostage takings in 1999 and 2004.[17] However, according to many analysts, IMU has been significantly weakened during the Afghanistan war and it is difficult to estimate its current potential.[18]

Unlike IMU, HT maintains that its objective is the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate using non-violent means, and indeed, despite the claims of HT's involvement in numerous terrorist attacks in Central Asia by regional governments, there is little evidence in support of these accusations.[19] Although the organization emerged as a global party, having its roots in 1950s Jerusalem[20], it has undergone a process of regionalization and remained rather local in focus.[21] The party has had a substantial success in recruiting members in Central Asia, predominantly in the Ferghana Valley, but also elsewhere in the region. According to some estimates, there are between 15,000 and 20,000 of HT followers in Central Asia (data from 2006) and this number is constantly growing.[22] Interestingly, despite its non-violent strategy, HT has been portrayed as one of the most destabilizing forcers in the region, and the governments on numerous occasions attributed local problems and violent incidents to its actions.

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Given the undeniable development of fundamentalist networks in Central Asia it is now important to look at the extent to which such groups can de facto jeopardize the security of the region and the very existence of particular regimes.

According to scholars such as McGlinchey and Mirzohid Rahimov, Islamist movements enjoy a growing support among regional populations, although it is difficult to estimate its scope.[23] For a number of people the idea of establishing a Caliphate based on Islamic principles, ensuring peace, justice and stability seems like a fulfillment of dreams, especially given its transnational character; the fake national divisions imposed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the separation of peoples and put constraints on the freedom of commerce and movement among regional societies.[24] Moreover, as already stated, the autocratic nature of regional states, most notably Uzbekistan, pushes people to look for an alternative, which in case of Central Asia has been almost exclusively limited to Islamist groups.

Nevertheless, according to specialists, radical thinking has had a rather marginal influence in the region. Despite apparent injustice, local people are afraid of fundamentalisms largely due to the developments in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.[25] Furthermore, given the Soviet past, regional populations lack substantial knowledge of Islam, and although 92 per cent of Uzbekistan's society are declared Muslims[26], the years of control over religious movements resulted in the preservation of rather traditional and 'folk' versions of Islam, which have little to do with the orthodox Islamic doctrine.[27] The revival of faith at the beginning of the 1990s definitely contributed to the betterment of the religious education of peoples (many new *madrasses* and Mosques were built, Islamic literature was widely distributed)[28], but nevertheless it did not bring Islam to the center of socio-political life. Additionally, the offensive propaganda of state-controlled media discourages people from joining Islamist networks, firstly because they are portrayed as violent and fanatic, and secondly because the membership in such groups, when disclosed, might result in imprisonment and other severe sanctions.[29]

Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that the real impact of radical Islamist movements in Central Asia has been rather marginal. Yet, the policies adopted by regional regimes, especially Uzbekistan, have been extremely harsh and not proportionate to the threat. Islam Karimov, who came into power in 1989, has been pursuing a dangerous policy, fighting an imaginary threat of Islamic terrorism, which can be compared to Don Quixote's tilting at windmills. Not only he began a crusade against militant movements, but also reinstalled state-led Islamic observance (through the Spiritual Directorate for Muslims – the Muftiate) of mosques and *madrasses* in order to prevent the independent worship, and imposed a compulsory registration of all the religious groups with more than 100 members.[30] Moreover, under the 2000 Bill on Terrorism, Uzbekistan adopted a very broad definition of terrorism, defining it as 'socially dangerous wrong doing', by which any acts committed by the opposition could be classified as terrorist.[31] And indeed, according to Human Rights Watch, many civic activists, human rights defenders and independent journalists have been serving prison sentences on politically motivated grounds.[32] Additionally, Karimov's regime has been using forced confessions and tortures and refused to consider defense evidence on numerous occasions, meting out sentences disproportionate to the crimes committed.[33] According to Buzan promoting threats and dangers requiring immediate response, can bring political gains to the governments, which thereby legitimize their actions in the name of internal stability of the state.[34]

A clear manifestation of such approach has been the violent crackdown of the so-called 'Andijan uprising' in 2005. The main reason behind the events has been the imprisonment of 23 Muslim businessmen from the eastern city of Andijan on the charges of Islamist extremism. The businessmen, although prominent, had no political ambitions, but according to McGlinchey, their popularity within the city coupled with transparently led enterprises beyond government's control, did not fit the requirements of the corrupt Uzbek elite, willing to control the economy for personal gains.[35] The day when the government was supposed to deliver the verdict, a group of people stormed the prison freeing the businessmen, and seized the government's building in the centre of the city. Thousands of local residents soon joined and began a mass protest against the policies of the government, social grievances and worsening economic situation in the country.[36] The government, fearing the scenario of Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip revolution', opened a fire to the crowd killing hundreds of individuals (according to OSCE estimates between 300 and 500)[37]. Although the protests did not carry any clear political message, the media coverage referred to the event as an uprising of 'radical Islamist and evil forces'.[38] Furthermore, ever since the massacre, the government has refused to clarify the circumstances surrounding it.[39]

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Such approach to oppositional movements and Islamic fundamentalism is not only ineffective, but also potentially dangerous. Ineffective, because it does not prevent radical networks from operating in the country; on the contrary, a growing number of individuals become members of Islamist organizations. It is dangerous because the society comes to realization that it is oppressed and underrepresented in the government, which in consequence might lead to even greater support for fundamentalist networks, remaining the only visible opposition in Central Asia. Such development is even more possible given the growing disillusionment and resentment towards state-promoted version of Islam, and governments' adoption of tough measures directed against independent religious groups, not only militant Islamists. Although currently marginal, fundamentalist networks can become significant social movements in the future. This in consequence carries the risk of regional conflict with moderate and Islamist forces joined together against the regional regimes.

This essay has sought to demonstrate that anti-Islamist policies adopted by Central Asian governments, in particular Uzbekistan, have not been effective in fighting radicalisms. Following the social movement theory to the emergence of fundamentalist groups in Central Asia, it has argued that the main cause behind the radicalization of populations has been the autocratic policies of the regional governments. Moreover the paper has shown that the oppressive tactics employed by Islam Karimov have been largely directed against oppositional movements, and Islamist threat has been purposefully exaggerated in order to legitimize government's actions and consolidate executive powers. In fact radical Islam has had a rather marginal influence among regional societies, which largely remained inclined to traditional version of the religion. Nevertheless, the support for fundamentalist networks is constantly growing and its development to the point that it may become an important force cannot be precluded. The continuation of aggressive policies of the governments coupled with the worsening socio-economic situation in the region might in consequence lead to a regional conflict and destabilization of the governments.

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