

"Ethnicity and Islam in the Post Soviet Central Asia,"
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Abstract: Central Asia is heir to many traditions. Chief among these traditions are Islamic and Sovietism. During the Islamic period a great many traditions of the people of the area such as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism gave way to Islam and the functionaries in the Soviet era destroyed a great many of the Islamic traditions and rituals. The paper is based on readings on the area and field works and tries to explain the persistence of Islamic traditions as means of self-identity and authentication in the face of the onslaught of a monolithic Soviet system.

Historical Back ground: A List.

THE MUSLIMS OF FSU can be divided into three groups according to geography: (There are members of each Muslim nationalities that are scattered all over the FSU)

I. Muslim groups in Russia: Tatars, Bashkirs, Altays, Uighurs, Dungans (Hui-Chinese Muslims).

II. Muslims of Transcaucasian and the North Caucasus

a. Turkic Peoples: Azeris, Kumyks, Karachays, Balkars, Nogays,

b. Iranian Peoples: Ossets, Tats, Taylyshs, Kurds.

c. Caucasian Peoples: Daghestanis, Chechens, Ingush, Kabardians, Alegeys, Abkhaz, Cherkess, Abazins, Adjars

III. Muslims of West Turkestan (Central Asia)

DISCUSSION:

During the period of colonization of Central Asia by the Russians and the Soviets active cultural and structural assimilation of the Muslims through various procedures and institutions was carried out. Anti-Islamic propaganda of the Tsarist Ministry of Education and Church through its various kinds of schools and the Orthodox Church was overt.

The Soviet period witnessed the forcible destruction of the Madaris and the Masajids as well as the "illegalization" of the Shari'ah. All these happen some say because of Muslims powerlessness. In other words Muslims were not only powerless to colonization they were READY to be colonized. What kept a trace of Islam until the fall of the USSR was a/ the Soviet nationality policy; b/ myth (the kharafat) and c/ attempts

resistance in forms of Pan-Turanism (Zenkovsky), Pan-Islamism, the Jadidism, and later on the Basmachi resistance.

Nevertheless, in less than one and half century (most of it under the Soviet system) most of the values rendered illegal or utterly undesirable by the occupiers and their attendant formal Islamic institutions were uprooted. The political, economic, and social institutions were destroyed immediately after the Soviet consolidated their power. New sets of values and institutions were declared and forcefully implemented. By the time the USSR comes to an end in 1990 one discovers the a type of catastrophe in Central Asia that almost rival that which befall he Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. Even the informal organizations could not protect themselves. Muslim family was attacked as were informal gatherings in masjid and khanaqas. Islam as ritual remained among the very few of the very young and the very old. Through out this period of colonization ethnicity not only survived but became robust and racist.

While the oppression and the cultural genocide was going on Pan-Islamic views to combat the aggressors were articulated by the very few for a very short time. The movement was part of the general awareness in most of the countries of then Islamic world.

What is most surprising is the ease with which the centuries old Islamic institutions institution succumbed to the Russians. One can attribute the ease with which Islam fell in Turkistan to the degree of illiteracy of the Muslims at this time which was almost universal. Islam as a social system require a degree of understanding that cannot be achieved in a illiterate societies. In other word, Islam does not flourish in illiterate society. The Muslim can resist the colonization of the mind if the mind is not ready to be colonized. That can happen when Muslims become 'Alim.

TWO things seem to have survived the Soviet colonization of Central Asia: myth and ethnicity. The first apparently survived because of Muslims illiteracy and later their illiteracy about Islam and their past because of Soviet attempt for the destruction of the Islamic culture. The second survived because of the policy of divide and rule that worked at cross-purpose of the Soviet policy for the development of the theoretical Soviet Person. In part because the Soviet person was soulless, and cold that people turned myths and few supervised Jum'ah prayers and ceremonies for birth, circumcision, marriage and death. Aspects of some of these rituals and some others predates Islam.

It is true that Islamic civilization by the end of the 19th century became almost totally theological. Its education system was useless for commerce and for other ingredients needed for economic development. It was into such a vacuum that the Russians and later the Soviets moved. The supportive environment that was there sometimes ago (as in the Samanid era? The Madinah) was no more around. How was it removed. Why Madinah model did not survive and has not been duplicated. Why did the positive attitude towards science and technology that existed almost a millennium before the fall of Bukhara evaporated? Why was formal Islamic institution so easily washed away from this land and a very few informal organization managed to survive? After all we are not talking about an ordinary people and landscape. We are talking about an area that without the contribution of its people our knowledge reservoir of today would have been quite diminished. The people contribution to the Islamic literature constitute a significant amount of the total writings of this religion. Only Muslims in name and ethnicity remains in Central Asia by the end of the 20th century. It is possible that Islam and Muslims would have perished with only their monuments testifying to their existence. It would have been another Spain in another form.

The only meaningful effort to combat colonization seems to have been Jadidism. It was destroyed by the Amir and the Soviets each for its own evil purpose (Shorish Islamic studies)

In Central Asia the Soviet have left a highly schooled population who are illiterate about Islam and even about their own history and traditions. They even do not have the appropriate type of education to deal with the appropriate technology to keep up with the technological changes or to halt or reverse the ecological catastrophe that Soviets economic policy bequeath these people. They were schooled to be a caste of cotton grower and cotton pickers. Their schooling was too specific to be transferable. Now that the centrally planned economy that required such a training is no more around people with high levels of schooling no more equipped to deal with the problems of economic development than are people in countries where school attainment years are a fraction of those in Central Asia.

One can juxtapose the ideal Soviet and the ideal Islamic person in order to find some clues to the devastation that occurred of the Islamic organization and of the Muslims there:

The Soviet Person

omnicompetent
Internationalist
A Humanitarian
a good Communist
Raceless, sexless and nationless
nationless
no nationalism
monolithic prolet.culture

The Islamic Person

Muttaqi (Pious)
Shuja` (brave)
`Alim (learned)
raceless and
no nationalism
seamless Ummah

The Soviet nationality policy has resulted in the undoing of the USSR in killing the Soviet person. As a result the imagination of the populace has been fired by hyper nationalism and ethnalization that is frightening to the minorities among the various republics. Nationalism in the final analysis becomes racism.

Because of apparent priority of polity neither Islam or communism was used for conflict resolution or development. As Madinah was strife ridden, both at the time of the Prophet (PBU) and during the Khulafa'i Rashidin, so was the USSR through out its history. In fact it is very hard to find state with no politics or something else ahead of it. Theoretically, of course, Islam is both the polity and the religion. In reality only on a very few instances the politics of the polity or those outside it has been set aside for to achieve a religious end. The argument does not end with Amawids or the Abbasids and the numerous dynastic empires to the present day.

Through all of these and over the years conflicting traditions, experiences, schools of thoughts and jurisprudence, oppressions from within and without kept the potential Ummah fragmented, illiterate and parochial.

The way out of this malaise of powerlessness seems to be the distribution of resources in a manner that the basic needs (rights) of the people are guaranteed. These rights are the right to minimum health, nutrition, shelter and education. The education includes understanding Islam. The teaching of Islam as a social system should be through

the first four year cycle of post-secondary education and should take place in a free and supportive environment.

At the present time the ethnicity driven policy of fear in Central Asia and elsewhere will keep Islam as a ritual and Muslims Islamically illiterate. This bad tradition should be abandoned.