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ISLAM AND CENTRAL ASIA: A CASE STUDY OF KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

There has been a growing apprehension about the resurgence of Islam across the globe and more especially, in the Central Asian region. The concepts of "Islamic fundamentalism", "Islamic resurgence" and "Islamic revival" etc. are the floating annotations reflecting the society and polity of Central Asian Republics. This paper is an attempt at understanding the nature of Islamic revival in the region. The author argues that Islam has been mild, tolerant, modernist and less dogmatic in its outlook because of the prevalent typical tribal and nomadic societal pattern of the region. It is also argued that Islam is serving the interest of newly growing ethno-cultural feelings of these Republics. Thus, Islam may be viewed as an ethnic marker. Having discussed the nature and extent of Islamic influence in the region, the paper attempts at examining Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and its impact on the Republic's society, polity and institutions. An effort has also been made to investigate as to how Islam has been dealt with along the course of nation-building process of post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

The perception of Islam as a closed world of cultural monolith, the dynamics of Islamic revivalism in different parts of the world, growing apprehension of "civilizational conflict" with Islam across the fault ridges of the world map etc., are the global concerns being given vivid annotation in contemporary researches on Islam and to an extent, world politics. Islam as a world religion is characterised by institutions, symbols, beliefs and customs which seek to establish unity. Islam as a civilization is spread from Senegal in the west to Indonesia in the east encompassing a population of 1.3 billion people and covering nearly 55 states.¹ Such an extensive area under Islam is further subdivided into regional sub-civilizations and local cultures. Apart from the Arab core area, there are Turkish,

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¹ Uwe Halbach, "Islam in the C.I.S. : A Rebirth", *Aussenpolitik*, Vol.2, 1996, p.148.

Caucasian, Central Asian, Persian, African, South, Southeast Asian and European subdivisions to Islam.² The term “Muslim” thus, is not merely denominational, it also encompasses ethnocultural categorisation of peoples who were Islamised at different times.³ Monolith Islam is much diverse as a civilizational and cultural construct. “Muslims” and “Muslim societies” are not identical. There are real and significant differences among many communities of Muslims in the world. Indeed “unity and variety” in Islamic history have long been basic issues in interpreting Islamic experiences.⁴

The Muslim societies of Central Asian Republics (CAR) also manifest “unity and variety” syndrome. Though they profess basic tenets of Islam yet they have their own special local and regional characteristics. Islam, no doubt, is central to the CAR’s cultural identity. But when it was introduced into the social landscape of the CAR in the 8th century, it was redefined to suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities that had shaped the life of the people for centuries. Combination with strong ethnic loyalties and tribal life style in the past has been identified as a factor influencing the present Islamic orientation of the region. State atheism under the (former) Soviet rule further made Islam unable to assert against the ideals of communism. The first overview of Muslim peoples in the (former) USSR published in 1981, was thus entitled “The Forgotten Muslims”.⁵

The collapse of communism and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union as a multi-ethnic empire facilitated the return of politics of the “Forgotten Muslims” in Central Asia.⁶ In the

2 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 147-49.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

disintegrated Soviet Union, dozens of informal organisations and national movements have taken up the cause of "Islamic rebirth". Islam is reasserting itself after 70 years of Soviet ideological domination in this region.

However, Islamic revival is not uniform and unilinear in the entire region. In some states, the euphoria over the return of religious freedom and assertion is being tempered by the fear of possible spread of the notion of "Islamic State". Enthusiastic activities of the Islamic fundamentalist forces who see religion and politics as two sides of the same coin tend to threaten the stability of Uzbekistan and Tazikistan. The Kirghiz and Uzbek governments have been alarmed by the activities of the Wahabi sect, an Islamic group in the Fergana Valley. Kazakhstan, however, deserves special attention as "Islamic rebirth" in this Republic, unlike others, is devoid of the said radicalism and ferocity. Islamic heritage is being glorified but in its ethno-cultural construct. The religious awakening has been more in the form of ethnic assertion than quest for an Islamic state. The state and society to a large extent approve the accommodative, democratic and secular model of governance in Kazakhstan.

Before discussing the influence of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, it would be pertinent to understand the specificity and distinct features of Islam in Central Asian region. State of Islam in the region is largely the product of nature and extent of Islamization in these societies (largely nomadic, tribal groups) in the past, and its present influence on the society and polity of the region. However, the distinctiveness of Muslim communities in Central Asia does not mean that these communities are outside the "real" Islamic world or even isolated from it.

Peripheral Islam

There is a marked tendency to exclude Muslim Central Asia from the historical accounts of modern Islamic history. In medieval times much of the area of contemporary Uzbekistan and

Turkmenistan, e.g., Merv, and Bukhara, were parts of great Islamic states in the early days. Yet, Islam as a "world view" concentrates more on the developments in the Middle East and considers Central Asian Islam having less history behind them.⁷ Few conditionalities are implicit in this line of argument. First, the undulated terrain and non-sedate ethnic groups dwelling in the Central Asian region made Islam difficult to enter. Islam took easy course to expand in those areas where habitation was more sedate. These apart, the ethnic groups of Central Asia were genuinely close to their kinship bonds and linkages than towards preferred Islamic bonds due to their nomadic living pattern. Secondly, in the post-medieval times due to expansion of Russia from the north and the development of the dynamic Shiite Safavid state in Iran led to distancing Sunni Central Asia from the rest of the Sunni Islamic world.⁸ During this period, the global overland trade patterns shifted from the well-known Silk Route which led to gradual weakening of the cities and people of Central Asia.⁹ Muslim Central Asia started to become the weaker partner to the greater Islamic world. Finally, the enforced atheism during the Soviet period created ground for further isolation of the region from the Islamic world. For a Soviet-Muslim the chief precondition for receiving a membership card of the CPSU was his open rejection of religious beliefs and acceptance of atheism. "Iron curtain" drawn by Stalin through forbidding individual travel by scholars and pilgrims between Central Asia and the Middle East, replacing Islamic Arabic alphabet by Cyrillic one etc. carried this perceived isolation to its climax.¹⁰ However, this should not lead to a conclusion that Central Asian Islam was dismembered from the greater Islamic world. Sunni Muslims in Central Asia continued travelling to Mecca and other places in the Middle East by shifting the travel pattern from land to sea. They made important

7 H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism, A Historical Survey* (Oxford University Press, London), 1961, pp-27-33.

8 Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford University Press, London) 1963, pp. 225-27.

9 John O. Voll, "Central Asia as a part of the Modern Islamic World", in Manz F. Beatrice (ed.) *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, (Westview Press, Colorado, U.S.A. 1996, p.64.

10 *Ibid.* p. 64.

contributions to Muslim scholarship and life, best exemplified by the spread and influence of the *Naqshabandiyya tariqa*.¹¹ In this way, it is possible to argue that the Muslim communities of Central Asia, whether independently as Sunni states or under Russian communist rule did not withdraw from the broader world of Islam, yet the historical eventualities definitely coerced them to convulse at the periphery as distinct cultures and societies.

Islam as an “Ethnic Marker”

When Islam was introduced into the social landscape of Central Asia in the 8th century, it thoroughly redefined itself to suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities that had shaped their life for centuries. Ethnic loyalties and tinge of tribal lifestyle patterns are the identifying features of the Islamic tradition in Central Asian region. Islam is identified more as ethno-religious identity rather than an overarching unified belief system. In his article on “Multiple Identities in Islam”, a Turkish author, M. Hakan Yavuz, maintained that the identity of Islam as “ethnic marker” is typical for societies on the periphery of Islamic civilization.¹² In such societies with their alien denominational environment, an individual who professed his support for Islam through clothing and eating habits gave “a public statement about his ethno-political identity.”¹³

After the Bolshevik revolution, it was decided to establish a unitary form of government throughout the territories of the former Tsarist regime. To maintain uniformity, they adopted the system and principles of Russification and persuaded the non-Slav peoples to reconcile to Russian domination and socialist regimentation. Any kind of protest by the Central Asian ethnic groups against the

11 *Ibid*, pp. 64-65.

12 Uwe Halbach, *op. cit.* p.151.

13 Hakan M. Yavuz, “The Patterns of Political Islamic Identity, Dynamics of National and Transnational Loyalties and Identities”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, No.3, 1995, p.352.

monoculture-based Russification drive was characterized as *basmachi*-nationalist uprisings inspired by Muslim fanaticism. Encouraged by initial protests, Islam became the pivot to safeguard the cultural survival of Islamic people in the Russian empire. Gradually, various ethnic groups of the Central Asian region in reciprocation found in Islam a way to give vent to their ethno-nationalist feelings in an organised manner against Slav domination. Islam also benefited through its "ethno-religious" image. It would have been difficult for Islam to survive exclusively as a belief-system in an environment completely hostile to religion, had it not been handed down as the "legacy of the ancestors", as an "ethnic marker" and as a refuge to mark the ethno-nationalist feelings for the Central Asian populace in former Soviet Union.

Modernist Islam

Islam in Central Asia experienced the effect of some reformist movements which were totally indigenous in nature. Under the influence of such traditions, elements of modernity infused into Central Asian Islam and it became less orthodox and dogmatic. The first experience was the influence of *Naqshabandiyya tariqa* during the fourteenth century.¹⁴ It spread the concept of Sufi brotherhood which made Islam more accommodative and moderate. The brotherhood inculcated the modernising principles of organisation and leadership in cultural Islam. The order became and remained an exceptionally important influence in the Central Asian homeland and was supported by people of all classes. The second major influence on the development of Islamic modernism in Central Asia was the impact of the life and work of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who defined the modernist goal as being the "presentation of the basic tenets of Islam in terms that would be acceptable to a modern mind."¹⁵ His key assumption was that Western scientific methods and Islam, if properly understood were complementary paths to understanding

14 Manz F. Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.65.

15 *Ibid*, p.68.

truth and were not contradictory.¹⁶ The third major influence was that of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. He is more clearly identified with the emergence of the political movement of pan-Islam.¹⁷ Although pan-Islam was a programme for defending Muslim lands against European imperialism, yet it did not abdicate western political ideas and institutions. Pan-Islam was nothing but reformulation of Western political ideas into Islamic framework. In the context of continuing European victories over Muslim states, the pan-Islamic efforts failed to leave an abiding impact but it definitely marked a formidable step in creating a political synthesis of Western and Islamic political institutions and concepts. Finally, a significant sign of religious enlightenment within the context of Central Asian Islam came with the ideas of Ismail Gasprinskii (1851-1914). He is often identified with the development of *Jadidism* which flourished at the turn of the 20th century. His movement to create new (*jadid*) institutions and schools in Muslim society gave a new impetus to provide a synthesis of modern Islam and Turkish elements in the Central Asian society.¹⁸ His efforts at educational reform within the framework of Islamic modernist views were pioneering ones in the Muslim world as a whole and had a long lasting impact.

The contemporary pronouncements noting the scientific contributions of Central Asian Muslim scientists as a proof of compatibility of Islam and science, the conviction that the Almighty and the All Knowing is the source of all science and knowledge¹⁹, the frequent criticism by Central Asian leaders about the prevailing superstitions, self-styled *imams*, *pirs* and *miras* etc. are the authentic expression of the modernist Islamic position in Central Asia.

Official and Parallel Islam

Another remarkable feature of Central Asian Islam that it experienced covert and overt, two, different styles of Islam during the Soviet period. One is the "official" Islam of the state-regulated

16 *Ibid.* p. 68.

17 *Ibid.* p.68.

18 *Ibid.* pp-68-69.

19 Jafar Panchayuev, "Islam and Science", *Muslims of the Soviet East*, No. 2-3, 1410, 1989, p.20.

establishment and the other is "parallel" Islam which covers the whole area of Islamic life outside the formal structures of official Islam. Initially, the Bolshevik stood for state sponsored atheism. The Soviet socialist government justified a stronger grip over religiosity both in public and private life. Gradually, due to placation of several Muslim nationalities under the unified Russian federation, they discovered a formula for acceptance of atheism while retaining the religious belief systems.

For this, the "official" Islam served as a vehicle for presentation of government views with regard to Muslim populations²⁰. "Official" Islam was nothing but a compromise with the officially atheistic Soviet state. They provided a means for state sponsored public survival of Islamic traditions and institutions.²¹ The Centre of the official establishment was Muslim Religious Directorates and state regulated schools and mosques. There were four such boards for four major regions - North Caucasus, Soviet Europe and Siberia, Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Kazakhstan. These Directorates were led by *muftis*, subject to the authority of the Central Government in Moscow²² They were bestowed with administrative authority for Muslim affairs in these regions. They used to provide authoritative legal interpretations to the Islamic laws for application. These official establishments served as a vehicle for presentation of government views to the Muslim populations of Central Asia.

The "Parallel" Islam represented the Islamic life outside the Soviet official Islam. The people of Central Asia continued to retain religious customs, social rituals and rites of passage - birth, marriage and death ceremonies, despite being held illegitimate under the "Soviet culture."²³ Gradually, "Parallel" Islam started resisting anti-religious policies of the Soviet power. They attacked the leaders of

20 John O. Voll, *op. cit.* p.72.

21 *Ibid*, p. 72.

22 *Ibid*, p. 72.

23 Halbach, *op. cit.* p.150.

official Islam for caring more for their positions than for the Islamic faith. The Central symbol of this popular Islam is *mazar*²⁴. It stands for the variety of places of pilgrimage and local shrines of *Sufi* order. The tombs of *Sufi* teachers who led revolts against Russian and Soviet control became increasingly important pilgrim sites under "Parallel" Islam. Much of the actual life in Central Asia under Islamic faith took place not through the official institutions but through the structures of "popular" Islam.

It is the elements of "Parallel" Islam like tomb visitations, visiting local shrines and *Sufi* orders, which provided strength to the Islamic resurgence in the Central Asian region. The nationalist movements under former Soviet Union were bought under the pretext of "Parallel" Islam. Thus, the new leaders in the official establishment, in the post-communist era are more sensitive to the populist/parallel facet of Islam. The average believer feels more empowered to bring change in the official form of Islam through larger participation in the decision making process. Gradually, the distinct mark of demarcation between official and parallel Islam, being explicitly manifest during the Soviet period is less clear in post-Soviet Central Asian Republics²⁵. This dynamism is part of what many call the "resurgence" of Islam.

Mild Islam

The observance of Islamic rituals has been more lax in the Central Asian region which is a clear manifestation of mild Islamic tendencies in the region. There are Muslim areas in this region which marginally belonged to high Islam such as Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Turkmenistan, where the term "rebirth" or "resurgence" hardly makes any sense with regard to model Islam²⁶. There is almost no Muslim architecture either in Kirghizstan or Kazakhstan. According to the Soviet estimates only 30% and the

24 *Ibid.*, p.150.

25 *Ibid.*, p.150-51.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 150

non-Soviet estimates between 20 to 40% of the adult population regularly performed the daily ritual. Fasting too is observed by only 50% of the adult urban population of only three days rather than a month²⁷. According to one of the most prominent religious leaders in Tajikistan, only three percent of the Muslims master the correct practice of *namaz* (*salat*, daily five prayers).²⁸ The instructive nature of the Islamic calendar specifying the time for the five prayers and explaining five pillars of Islam, recently issued by the spiritual Board of Kazakhstan, clearly manifests the impact of Islamic dogmas and belief system over the Kazakh society. The observance of Islamic dress code for women is not widely prevalent among the Central Asian women. Surveys conducted in this region demonstrate that daily prayer, one of the main pillars of Islam, has not been widely observed²⁹. This compelled a Turkish Islamist publication to ask the rhetorical question: "what is easier - to squeeze water from a rock or to explain Islam in Central Asia?"³⁰

This prodigy determines the picture of the Islamic world religion in the eyes of Central Asian populace. How far the observance of Islamic rituals could be applied to measure the nature and extent of Islamic rebirth or revival is a matter of debate. It becomes more controversial when the notion of growing Islamism and quest for "Islamic state" presupposes the growth of radical Islam incorporating elements of fundamentalism predicated on strict adherence. However, these indications unquestionably seem to point to the sustenance of moderate Islamic trend in Central Asia.

Islamic Revivalism in Central Asia

Islam which was more peripheral, docile, moderate, non-dogmatic and more vivid as ethno-religious identity in Central Asia saw an opportunity to reassert itself, inadvertently set in motion by

27 M. Rywkin., *Moscow's Muslim Challenge : Soviet Central Asia* (London, M.E. Sharpe), 1982, p-89.

28 Halbach, *op. cit.*, p. 150

29 Haghayeghi Mehrdad., "Islamic Revival in the Central Asian Republics", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1994, p. 251.

30 Halbach, *op. cit.*, p. 150

the last President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev and his well publicised policy of *glasnost*, after 70 long years of Soviet ideological domination. Intended to rectify the ills of the Soviet-society, *glasnost* provided the CAR a scope to express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious grievances that had not been addressed openly in the early Soviet days. The response to *glasnost* varied from republic to republic, yet the over all pattern reflected more heavily the ethno-nationalist sentiments than religious aspirations³¹.

The thrust towards Islamic rebirth was maximal in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and mild in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Turkmenistan. Muslim leaders in Tajikistan called for a holy war against the rules of the Republic baptising them as slave of Kremlin master. The Fergana valley of Uzbekistan saw fierce riots and mass demonstration organized by Islamic forces. The streets of Alma Ata saw several violent demonstrations led by Islamic groups³². Campaigns were launched to dethrone the *Muftis* of Muslim Religious Boards who were patronised by the Central Asian authority.

Yet, all these reactions failed to build a unified Islamic identity in the Central Asian Republics. They have found their ethnic identities more closer towards their newly found national identities. The efforts to take state in power hierarchy of some republics (e.g. Tajikistan) on the whims of Islamism failed to yield significant results owing to a heathen ignorance to Islamic cliché of fundamentalism among the masses. It could well be maintained that owing to their essential tribal and nomadic base which was Islamized in meek and limited way, the "resurgence" or "rebirth" of Islam in its fundamentalist posture or growth of militant Islam (i.e. seizure of power by means of religious slogans; the struggle for the Islamic state) seems improbable at present. At most an "enclave

31 Martha B. Olcott, "Gorbachev's National Dilemma", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2., Spring 1989, pp. 399-402.

32 R. Sakwa, *Gorbachev and his Reforms, 1985-90* (Prentice hall, New York), 1990, pp. 247-50.

Islamisation” could be observed in narrow local dimensions as evident in the Ferghana region.³³

However, this does not imply the obfuscation to Islamic rediscovery ‘or’ rebirth in the Central Asian region. Islam is regaining its lost ground but this should not be confused with the demand for an “Islamic Republic”. Islamic symbols and practices are being reinstated but to express the exclusive ethno-nationalist feelings of the newly emerged Central Asian Republics, long subdued under the Slav domination for the last 70 years. The symbols of Islam are primarily sought for national self ascertainment than for the religion itself. Outburst against the state-sponsored atheism and Slav domination under the Soviet regime is widely relieved by resurrecting mosques and religious buildings by the different Central Asian nationalities. Local heroes are being glorified to accentuate their suppressed nationalist feelings. Public building and streets are being named after famous Islamic theologians and philosophers from their own region reflects the search for symbols of national identity in the CAR. In Kirghizstan the greatest focus of national celebration is their mythical hero *Manas* of the past; in Kazakhstan it is *Abai*, who embodies mediation between Russian and Kazakh Islamic culture; in Turkmenistan the national poet Machtumquli and in Uzbekistan “Amir Temur” the founder of the Timur Lenk empire – they all represent the perspective under which Islam is rediscovering in the Central Asian Region.³⁴

It is widely believed that the influence of Islam in Central Asia will continue to rise over the next few years. Though the revival of religion signifies a reawakening in terms of their ethno-nationalistic sentiments, it does not necessarily reflect an interest in changing the political system. The efficacy of ‘Political Islamism’ depends on the context of the success or failure of post-Soviet political models. So long as democratic electoral methods are chosen and democratic

33 Halbach, *op. cit.* p. 153

34 *Ibid*, p. 152.

principles respected, the Islamic forces are allowed to participate in building the political and economic future of the republic, revival of radical Islam seems improbable.

Kazakh Land and Islam

Does Islam in Kazakhstan conform to the Central Asian trend? Why did Kazakh society receive the mild and non-dogmatic form of Islam? What is the extent of adherence to Islam and religious beliefs among its people? How has it affected the legislation, governing institutions and official ideology of post-Soviet Kazakhstan? How do post-Soviet Kazakhstan's policies and institution approve Islam? Do the official efforts to forge ties with countries of Islamic world have any role to play in institutionalising Islam in the domestic policies of Kazakhstan? In the wider context, having discussed the nature and characteristics of Islam and its possible mode of resurgence, this section will examine the "Islamic factor" in Kazakhstan in its specificity and seek answer to the aforesaid queries.

Islam and Past

It is generally believed that Islam made little impression on the Kazakh hordes. This could well be understood by knowing as to how Islam appeared and what pattern did Islam follow to spread over in its past in the very terrain of Kazakh steppe. The first message of Islam appeared in the southern reaches of Kazakhstan in the eight century after Qutayba Muslim's opening of Transoxiana in 714 AD.³⁵ Yet it was much significant as at this time many other religious such as Shamanism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity too flourished in this region. The Islam made its inroads in Kazakhstan, in real terms, with the Russian conquest of this land in the eighteenth

35 Altoma Reef, "The Influence of Islam in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan", in Manz F Beatrice (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 165.

century³⁶. The subsequent policies followed by Ivan IV and a number of his successors to forcibly convert the Tatar population to Christianity forced Islam to escape through Kazakh steppes against the “coerced persecution³⁷”. Tatar *mullahs* and merchants fled towards Kazakh land and started to build mosques and *madrassas* in the region. The propagation of Islam in Kazakhstan was further strengthened by Tatar missionaries who undertook “civilizing missions” in this nomadic region³⁸. Although by the end of 15th century, *Naqshabandi* and *Yasawi* missionaries were able to make significant numbers of converts in this area, yet they failed to deliver any formidable imprint on Kazakh’s nomadic societal pattern. Islam in its historicity was thrust upon Kazakh “flesh and blood”. Though under the influence of Tatar *mullah*, the Kazakh people were increasingly adopting Islamic custom and traditions, yet there were still many who did not know even the name of Muhamad and in many places, their *shamans* had not lost significance³⁹. It is thus Kazakh adaptation of Islam reflects a blend of indigenous spirit cult and nomadic practices⁴⁰. Islam made its last imprint not as a creed with organised socio-political objective but simply as a way of life.

Parallel Islam of Kazakhstan

It is very difficult to determine the extent of Islamic impact among the general population of Kazakhstan owing to lack of primary data in this concern. The observance of Islamic rituals has been more lax in Kazakhstan compared to Middle East in general. Surveys conducted in 1970s demonstrated that daily prayer one of the main pillars of Islam, had not been widely observed⁴¹. The

36 Geoffrey Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia* (London, W and N), 1964, pp. 33-35.

37 Rorlich Azade-Ayse, *The Volga Tatars* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press), 1986, pp 40-43.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-43.

39 Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 166.

40 Elizabeth Bacon, *Central Asians Under Russian Rule* (New York, Cornell University Press), 1996, pp. 40-43.

41 Rywkin, . *op. cit.*, p. 89.

observance of Islamic dress code for women was not a marked feature in Kazakhstan. Even observant Kazakhs often deviate from formal fasting and prayer requirements⁴². Roshan Mustafina, a Kazakh ethnologist supports the trend of limited religious observances in Kazakhstan in his recent study⁴³. Mustafina finds that many Kazakhs consider Muslim ceremonies as part of their "national" rather than religious heritage⁴⁴. The profundity of the Islamic imprint correlates negatively with the prevalence of tribalism in Kazakhstan. For most of the Kazakhs who identify themselves as Muslims, their Muslimness seems to signify more of their ethno-national identity than a commitment to observing Islamic rituals and belief system⁴⁵. To what extent the observance of Islamic rituals may be used as a litmus test for measuring the vigour of Islamic revival is a matter of great controversy. Yet every indication of parallel Islam seems to point the emergence of a moderate Islamic trend in Kazakhstan.

Official Islam of Kazakhstan

By the time of Bolshevik revolution, Central Asia, including Kazakhstan was predominantly Islamic though redefined to suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities. The Soviet socialist government stood for state sponsored atheism. Yet in order to assimilate the various Muslim nationalities into the new Soviet political order, they provided a means for state sponsored public survival of Islamic tradition and value system, under the policy of official Islam. Muslim Religious Directorates bestowed with administrative authority for Muslim affairs for the different regions were resurrected. Muslim Religious Board of Central Asia was established as one of the four 'spiritual directorates' in 1941 to oversee the religious affairs of CAR⁴⁶. The membership and recruitment policies of the Board were tightly controlled the Central

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 89-91.

43 Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.167.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 166-167.

46 Haghayeghi Mehrdad., *op. cit.*, p.250.

authority. Its responsibilities included the appointment of *Mufti* of Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, and Kazakhstan as well as *Kazi* of Tajikstan and Turkmenistan⁴⁷. Kazakhstan too came under the jurisdiction of this Board which established sanctioned channels of Muslim religious activity, administered Muslim religious institutions and regulated religious training and the activities of the official clergy.

With the arrival of the policy of *glasnost*, the ethno-national identity of Kazakhstan assumed more comprehensive character. Taking cue from this, Islam undertook the role of an ethnic marker to reflect the newly evolved ethno-nationalist feelings of Kazakhs against the prolong Slav dominated Soviet rule. Given the Board's pro-Soviet track record, these Boards were being conceived as significant institution to discredit the Soviet regime and augment the nascent ethno-nationalist fervor in Kazakhstan. A campaign thus, was launched to attack the Religious Board of Central Asia, after which a separate Board - Spiritual Board for the Muslims of Kazakhstan (DUMK) came into existence in January 1990. The post Soviet Kazakh government undertook conciliatory approach towards the clerical leaders and continued with such Board so as to avert further radicalisation of Islamic forces in Kazakhstan.

The establishment of an independent spiritual Board in Kazakhstan has accomplished two major purposes. First the independent *Muftiate* acted as a symbol of sovereignty. It helped in posing the institution as symbol of exclusive ethno-cultural identity of Kazakhs. Had the directorate not been established, the Kazakhs certainly would have strived (as did the Turkmens and Kirghiz) to establish one after independence⁴⁸. Second, the directorate forestalled the spate of radical Islam in the post Soviet Kazakhstan. Had this institution not been there, it would have been difficult for Kazakh government to establish sanctioned role for Islam in Kazakh society. Though the Board is officially independent and self-financing, the DUMK apparatus, at least through liaison and

47 *Ibid*, p.250.

48 Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 172.

advisory functions facilitated greater government influence over any further process of Islamic revivalism⁴⁹.

Islam and Political Parties

Over the past few years, the CAR have become the birth place of a multiplicity of political parties with a wide range of ideological variations. Islam too has assumed as one of the categories for political organisation in this region. Founded as a national independence party in 1990, *Alash* Party acts as an opposition movement to the official Islamic functionaries and criticizes the Nazarbayev regime in Kazakhstan⁵⁰. *Alash* activists promote ideas of Turkish chauvinism in Kazakhstan and has attracted many Muslim followers. Yet, the rights of the titular nationality of the republic occupy a special role in the *Alash* programme. The *Alash* forces Islam in consonance with the national traditions, language and culture of new Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs political fulcrum possesses priority rights in the observation of its national traditions by mitigating its Soviet Slavic past, the development of its language and culture and Islam conforms to viewpoint. This could well be visualised by an incident of December 1991 in which the Alma Ata mosque was blockaded for a couple of days by *Alashists*. They accused Mufti Nysanbai-uly of the mosque of having ties with KGB and pilfering the religious communities' contributions towards the construction of a new mosque in Alma Ata⁵¹.

Other political outfits like People's Congress of Kazakhstan and Socialist Party of Kazakhstan, both are committed to gradual establishment of a democratic, tolerant, multi-ethnic and multi-party political system in Kazakhstan and exhibit no signals of radicalism. Even representatives of the *Alash* party, reconciling with the country's unique demographic positioning, argue that only a secular

49 *Ibid*, p.172.

50 Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 173.

51 Reported in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 17 December 1991, p. 1

model of governance could be followed in Kazakhstan. Similarly, the Civil Democratic Movement (*Azat*) which merged with other parties to form Republican party, too stands for 'Liberty, equality, fraternity and decent life for all citizens of Kazakhstan'⁵². This movement primarily concerns itself with improving the plight of Kazakhs which suffered greatly under Soviet rule, Kazakhstan being coerced to subserve the colonial needs of Russian empire.

In a nutshell, the politics of Kazakhstan revolves not around Islam but rather around ethnonational Islam. They reverberate Islamic ideology to strengthen their exclusive nationalist outlook. The appeal for Islam is not so much to religious radicalism as to nationalist audience, since many of their stances reflect a concern for general well being of the Kazakh people.

Governing Institutions, Legislation & Islam

The peculiarities of Islamization among the steppe nomads and the nationalist nuances of Islam in burgeoning Kazakhstan have been scrupulously watched by the Kazakh government. This government has employed an accommodative and tolerant policy towards religion and clerical leaders so as to avert further radicalization of the Islamic forces in the country. The concept of Islamic State - as the ultimate expression of Islam - has been categorically repudiated. The general attitude of the majority of the populace in Kazakhstan if not in line with the government's liberal religious policies is closer to it than to the more vehement Islam⁵³. Turning the official policies of post Soviet Kazakhs to this general mood, the government has been able to contain the political role of Islam.

The new approach to nation-building is reflected in the second post-Soviet constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (August, 1995), the Message of the President to the people of Kazakhstan,

52 Reported in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 11 April 1992, p. 3.

53 Haghayeghi Mehrdad..., *op. cit.*, p.253

“Kazakhstan 2030” of October 1997. In these documents and addresses, Kazakhstan is seen as a complex mixture of ethnic and religious groups, making it a natural bridge between East and West, Turks and Slavs and Muslims and Christians. Kazakh constitution visualises it as a “democratic, secular and unitary state⁵⁴. Kazakhstan legislation maintains that all governing institutions are to be secular in orientation and the President and people’s deputies are to be freely and regularly elected at all levels. We see no evidence of preference being given to Islamic religion or any other religion for that matter. National holidays consist only for celebration of secular events; Islamic holidays have not acquired the status of official holidays⁵⁵. Kazakh legislation asserts equality before law for all citizens irrespective of the grounds of ethnic background, language, race, religious beliefs etc. the law on public associations forbids the creation of organisations which profess exclusivity or enmity on the ground of race, language and religion in the country owing to which *Alash* has experienced several hurdles to register as a political party⁵⁶.

One of the most constant themes under Nazarbyev leadership has been multi-ethnic harmony of the Kazakh population. The President has asserted “we want to build a normal democratic state with an open economy, which is completely incompatible with any religious fundamentalism. One must take into account that in our republic there are various faiths but none of them can become a state religion”⁵⁷. Mufti Nysanbai-uly attends all major official celebrations and other public functions along with Father Aleksei (the Alma Ata and Semipalatinsk archbishop) giving an impression of inter confessional harmony⁵⁸. At the same time, the

54 Full Text of the Constitution appeared in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 2 February 1993, pp. 3-4.

55 Reported in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 4 February 1992, p.1

56 Reported in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 25 April 1991, p.1

57 Reported in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 14 April 1992, p.2

58 Manz F, Beatrice (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.176.

Nazarbayev administration, has taken care to contain a potential political challenge by ethnic-based Kazakh parties such as *Alash* and *Adalat* by promoting the indigenous culture and identity. The Kazakh language, hence, has been given official status, and a knowledge of Kazakh is a pre-condition for candidature for the Kazakh presidency. Nazarbayev's success in implementing the ethnic policy is obvious from his popularity across the country including among the Russians. Consequently, the secularism and centrism of the governments domestic policy feed into Alma Ata's policies towards the outside world and its foreign policies.

Foreign Policy and Islam

With the arrival of Kazakhstan as a sovereign nation-state in the comity of nations, the interest of the country has grown towards Middle East Muslim countries and *vice versa*, of which Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia are prominent. High level contacts between Kazakhstan and Turkey began multiplying after 1991, with officials on both sides repeatedly stressing common linguistic, religious and cultural ties between the two nations⁵⁹. The two governments signed agreements in the fields of transportation, telecommunication and a letter of intent about further contacts⁶⁰. With Turkey, which follows less vigorous model of Islam, President Nazarbayev sought assistance to get an early start in charting a plausible religious and cultural course for the republic. A group of Turkish clergy led by well known Islamic jurist, Halif Altay, toured Kazakhstan to prepare the ground work for future training of Kazakh clergy by their Turkish counterpart⁶¹. Turkey has also agreed to provide educational assistance to Kazakhstan. On 1 April, 1992 Kazakh television aired a programme entitled 'the face of Iran' celebrating the establishment

59 Beatrice (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 167.

60 Alma Ata Kazakh Radio Network in Kazakh, 26 September 1991, in FBIS-SOV-91-189, 30 September, 1991, p.90

61 Reported in *Summary of World Broadcast*, SU/1353-B/7, 11 April 1992.

of the Islamic Republic⁶². The Saudis have opened an equity joint venture Islamic bank in Alma Ata⁶³. By early 1992, Iran signed agreements to open an Iranian bank in Kazakhstan and to assist in oil exploration and transportation of goods between Kazakhstan and Iranian Caspian sea ports⁶⁴. In cooperating with countries of Islamic world (especially with other Central Asian Republics), Islam has been made a basis for forming a political or economic bloc. In May 1992, a meeting between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, thus was held in the Kazakh city of Turkestan, home to the mausoleum of Sheikh Ahmad Yasavi, the *Sufi* saint who played a major role in bringing Islam to the region as exemplary⁶⁵.

This raises an impression of Kazakhstan being proactive in developing ties with Islamic nations. At face value, it seems that religious and cultural-ethnic proximity may have encouraged greater interest for this part of the world for Kazakhstan. However, a closer look at the state of affairs yields a very different notion. Developing national rapport with the Islamic nations has helped Kazakhstan to restrengthen and legitimize its new sovereign status. Pulling strength from the Islamic bloc by building ties with these countries has helped Kazakhstan to resurrect its exclusive sovereign image. Secondly, as a landlocked state, Kazakhstan needs to develop closer ties with its adjacent neighbours to develop transport routes and transit facilities. Under supreme national interest, it is usually prudent to develop friendly ties with one's neighbours. Kazakhstan has shown its mature, pragmatic outlook by forging ties with its adjacent Islamic countries through effective use of Islam to subserve its national interest. In a very similar fashion, the advocacy for common religious or ethnic roots as basis of cooperation in the Central Asian region, Kazakh's motivation is not to strengthen the

62 Reported in *Summary of World Broadcast*, SU/1362-A4/3, 23 April 1992.

63 Reported in *Summary of World Broadcast*, SU/1359-A4/2, 20 April 1992.

64 Tehran IRNA, 31 Jan, 1992, in *FBIS-SOV-92-023*, 4 Feb., 1992, p.67.

65 Reported in *Kazakhstanskata Pravda*, 27 June, 1992, p.1.

position of Islam but to realign the links crucial to the functioning of Kazakh's economy and establish new trade relations to facilitate the transition to market economy⁶⁶.

Further, Kazakh's proactive ties with Turkey must be seen under the ambit of its national priorities. Turkey's secular model of governance is perceived to be the model required in the multi-ethnic and diverse Kazakhstan. Iran's theocracy is not a preferred model for Kazakhstan. Turkey's viable economy and established trading and financial links with US and Europe can facilitate Kazakhstan's entry to the world economy and solicit financial support which is the overarching need of Kazakhstan for building itself.

Finally, if we look at the broader picture of relations, it seems that Kazakhstan is pursuing foreign and trade policies strictly based on national economic interest. Growing ties with Islamic bloc by Kazakhstan has not led the state to overlook Israeli expertise in agriculture. The development of greater cooperation with other Central Asian states has not been directed against Russia and non-Muslim states of the CIS. The biggest deals by the Kazakh government for oil exploration has been signed with the Western energy giants such as Shell, Mobil, Chevron and British Gas but they are next to none in trying to avail the credit and expertise capacities of the countries of the Islamic world. In a way, pragmatic interest to maintain secular, stable, multi-confessional and economically viable identity of Kazakhstan, better explain Kazakh's foreign policy and relations.

Conclusion

As this study has demonstrated, Islam came relatively late to the Central Asian region. Due to their essentially nomadic cultural pattern, Islam transformed its identity to sub-serve as "ethnic marker". Its profligation and expansion was further constrained

66 Reported in *Izvestia*, 30 Nov., 1992.

under seven decades of atheistic Soviet rule. The sketchy understanding of tenets and traditions of Islam among the populace reflects the limited influence of Islam in the region. After *perestroika* and *glasnost* experience, subdued Islam came to the fore but to serve the ethno-nationalist feelings of the Central Asian region. Islam was effectively used as symbol to subvert Slav dominated Soviet rule, owing to which Islam was unable to grow in its chaste and radical form. Thus, the revivalist movement in the region, as a whole, has so far been politically moderate in scope and intensity. At best an "enclave Islamisation" could be observed in narrow local dimensions in this region⁶⁷

In a very similar fashion, Islam in itself and of itself does not determine the identity of the Kazakh people. Islam has found its place in mild and modernist form in Kazakhstan. Yet, Islam plays a greater role in public affairs than it ever should under Soviet regions. However, the Kazakh government's strong conviction to maintain multi-ethnic, multi-confessional and secular political system has maintained the harmony. The development of political parties like *Alash* or *Azat* are in no way incompatible with the goal of constructing a secular and tolerant Kazakhstan⁶⁸. In constructing a foreign policy, Kazakhstan has been able to strike a balance by forging close ties with west to gain more economically and using Islamic heritage to pursue its national interest while establishing ties with its neighbouring countries and Islamic block as a whole.

The viability of post-Soviet Kazakhstan as a secular, tolerant, multi-ethnic and modernist republic exists so that economic needs of the populace are placated and democratic principles respected in governance, and different ethnic categories are harmoniously allowed to participate in building the political and economic future of the Republic.

67 Halbach, *op. cit.*, p.153.

68 Beatric (ed.), *op. cit.* p.177.