

Book Review

Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia

Author: Adeeb Khalid

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Reviewed by Stithorn Thananithichot*

In *Islam after Communism*, Adeeb Khalid examines the Soviet impact on the Islam heritage of the five countries of Central Asia, (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) that emerged as sovereign states from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Seeking to explain what Islam means to Central Asia, Khalid employs historical perspectives to consider the experience of 70 years of Soviet rule (1917-1991), which he sees this period as one of enormous transformation in society and culture that causes Central Asia to become distinguished from other areas in the Muslim World. He argues that all forms of Islamic expression came under sustained assault in the Soviet period: patterns of the transmission of Islamic knowledge were damaged, if not destroyed; Islam was driven from the public realm; and the physical making of Islam such as mosques and seminaries disappeared.

In Khalid's view, during the period from the revolutions of 1917 down to the relaxation of antireligious pressure during the Second World War, patterns of Islamic learning in Central Asia were damaged. Because of the Soviet rule, Muslim educational institutions were abolished, new religious text could not be published, and oral chains of transmission were often destroyed. The family became the only site for the transmission of Islam, and with the available religious knowledge circumscribed, a considerable homogenization of Islam, as differences in approach and interpretation were erased. Islam in Central Asia in this period was also driven from the public realm because the Soviet regime framed its official rhetoric in terms of universal human progress, defining progress in entirely non-religious (indeed, antireligious) terms. The official channels of socialization - most importantly, the school system and the army -

*Stithorn Thananithichot is a Researcher (on study leave) at the King Prajadhipok's Institute, Thailand. He received bachelor's degree in Political Science from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and obtained master's degree in the same field from Thammasat University, Thailand. He is now a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Political Science, University of Utah, USA. His research interests include democratization, electoral behaviour, nation and nationalism, and Thai politics. He has published three books and many articles. His most recent article is entitled "Imagined Thai: The Politics of Constructed National Identity in Thailand," in *Global Politics in the Dawn of the 21st Century*. Athens, Greece: Athens Institute for Education and Research. In addition he has also edited three books.

provided by the Soviet regime were successful in displacing Islam from the public arena. Even though Islamic practice was never eradicated, the disappearance of the social and moral authority of the carriers of Islam brought about tangible changes in actual practice. That is - the daily routine, structured around the five-times-daily call to prayer from the mosque, as well as the annual cycle of public celebrations of Muslim holidays, was destroyed. Islamic strictures against alcohol and even pork could not be flouted much more easily; at the same time, the requirements of ritual purity, which help structure both private and public life to a considerable degree in Muslim society, were impossible to fulfill. All of these changes, according to Khalid, not only have affected on what people think of themselves as Muslims, but also have impacted on the meaning of being Muslim, the meaning that was cut off from its own past and from Muslims outside the Soviet Union. Central Asian Islam, for Khalid, for this reason, is a local form of being rather than part of a global phenomenon.

Considering the status of Islam during the final decade of Soviet rule (during the post-war era in which religious life in the Soviet Union reach a sort of equilibrium, tolerated by the state under strict conditions and attacked primarily through antireligious propaganda) Khalid demonstrates that the Soviet period also saw the emergence of strong secular, ethnonational identities among Central Asians, as well as the creation of new political and cultural elites firmly committed to such identities. He discusses the obligatory issues of policy and the role of the official religious boards set up by the Soviet government to manage and control religious affairs, and argues that whatever

constraints were placed on potentially politicized expressions of nationalism, the Soviet state in Central Asia was itself responsible for forging and strengthening national sentiment that had not existed, as such, in pre-Soviet times. Hence, although the meaning of being Muslim in Central Asia was changed according to the Soviet rule, Central Asian Islam became synonymous with tradition and was subordinated to powerful ethnonational identities that crystallized during the Soviet period. It was effectively *demodernized* in the Soviet period, survived merely as an element of national culture, and endured today.

Islam was recovery since 1991 when Central Asia was independent as a republic, but Khalid claims that the nature of its revival of Islam does not necessarily have political implication. More people may say their prayers more than in the Soviet period; however, the resurgence of piety does not lead directly to the politicization of Islam. Rather, in Khalid's view, "it is connected with how Islam is deployed in politics, how the authority of Islam is used to justify or legitimate political action, and which interpretations of Islam come to dominate the political landscape of the country" (p.139). He asserts this argument by exploring the role of the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan's civil war, and concluding that Tajikistan today shows "few sign of Islamization" (by which he means either a wide-scale appeal of Islamist rhetoric or action, or a significant return of Islam to public discourse), as well as by discussing the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir. He also offers quite brief discussions of the "Islamic threat" in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, and concludes that Central Asian regimes jus-

tify their policies toward Islam as a defense of secularism. However, according to Khalid, even though Islamic militancy may pose some danger to the regimes, the danger the regimes pose to ordinary pious Muslims is far greater. The most immediate potential source of instability in Central Asia's near future, for him, is the successions that loom at the top, as the first generation of leaders succumbs to mortality, while the greater long-term concern should be the dismal state of the region's economy, the ecological nightmare unfolding there, and the endemic corruption.

Overall, Khalid's *Islam after Communism* is excellent in explaining religion and politics in Central Asia, particularly by mentioning the importance of history and culture in the study. One of the most important things we have learned from Khalid, in my opinion, is his view on the complexity of Islam as a historical phenomenon, its internal diversity, and the infinite possibilities that reside within it. Thinking in this way would help us to understand the concrete historical experience of the real Muslim societies of Central Asia that experienced the twentieth century in a radically different way than other countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia did.

Another strong point of the book is the attention he pays to the Soviet period, and I strongly agree with his argument that considers this period as one of enormous transformation in society and culture that causes Central Asia to become distinguished from other areas in the Muslim World. Experienced under Communism, Islam in Central Asia was changed in many interesting ways that the Soviets tried to remake it. Even though the Soviets did not achieve all their goals, Central Asia was utterly transformed

by them.

In addition to some strong points I have mentioned above, the book, in my opinion, has something that disappointed me. While Khalid claims the history matter, which in my view means the memory matter, he overlooks the capacity of the religion (i.e. Islam) in reviving the fate and belief of Central Asian Muslims. If in the Soviet period, Islam was damaged through a limit transmission channel, it could be rebirth by its independent process of transmission in the post-Soviet era. As we have seen from Khalid's argument that Islamic observance is increasing in the region although few of them had any real knowledge of the religion or knew how to practice it. The point that we have to concern then is what kind of 'Muslim' that the new (or next) generation of Central Asian Muslims would be. Especially in the liberal world, where people can imagine their identity by learning from the others, they may construct a new imagined Muslim that could be either advantages or disadvantages to the nation. As we have seen in many areas of today's the modern Islamic world, some transmissions of knowledge about Islam and what it means to be Muslim bring about terrorism and violence. The danger to the regime being influenced by the religion is not "rank low on the list" as Khalid said (p.198). We must put religion (Islam) as one of the potential sources of instability in the future of Central Asia rather than be concerned about only administrative and economic factors (as Khalid points in his conclusion chapter), which in my opinion are a "normal" effect of a free-market democracy that does not lead us to view Central Asia's transition from Soviet authoritarianism to something "*more normal*" as Khalid attempts to suggest.