

# Islam and Nationalism in the Formerly Soviet Central Asian Republics

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Résumé de l'article

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## **Islam and Nationalism in the Formerly Soviet Central Asian Republics**

by  
*James G. Mellon*

### **ABSTRACT**

*When the Soviet Union collapsed, the Central Asian republics, which had not really sought independence, found themselves independent. Unlike what happened in some other parts of the former Soviet Union, the regimes in power under the Soviet Union remained in power, and endeavored through authoritarian means and trying to identify themselves with nascent nationalisms to suppress opposition and seek an aura of legitimacy. These regimes sought to suppress expressions of Islam and Islamic revivalism outside of state-sponsored Islam. Particularly in the aftermath of 11 September, it has been expedient for these regimes to label non-state-sponsored Islam as Wahhabi, even though most of this Islam has been of the more moderate indigenous Hanafi school. Progress in democratization has varied among the republics but has been slow in all of them. Until the overthrow of Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, only Tajikistan, which had experienced a civil war, had changed leaders since independence. This article expresses concern that a focus on fighting terrorism may lead to a tendency to overlook issues of human rights and democratization in these states.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Events in places like Afghanistan have brought attention to the formerly Soviet Central Asian republics whose location gives them a strategic importance. It is the argument of this article that this strategic importance and the reality of Islamist terrorism should not induce Western governments to accept for the sake of short-term interests a lack of progress in democratization and respect for human rights that may, if tolerated, jeopardize the long-term stability of the

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region and the interests of the globe, the West, and the republics themselves. While recognizing the genuine obstacles faced by these states, authoritarian regimes should be viewed skeptically when they seek to exploit the Islamist threat cynically as a justification for suppressing legitimate dissent in order to maintain power. For our purposes, the term "Central Asia" refers to a region composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. While there is a certain logic in studying them collectively, there are differences. Uzbekistan (Pop. 25,155,064; Area 447,400 sq. km.) is largely desert but with irrigation became the major producer of cotton for the Soviet economy. Uzbekistan has sought to develop policies reflecting Uzbek nationalism. Kyrgyzstan (Pop. 4,753,003; Area 198,500 sq. km.) has traditionally been viewed as remote and mountainous, isolated and consequently economically under-developed but until recently isolated as well from the controversies and chaos that other states in the region have been forced to confront. Kyrgyzstan's pursuit of economic liberalization has so far achieved limited success in producing economic development. Only 2.5 percent of the land in Turkmenistan (Pop. 4,603,244; Area 488,100 sq. km.) is arable but the country enjoys impressive oil and natural gas reserves. Economic development has been closely related to petroleum revenue. Kazakhstan (Pop. 16,731,303; Area 2,717,300 sq. km.), as well, enjoys considerable oil reserves. Like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan has pursued policies of economic liberalization. Tajikistan (Pop. 6,578,681; Area 143,100 sq. km.) has experienced civil war, and, in the words of Ahmed Rashid:

. . . remains the most disadvantaged of the Central Asian nations. The economy is in ruins, the government has no control over large tracts of territory, and the drug smuggling from Afghanistan for onward journey to Europe has become a major factor in the continued destabilization of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, for all their differences, these states have a number of attributes in common. All five are predominantly Islamic societies and were included, contrary to the popular will, within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In all five cases, there was a high degree of specialization and the economies were closely integrated into the Soviet economy. Independence followed not as an outcome of a nationalist movement seeking independence but rather simply as a consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Martha Olcott reflects that:

Few peoples of the world have ever been forced to become independent nations. Yet that is precisely what happened to the five Central Asian republics after Russia, Belarus and Ukraine – the three original signatories of the USSR's founding 1922 constitution – met in Minsk on December 8, 1991, and created a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, there is no potential leadership figure with the legitimacy and moral authority that might come from involvement in an independence move-

ment. In short, none of these states had a Mandela-like figure able to command respect.

Recent years have witnessed such developments in international politics as the fall of communism and the Soviet Union, followed by the struggle to create stable, democratic political systems in formerly authoritarian states; the resurgence of nationalism; and the challenge of Islamic revivalism. Each of these developments has touched on the recent politics of these states. In the face of these developments the governments of these states have encountered problems that have reflected serious issues of legitimacy and efficacy.

The immediate impetus for this research, at least initially, was not to pursue specialized area studies in Central Asia. Rather, it followed from work in the study of religion and politics, which led to the study of specific manifestations of the influence of religion on politics. Few things are as capable of motivating individuals and shaping cultures as religious belief and practice. In order to avoid the temptation of overgeneralization about religion and politics, the student of religion and politics needs to examine a variety of cases in diverse settings in which religion impacts on the political sphere. Central Asia would appear to be a potentially useful case. For our purposes, we shall draw on both the secondary literature available, and on primary and secondary materials written with the intention on the part of the authors to assess events, and with the intention in some cases on the part of authors to influence events, as well.

## **Nationalism in Central Asia**

Bernard Lewis argues that nationalism emerged gradually in the Middle East in general, and especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> While he does not examine the cases of the Central Asian states specifically, what he observes about the Middle East applies as well in Central Asia. Until recently, individuals were more likely to identify themselves as members of a particular clan, residents of a particular village, adherents of a particular religious faith, and/or subjects of a particular lord, monarch, or emperor than as members of a given nation. Olivier Roy suggests that, prior to the Soviet era, there was little focus within the region on ethnicity or nationality.<sup>4</sup> In ancient times, the region was culturally and linguistically Persian. Subsequently, variations of Turkish replaced variants of Persian as the languages of the masses but Persian remained the language of higher culture and of government regardless of the actual ethnic origin of any given dynasty. However, Iranian influence was limited because Iran tended to see itself as the protector of Shi'a Islam, and, in spite of the Persian cultural influence, Islam in Central Asia has traditionally been Sunni Islam of the Hanafi (or Hanafite) school. None of this, however, should be seen as suggesting any likelihood of accepting conquest without serious resistance. Rule by outsiders has never been easily accepted in this region. Shireen Hunter observes that, "The history of Central Asia has been about empires and tribes. The con-

cept of nation and nation-state to denote a triangular relationship among territory, ethno-cultural identity, and political authority is very recent in this region.”<sup>5</sup>

In *The Ends of the Earth*, Robert Kaplan writes, “Confused about Turkic identity? So are many of the people who inhabit this vast region. A monochrome Turkic power bloc, colored on the map in Seljuk blue, is not likely to arise. Individual and national identities across Turkestan are far too complicated for that.”<sup>6</sup> Nationalism as an object of study can be approached through a focus on identity, narrative, frames, and institutions. In the cases of the republics of Central Asia, the issue of identity can be extremely complicated. Rule by an external power might be imposed by military force but it was never accepted lightly. Czarist and then Soviet domination was always resented. The re-settlement of Russians in the republics in an attempt to weaken indigenous nationalism has led to continuing tensions between Russians and those who are ethnically Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. The presence of substantial Russian populations and the deliberate Soviet policy that drew republic boundaries in order to cut across ethnic lines thereby creating within each republic a mix of ethnic populations, means that the Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, or Turkmen nations may be seen by some as corresponding with the respective states and by others as corresponding with ethnicities. Determining what may be indigenous to the Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, or Turkmen nations is complicated not only by these factors. Until fairly recently, these were nomadic, predominantly pre-literate societies. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, regimes with little popular legitimacy are not about to jeopardize their power by dismantling existing state boundaries. Ironically, with communism no longer available as an ideological support for a regime in power, post-Soviet regimes, even when led by individuals associated with the regimes of the Soviet era, have sought to exploit nationalism in the effort to inspire popular support. However, differences persist about precisely what constitutes these identities, and many find the secular nationalisms espoused by these regimes as inauthentic for a number of reasons, including the exclusion of the Islamic identity, which many see as an essential component of Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen identity.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire expanded into this region, taking over much of the region, establishing a province of Turkestan ruled by a governor general from Tashkent, while the khanates of Bukhara and Khiva remained separate but dependent on Russia. Rashid notes that:

Whilst the settled regions were easily conquered, the nomadic tribes continued to resist for several decades, and periodic revolts broke out in the Fergana Valley. In 1885 Russian troops crushed a revolt in the valley towns of Osh, Margilan, and Andijan led by a Sufi Dervish, Khan Tura. The most serious threat to Russian rule arose in May 1898, when twenty-two Russian soldiers were killed in

Andijan by Islamic rebels. The revolt spread to other towns before Russian troops arrived and brutally quashed the rebellion.<sup>7</sup>

Both the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union resorted to military action and the settlement of Russians and Cossacks in an effort to quell resistance to outside rule and assimilate the local people. In an attempt to discourage nationalist revolts, Stalin sowed the seeds for future complications by deliberately drawing boundaries creating the new republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in such a way as to cross the boundaries of the national communities in the region. Olcott notes that, when the states became independent, "Central Asia's leaders were also aware that, although each republic was named for a local nationality, none was a 'national homeland.'"<sup>8</sup> The outcome is that there are ethnic minorities throughout the region. To discourage outside influences, the Soviet Union replaced the Arabic with the Cyrillic alphabet for the Turkmen language.

Robert Legvold remarks that in some ways the issues faced by the Central Asian republics are similar to those faced in other parts of the former Soviet Union but in two ways differ. First, Legvold notes that "... unlike other parts of the former Soviet Union, they as a group seemed to be abandoning democratic aspirations and drifting toward the semi-authoritarian forms familiar in much of the Third World."<sup>9</sup> Second, he observes that "... the fundamental starting point for the policies of the major powers in Central Asia must be the 'no-man's-land' in which these states find themselves as they battle to create nation-states where none existed before, fashion workable political orders, and simultaneously put new economic systems in place."<sup>10</sup> Legvold adds that "The struggle to create a new post-Soviet political or economic order does not distinguish Kazakhstan from, say, Ukraine, Georgia, or, for that matter Russia, but the added burden of doing this while inventing the nation-state does."<sup>11</sup>

In *Eastward to Tartary*, Kaplan notes that:

Then Stalin began wave after waves of purges and executions, interspersed with the resettlement in the new Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan of Russians and other deportees from all over the Soviet Union. Almost all educated Turkmens were annihilated. When Turkmenistan became independent in 1991, its people inherited both a void and a deep suspicion of foreigners. No other formerly Soviet republic had a higher unemployment rate, a higher infant mortality rate, or a lower literacy rate.<sup>12</sup>

Kaplan describes being told by a Turkmen bureaucrat and scholar that "... there is a great gap between historical and literary fact and what the government here declares. Local scholars know the truth, but they still must recite other 'facts' that are sometimes nonsense – like that the Turkmens discovered America, for example. The truth is that because the Turkmens were nomadic, we were always in close contact with other cultures: Hellenistic, Parthian, Iranian. So it is impossi-

ble to know what, exactly, is Turkmen about us and what is not.”<sup>13</sup> The state known as Turkmenistan is relatively homogeneous ethnically.

Eugene Huskey observes that the Kyrgyz “. . . lacked a national as well as a civic consciousness before the Soviet period. Although bound by a common language, traditions, and legend, the Kyrgyz – like rural French before the twentieth century – had yet to imagine their membership in a national community.”<sup>14</sup> As is the case with the other republics, Kyrgyzstan is struggling to form a cohesive community for the purposes of national development in spite of a weak sense of unity. Rogers Smith points out how the regime of President Askar Akayev uses the Kyrgyz epos *Manas* in an effort “. . . to institutionalize a post-Soviet vision of the modern Kyrgyz Republic in his constituents’ lives, by presenting the new Republic as the appropriate heir of the grand traditions the *Manas* epos embodies. And he sought to achieve this strengthening, in turn, by using the epos to reinforce the sense of the Kyrgyz that they are a people, and a people that deserves to feel proud of its historical, cultural, and political identity, properly understood.”<sup>15</sup> In Kyrgyzstan with substantial Russian and Uzbek minorities and a history of the use of Russian in administration and education during the Soviet era, language policy has generated controversy. Kyrgyz and Russian, but not Uzbek, are recognized as official languages, and there have been controversies about whether civil servants and elected representatives should be required to demonstrate fluency in Kyrgyz.

In examining the case of Kazakhstan, Olcott notes that:

The country’s leaders proudly boast that Kazakhstan is the most multinational of all the Soviet successor states, but few who live in the country seem proud of this ethnic diversity. Instead, it appears a source of stress for many. Outside observers sense that for Kazakhstan to survive and prosper, its population must develop a civic-based patriotism to a common homeland rather than an ethnic-based loyalty to the land of the Kazakhs (or, alternatively, of the Russians).<sup>16</sup>

Olcott suggests that ethnonationalism in Kazakhstan has not translated into a source of legitimacy for the new state, commenting that “. . . despite the recent rewriting of Kazakh history to stress the state-building agendas of their premodern ancestors, the country’s titular nationality has not managed to translate its ethnic pride into a coherent and widely accepted ideological defense of its unique nation-state.”<sup>17</sup>

Tajikistan is somewhat distinguished by a cultural and linguistic affinity with the Persian, rather than Turkic, traditions. Evgeniy Abdullaev suggests that religiously inspired violence has been more prominent in Tajikistan, and, to a lesser degree, Uzbekistan because the Tajiks have traditionally been closer culturally to Iran, and hence more influenced by the more radical Shi’a tradition of Islam, while the Uzbeks occupy a position where Iranian Shi’a and Turkic Sunni

influences co-exist.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the Turkic cultures of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan have been associated with Turkic cultures and the Sunni tradition of Islam.

Kaplan remarks that, "It is not only irrational borders with which Uzbeks and others in Turkestan have to contend: They must also rebuild, even reinvent, a national past out of preconceived myths, compounded by the historical erasures of communism."<sup>19</sup> He notes that, "Another regional specialist, Edward A. Allworth, observes that today in Central Asia, nationalities are being created *retrospectively*. And not always accurately: Statues of Tamerlane are going up in Uzbekistan to honor an 'Uzbek national hero,' even though Tamerlane was not an Uzbek. In truth, it was the Uzbeks who toppled Tamerlane's dynasty when they defeated Babur."<sup>20</sup>

The presence of ethnic minorities, including Russian minorities, throughout the region complicates relations not only within each republic but also among the republics, and between the Central Asian republics, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. Throughout the former Soviet Union, uncertainty has arisen as to whether political identity follows from ethnicity, regardless of the successor-state in which one resides, or from residency within the boundaries of a particular republic, regardless of ethnicity. Rogers Brubaker observes that:

The Soviet nationality regime, with its distinctive and pervasive manner of institutionalizing nationhood and nationality, has transmitted to the successor states a set of deeply structured, and powerfully conflicting, *expectations of belonging*. Successor state elites, with their deeply institutionalized sense of political ownership and entitlement, see the polities that bear the names of their respective nations – above all the territory and institutions, but also, with some ambivalence, the population as well – as 'their own,' as belonging, in a fundamental sense, to them.<sup>21</sup>

Graham Smith notes that ". . . from the outset, a tension existed between establishing a citizen-polity in which individuals were to be treated equally, and the role that was envisaged for the titular nation within the socio-economic and political life of the citizen-homeland."<sup>22</sup>

In each of these republics, post-Soviet regimes, without any moral authority stemming from being associated with pre-independence nationalist movements and lacking credibility from involvement in any dissident movements, sought to legitimize themselves and inspire some sort of national consciousness to maintain national unity. Such regimes sought to stimulate development and ground a sense of national identity on the basis of a narrative. Pauline Jones Luong observes that "Although the exact mix of tradition and modernity in their rhetoric and actions varies from case to case, the legitimation strategies of all five Central Asian leaders exploit tradition to mask more modern forms of authoritarian rule."<sup>23</sup> Reinhard Schulze suggests that ". . . since the nationalists in the sud-



denly independent republics by no means wanted to acknowledge the fact that their states were really the product of Leninist and later Stalinist minority policies, they had to resort to sometimes invented, and often mythical traditions to provide their state with the history it lacked.”<sup>24</sup> One way in which these narratives have come to be contested is that narratives focussing on the history of Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Turkmen, or Kyrgyz peoples as the determinants of identity have confronted narratives in which being Uzbek or Tajik or Kazakh or Turkmen or Kyrgyz can be understood only when associated with an indigenous Islamic culture. Until the recent Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the regime that inherited power at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union remained in all the republics but Tajikistan. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that these regimes have persisted in Soviet attitudes toward religion in general and Islam specifically.

### **The Influence of Islamic Revivalism**

Although most commentators conventionally discuss the impact in the region of Islamic revivalism (or Islamism, sometimes also referred to as Islamic fundamentalism), this depiction may call for some caveats. Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, in their study of religious fundamentalism, adopt a classificatory scheme which distinguishes among “religious fundamentalism,” in which they see religion as the primary or even sole motivation, and what they term “syncretic fundamentalism,” in which other motivations other than religion are of higher or equal priority, and “potential and marginal fundamentalisms,” which do not fit neatly in either of the other categories. These authors place Islamic revivalism in Central Asia in the third category, “potential and marginal fundamentalisms,” rather than the first, on the grounds that “Islamic movements in central Asia since glasnost and in the early post-Soviet era have been marked by the revival of religious practice and belief and ethnonationalist fragmentation, with control being decentralized to the different Islamic regions – Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and the like.”<sup>25</sup> They observe that:

Ideologically the revival of Islam rejects the adaptive strategy followed by the Muslim clergy under the old Soviet Union; the new ideological trends in this period were revivalist and traditionalist rather than fundamentalist. In some cases such movements are anti-Russian in the ethnic sense, but (with the exception of Uzbekistan) they are not organized, focused reactive movements possessed of a charismatic leadership, clear lines of authority, and a mythologized or aggrandized enemy against whom they preserve purity and erect boundaries.<sup>26</sup>

It is their view that the potential exists for “religious fundamentalism,” as they define it, to spread to the region. It should also be noted that not all observers draw such a sharp distinction between revivalism and “potential fundamentalism,” on the one hand, and “religious fundamentalism,” on the other.

Frequently, it is assumed that, with modernization and economic development, there will be a trend toward secularization and a decline in the influence of religion. In contrast, Peter Berger suggests that religion, especially in its so-called "fundamentalist" forms, has become increasingly influential in the public arena.<sup>27</sup> Specifically in regards to Islam, Ernest Gellner suggests that traditionally in predominantly Islamic societies strict observance was associated with higher-status, urbanized, and more affluent elements within society.<sup>28</sup> With increased affluence, the poor and residents of rural areas can now aspire to the sort of strict observance of Islamic practice that was previously associated with the upper classes.

For many citizens of the Central Asian republics, even those who may not regularly practice the faith, Islam represents an essential element of the Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, Tajik, or Kyrgyz identity. Nadia Diuk and Adrian Karatnycky write that Islam's "... importance to the Soviet Central Asians' identity cannot be overestimated; it was the force that held them together and provided cultural and spiritual nourishment when they were under pressure to Sovietize. More than nationalism, Islam was often the vehicle for anti-Communism in this region."<sup>29</sup> In a study of the republics in the period between the Second World War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yaacov Roi observes that "The broad masses of the nationalities concerned seem to have considered themselves Muslim throughout the Soviet period, as well as being Uzbek or Kyrgyz, Turkestani or Caucasian, members of a given clan or tribe and inhabitants of a certain locality."<sup>30</sup> It is concluded by Roi that "The role played by Islam in the evolution of nationalism within the Soviet Union's Muslim ethnicities, like that of other 'national' religions in the development of Russian, Ukrainian and Lithuanian nationalism, was a significant factor in the nationalist earthquake that eventually helped bring down the Soviet regime."<sup>31</sup> John Esposito notes that:

Despite Soviet domination and anti-Islam policies in Central Asia, Islam remains a core component of individual and community identity and an important part of religious and cultural life. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Islam has been integral to the process of nation building in post-independence Central Asia, contributing to the development of new national identities, value systems, guidelines for social and political life, and new relations with the Muslim World.<sup>32</sup>

In the aftermath of the end of Soviet rule, this region has witnessed a perverse response on the part of post-Soviet regimes to the influence of Islam. The current regimes remain vulnerable and fragile. It is perhaps not so surprising that regimes, which represent elements of the old communist autocracy seeking to repackage themselves under banners of nationalism in pursuit of legitimacy and popular support, have made obvious efforts to maintain the disdain for Islam and for religion in general characteristic of the Soviet era. Esposito observes that regimes have sought to dismiss opposition groups by associating such groups

with Wahhabi Islam, thereby depicting such opposition as both foreign-inspired and extremist.<sup>33</sup> This region has been slow to develop those institutions integral to civil society. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon suggest that the suppression of Islam during the Soviet period had the effect of detaching many young Moslems in the region from their roots in indigenous expressions of Islam, and left them susceptible to Wahhabi and Deobandi Islam, forms of Islam whose militancy appealed to many in the face of frustrations with the progress of democratization and economic reform.<sup>34</sup> The outcome has been that the influence of indigenous strains of Islam have been discouraged, and the influence of Islamic revivalism, rather than being channelled into benign forms conducive to peaceful political development potentially leading to democracy, has been taken over by more militant Deobandi and Wahhabi strains that have been propagated from other parts of the Islamic world. Organizations like the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), led by Juma Namangani, have engaged in guerrilla war and terrorism in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The IMU was linked to Osama bin-Laden and the Taliban, and assisted the Taliban by attacking the Northern Alliance during the civil war in Afghanistan. Foreign fighters swelled the ranks of the IMU. On the one hand, the activities of the IMU have reinforced the apprehensions of the regimes in the Central Asian republics about Islamic revivalism but ironically state repression of indigenous and more moderate forms of Islam and Islamic revivalism has angered many and removed some of the alternative forms for the expression of that anger and of Islamic religiosity. Zartman observes that:

The subject is of crucial importance today in the Algerian, Sudanese, Egyptian, Tunisian, Afghan, Tajik, Turkish, and other situations, where liberal secular (if not democratic) politicians seek to end various degrees of civil strife by arranging dialogue with moderate religious politicians while extremist terrorists (often no longer with any claim on religion) are demonstrating in the wings. The relations between the terrorists and moderates remain unclear, the moderates' control over the terrorists uncertain, and the extent to which an agreement with the moderates would end the terrorism unassured.<sup>35</sup>

Gilles Kepel argues convincingly that throughout the Islamic world the more extremist manifestations of Islamic revivalism are becoming desperate as the momentum and popular support has moved increasingly in the direction of manifestations that work through civil society. He observes that this argument "... goes against the blinkered vision of those who make the doctrine of Islam itself an obstacle to the implantation of democracy in any of the countries where it is the dominant religion, and also to those who attribute to that doctrine a 'democratic essence'. Islam, like any other religion, is a way of life, one that is given its shape and form by Muslim men and women."<sup>36</sup> The relatively undeveloped civil society in the region limits possibilities for Islamic revivalism to work through institutions of civil society. Discouragement on the part of regimes of the

development of civil society and, ironically, repression of both traditional Islam and forms of Islamic revivalism conducive to civil society, may grant more extreme forms of Islamic revivalism a longer lease on life than those forms may enjoy in some other parts of the predominantly Islamic world.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have advanced a promising approach to the issue of reconciling the emergence of Islamic revivalism with the assumption that development should lead to increasing secularization.<sup>37</sup> Their approach rests on two axioms. The first is that, in spite of development, insecurity and vulnerability will lead people in a given society to look to religion and experience religious feeling in a more intense manner. This insecurity, they stress, includes but is not limited to economic insecurity. This existential insecurity reflects, as well, vulnerability to disease, malnutrition, natural disaster, and lack of access to education and health-care. The second axiom suggests that regardless of the degree to which any individual may have become secularized, he/she will inevitably have been conditioned by the cultural traditions of a given society that have been shaped in part by religion. Norris and Inglehart suggest that "... the distinctive world-views that were originally linked with religious traditions have shaped the cultures of each nation in an enduring fashion; today these distinctive values are transmitted to the citizens even if they never set foot in a church, temple, or mosque."<sup>38</sup>

Consideration of conventional indicators like income per capita, life expectancy, and the literacy rate for the republics will confirm that individuals have genuine grounds to experience a sense of vulnerability and insecurity. This theory would suggest that such a sense is likely to make people feel more intensely the need for religion. The Norris-Inglehart thesis would lead one to note the degree of uncertainty and dislocation in the Central Asian republics brought on by the pressures of rapid transition as the economy moves away from an odd combination of traditional and command elements toward an odd combination of traditional and market elements with the ultimate outcome unclear as to which elements, traditional or market, will prevail. As well, in the absence of the ideological forces of communism to lend an aura of legitimacy to the political order, regimes have encouraged some democratic pretenses while maintaining authoritarian practices, and emphasized nationalism in spite of the fact that state boundaries, as a consequence of Stalinist policy, cross, rather than coincide with, ethnic borders. As people become frustrated with the slow pace of improvement in the standard of living, they become less certain of the value of democracy and markets. This may not be entirely fair – the benefits from the expansion of a market economy may be long-term, and democracy, for all the rhetoric, has not enjoyed the consistent or whole-hearted support of regimes in the region.

The Norris-Inglehart approach would also suggest that anyone in these republics, believer or not, will inevitably be exposed to, and almost certainly be conditioned, to at least some degree, by the religious tradition via the extent to which that tradition has come to pervade the political culture. In considering the

implications of this, it should be kept in mind that we are not referring simply to the religious tradition of Islam but to the particular form associated with Hanafi (or Hanafite) Sunni Islam and its particular history in Central Asia. Hanafi Islam tended to be more liberal, more open to accommodating pre-Islamic practices, and less strict than other forms like the Wahhabi, for example.<sup>39</sup> Some of the Central Asian peoples pursued sedentary lifestyles prior to Soviet occupation, while others tended to be nomadic prior to Soviet occupation. In either case, the Islamic clergy in Central Asia traditionally did not possess the degree of political authority exercised by clergy in some other parts of the predominantly Islamic world. In addition, for those peoples like the Kazakh, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz who were less likely to follow a settled (or sedentary) lifestyle, Islamic observance in practice was weaker than among more settled peoples like the Uzbeks and Tajiks.

In each of the republics, there exists a state-controlled official Islam with clergy employed and regulated by the state. There also exists a parallel (or unofficial) Islam independent of the state. While there are some militant fundamentalist teachers of Islam, these are the exception. There have been some outbreaks of militancy but most of the parallel Islamic clergy is Hanafi Sunni Islam. However, authoritarian regimes in pursuit of sympathy or at least tolerance for their repression of Islamist and other critics have labelled, especially in the aftermath of 11 September, almost every dissident as Wahhabi, referring to the strain of Islamic revivalism supported by some Saudi elements. Murad Esenov argues that "the politicization of Islam" is more prevalent than the "Islamisation of politics," asserting that "Islam is under the strict control of the secular power, not vice versa."<sup>40</sup> Olcott observes that "Although some who work in the state apparatus that supervise religious institutions are themselves religious believers, many are not, and are still holdovers from the atheistic communist regime. Because of this many believers see the state as an opponent of the faith, rather than its protector, a perception which often works against the encouragement of moderate trends within Islam, and serves the goals of radical Islamic groups."<sup>41</sup> She further asserts that "The Central Asian elites are exaggerating the threat to the state that is posed by those advocating radical Islamic ideologies, and US policy makers will be making a great mistake if they allow shared goals in the war on terror to blind us to the short-sighted and potentially dangerous policies that are being pursued in the region with regards to religion."<sup>42</sup> The repression of moderate Islamists has led to human rights abuses, weakened the relatively moderate indigenous forms of Islamism which lack the external support of the Wahhabi elements, and provided a rationalization used both domestically and internationally for continuing lack of progress in democratization.

## **The Fall of Communism and the Path Toward Democratization**

While the republics have made varying degrees of progress toward establishing market economies, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan making more progress than Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan, none have made the sort

of progress toward democratization that would have been hoped for at the time of independence. Recent elections in Uzbekistan in December 2004, Tajikistan in February 2005, and Kyrgyzstan in February 2005, have been monitored by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The outcomes of the latter two of these elections have been especially controversial.

The later years of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact witnessed considerable pressure for change and for human rights emanating out of social and political movements like Poland's Solidarity movement. The institutions associated with civil society had developed much further in states like Poland and Czechoslovakia (later to become the Czech Republic and Slovakia) than in states like Romania and Bulgaria. One outcome was that, when communism did fall, there existed the potential for democratization in Poland and Czechoslovakia that did not exist in states like Romania where, in the absence of genuinely autonomous civil society organizations, the post-communist regime was led by former members of the old communist order. Similarly, not all the republics of the Soviet Union were at the same stage of political development. The Central Asian republics, although they had witnessed some nationalist agitation over Russian domination, had not developed the sort of civil society that Poland or Czechoslovakia or, within the Soviet Union, that the Baltic republics had, and two crucial outcomes have been that, in the absence of an organized opposition, post-Soviet regimes in the Central Asian republics have been dominated by former members of the Soviet regimes, and that the progress of democratization has been much slower than in the Baltic states, for example. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott note that:

On the whole, the sociopolitical situation in the countries of Central Asia differs markedly from that in Russia and most of the other new states. Although the expansion of political participation and the depth of the anti-Communist political movement have varied substantially among Russia and the countries of the western region, in nearly all instances these developments have surpassed the analogous political phenomena in Central Asia. If political and economic holdovers from the Communist system are at least under siege in the western states, they have a much surer hold on power in most of Central Asia.<sup>43</sup>

Reflecting on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, David Remnick remarks that "The dissolution of the Soviet Union had become inevitable after the collapse of the August coup, but the haste and vanity of those who dissolved it were extraordinary. Although they portrayed themselves to their people as national heroes, many had supported or, at least, were ready to knuckle under to the leaders of the August 1991 coup attempt. In time, the leaders of Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Turkmenistan would establish authoritarian regimes more severe than anything seen in the Soviet Union since the days of Andropov and Chernenko."<sup>44</sup> Olcott points out that, whereas often leaders of newly independent states derive popular

legitimacy from involvement in the movement for independence, the leaders of the Central Asian republics:

. . . were inadvertent founding fathers. Most were once part of the old Soviet Union's nomenklatura, which was in turn largely drawn from the region's traditional ruling elites. These leaders were neither democrats nor dictators, nor nationalist heroes. Some were opportunists; most were sincere in the desire to secure their countries' economic survival. All were aware of the highly vulnerable nature of their nations' premature births, and each leader recognized the risks of his own ouster.<sup>45</sup>

Ahmed Rashid concludes that, rather than encouraging the development of civil society and respect for human rights, the reality is that "Uzbekistan and other Central Asian regimes have made no gesture toward reforming their grotesque record of human-rights abuses. Muslim believers remain in Uzbek jails, elections are a farce, there is not even minimal freedom of the press or of assembly, and torture is commonplace."<sup>46</sup>

Gregory Gleason suggests that progress toward democracy in these states has been limited by a gap between formal institutions and actual processes; a tension between economic restructuring, which gave rise to some dislocation, and political reform, an approach to reform that has been top-down; and a security environment that at times took priority.<sup>47</sup> Pauline Jones Luong notes that "The convergence toward authoritarianism across Central Asia since 1995, then, is a testament to the declining rather than the rising power of these states. Waning legitimacy in the face of declining standards of living and rampant official corruption has important political as well as economic consequences for these states."<sup>48</sup>

Anticipating the possibility of complete chaos and region-wide war, Karl Meyer reflects that at least the worst-case scenarios for the region in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union, did not materialize, except for a civil war in Tajikistan and some outbreaks of violence in Uzbekistan.<sup>49</sup> To some degree, this reflected success on the part of the post-Soviet regimes in suppressing opposition and unrest and, to some degree, the lack of the elements of civil society through which criticism might be voiced. In each republic, regimes in power under Soviet control formed governments under independence, and with the exception of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, these regimes continue to hold power. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov remains president. In Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov continues to hold power, while Nursultan Nazarbayev remains in power in Kazakhstan. Only in Tajikistan, where the current president is Emomali Rahmonov, and Kyrgyzstan, where Askar Akayev had been president since before independence until his overthrow in March 2005, has national leadership changed hands since independence.



As an example of the sort of authoritarian regime that can be found in the region, one can consider the case of Turkmenistan. Rashid remarks that “Nothing in Central Asia in the post-Soviet era has been quite so bizarre as the personality cult that President Saparmurad Niyazov has fostered in Turkmenistan. Starting in 1991, when Niyazov erected statues and plastered photographs of himself posing as ‘Turkmenbashi’ (Father of all Turkmen) on walls and squares across the country, the cult has grown to the point where buildings, streets, even entire cities have been named after him.”<sup>50</sup> Rashid observes that “Even by the authoritarian standards of the Central Asian regimes, Niyazov’s government is unique: the most repressive and dictatorial regime in the region. Political parties are banned, the government controls all media outlets, meetings of all kinds – even academic – are forbidden, and Christian and Hindu sect leaders have been thrown out of the country along with political opposition leaders.”<sup>51</sup> Kaplan notes that when he visited Turkmenistan, “There were no identifiable dissidents: The kind of dissent that focuses on universal values such as human rights requires urbanity, and the Turkmen were a nomadic, tribal people, who still wore traditional costumes and didn’t know the names of streets, perhaps because knowing street names requires an abstract and impersonal knowledge that is not based on habit.”<sup>52</sup> Kaplan further observes that “Outrage against the regime was muted. When I asked why, I got a one-word answer: ‘Tajikistan.’ Tajikistan was another former Soviet Republic in Central Asia that had collapsed into violent anarchy, by some counts split among twelve different warlord-ships. Turkmenistan was prone to similar disintegration, and everyone here knew it.”<sup>53</sup> Graham Smith suggests that “. . . nation-building has involved repackaging the idea that strong governance is central to the well-being of the homeland polity, based in particular on the notion that it is only through strong political leadership that both material prosperity and geopolitical stability will be secured.”<sup>54</sup>

Some of the issues can be illustrated by an examination of recent events in Kyrgyzstan. Conventional wisdom would have suggested that a relatively underdeveloped civil society would have made Kyrgyzstan an unlikely place for an event like the Tulip Revolution. Conventional wisdom would also have suggested that if an authoritarian regime were to be overthrown by an event other than a coup by members of the regime or by members of the military, it would have been an outcome of an Islamist threat. Olcott moves from the obvious – that the immediate instigation that culminated in the overthrow of the Akayev regime was an election generally considered corrupt and dishonest that could have resulted in the extended tenure in office of Akayev once a legislature friendly to the regime had changed the rules – to make some thought-provoking points. While dishonest, the election of 2005 was probably closer to a genuinely fair election than previous elections in Kyrgyzstan since independence. What had changed were popular expectations. Olcott observes that “. . . the elections were more democratic than the previous parliamentary election, but fell short of being ‘free and fair’ and more importantly did not meet local expectations.”<sup>55</sup> Increasingly, the people of Kyrgyzstan have become aware of democracy and democratization elsewhere,



and have become skeptical of excuses for continuing authoritarianism, and impatient with the slow pace of democratization. Of course, mixed with a desire for democracy was a frustration with the chronic inability of the government in power to provide effective government. Justin Burke observes that "Allegations of vote-rigging served as the catalyst for the Kyrgyz revolution. But it was pent-up frustration among the population over persistent poverty and pervasive government corruption that packed the revolution with its explosive power. Many supporters of the revolution aren't necessarily interested in democracy; they are preoccupied simply with providing for themselves and their families."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting that while Kyrgyzstan has long been characterized by widespread poverty, in recent years the economy has experienced dramatic improvement, with growth in the gross domestic product of 6.7 percent in 2003, and the percentage of the population living below the poverty line dropping from 55 percent to 40 percent between 1998 and 2003.<sup>57</sup>

In March 2002, police responding to demonstrations in support of Azimbek Beknazarov, on trial after issuing a call for Akayev's impeachment, used force to break up the demonstrations. The deaths of seven unarmed demonstrators in Aksy precipitated a crisis that threatened Akayev's hold on the presidency. Akayev responded by turning to Russia for advice and assistance. Akayev replaced the prime minister, Kurmanbek Bakiev, with Nikolai Tanayev, a Russian who had lived and worked for some years in Kyrgyzstan. While restricting opportunities for independent meetings and events, Akayev's regime initiated discussion of constitutional change. A committee of jurists, politicians, and activists recommended changes that included limiting presidential powers and enhancing the powers of the prime minister. Rather than submitting these proposals to a referendum, the Akayev regime substituted this proposed constitution with another constitution written in the president's office. This latter proposed constitution, which included a stronger presidency than that recommended by the committee and made it practically impossible to impeach the president, was submitted to voters in a referendum in February 2003. Olcott suggests that "... Akayev found it easier to behave more like the leaders of neighboring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and to accept 'technical assistance' from Russia designed to help shape Kyrgyzstan into a 'guided' democracy, rather than a society that is recognizably democratic according to western norms."<sup>58</sup>

An outcome of these events was that mistrust of Akayev's intentions and integrity spread. *Human Dimension Commitments in Central Asia: Achievements and Challenges*, the report of meetings in January 2004 organized by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights, in cooperation with the International League for Human Rights and with funding assistance from the Foreign Ministry of Belgium, observes that concern was expressed that "In Kyrgyzstan, there were many violations during the last elections, but the response from the international community was inadequate, resulting in an impression being left that such violations can

occur with impunity. In relation to the Aksy tragedy, not only were the perpetrators never punished, but in fact they were promoted.”<sup>59</sup> Also in 2004, Aziz Soltobaev, noting restrictions imposed on the media, hypothesizes that “. . . these extreme measures against the representatives of opposition and mass media on the part of the authorities could lead to diametrically opposite outcomes and heat up the situation in republic even further.”<sup>60</sup>

Elections for a new parliament were held in 2005, with the initial round on February 27 and the second round on March 13. While the electoral process was more fair than in previous elections, the regime went to great lengths to ensure a parliament sympathetic to Akayev, rejecting some candidacies, engaging in vote-buying, and pressuring candidates to stand aside. When two leading opposition figures, Adakhan Madamarov and the prime minister fired by Akayev, Kurmanbek Bakiev, each of whom were expected to be elected easily to the new parliament, were declared to have been defeated in the second round, outrage grew. It was believed that Akayev intended to use the new parliament to approve a new constitution that would waive the term limits precluding Akayev from again seeking the presidency in October 2005 that ignited the revolution in which people took to the streets. Akayev swore in the new parliament, resisted calls for his resignation, but then fled to Russia.

The popular uprising that caused Akayev to flee originated in the south. Protestors seized government buildings in Jalal-Abad and Osh. The crisis that arose when protests broke out in the capital, Bishkek, starting on 22 and 23 March 2005, ultimately led several days later to Akayev’s flight. Although he refused to resign for several days, a provisional government assumed authority. The protests do not seem to have been under the control of any single group, and even prominent opposition politicians seem to have been swept along with the tide of events. The concern over the lack of unity among Akayev’s critics and the danger of fighting among competing opposition elements was addressed when two potential rivals cooperated in the formation of the provisional government; Kurmanbek Bakiev became prime minister and, hence, interim president, and Feliks Kulov became interior minister.

To be fair to the regimes in the region, some progress has been made, largely in response to international pressure, in the direction of fairer elections. However, there do exist groups committed to using violence to advance an Islamist agenda, although it would be a mistake to identify Islamism exclusively with such groups or to view all opposition elements as exponents of either Islamism or violence. Marat Yermukanov suggests that Kazakhstan has been typical in trying to assuage Western concerns by expressing rhetorical support for democratization while suggesting that cultural and economic factors, and the threat of Islamist violence render speedier progress toward democratization and political and economic liberalization inadvisable, if not impossible, and justify interference with non-governmental organizations, opposition parties, religious groups, and the media.<sup>61</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh, in an assessment of Uzbekistan,

suggests that the regime in power “. . . has used the imagined Islamic threat as an excuse for its authoritarian politics internally, and territorial consolidation externally. Tashkent’s border initiatives are ostensibly aimed at securing its territory against Islamic infiltration, but they are seen as evidence of Uzbek hegemonic mind-set in other Central Asian republics.”<sup>62</sup> With the outbreak of the Tulip Revolution only months in the past, events in the other republics have not stood still. Violence has erupted in Uzbekistan, and concern has arisen that the regime has intensified efforts to suppress opposition.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It may sound terribly romantic to talk about “the Great Game,” and certainly in the aftermath of military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is an understandable concern from a geo-strategic viewpoint about the stability of Central Asia and any possibility that the more violent manifestations of Islamic revivalism may shift their base of operations to the Central Asian republics or simply see them as convenient bases from which to strike against the nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. One could focus on the geo-strategic considerations posed by the region’s proximity to Russia or to the Middle East or to Afghanistan or to India and Pakistan. The region does occupy a location of strategic importance in a number of respects, and this understandably has influenced Western policy toward the region. It is entirely understandable that Western governments would wish to secure co-operation from governments in the region. On the one hand, there are legitimate concerns about militant forms of Islamic revivalism, like the IMU. On the other hand, there is also a tendency on the part of authoritarian regimes to use this threat as a broad excuse and justification for human rights abuses. Western governments, however, should not align themselves so closely with authoritarian regimes that they overlook the human rights abuses and suppression of Islam and other religious practice that exists in the region.

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