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Relations between the State and the Muslim Community in Central Asia: Overview, Analysis, Practical Co-operation in Kyrgyzstan

This contribution discusses theoretical and practical aspects of the development of Islam in Central Asia. It builds on ten years of dialogue between the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH) and its partners in Central Asian countries.

As well as the prevention of armed conflict, this contribution will focus on two issues in particular: first, the transformation and state-formation processes that form part of the context within which the Islamization of societies is taking place; and second, the specific positions taken by the state with respect to the phenomenon of Islamization and, conversely, the position of Islamic communities, their elites, and political representatives with regard to the secular state.

General Trends

Since the Central Asian states achieved independence, a number of trends in the development of Islam have been gaining momentum, particularly in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan:

1. The religiosity and Islamization of the population are growing rapidly. The influence of Islam has extended beyond socially disadvantaged groups to reach schoolchildren, students, the owners of small- and mid-sized enterprises, teachers and members of the intelligentsia, and, above all, the rural population. From this it can be concluded that Islam has become a major religious, ideological, and socionormative force. As an organic part of the lives of a majority of the population, Islam can be said to have become “nationalized” socially. As Islam has become nationalized, the secularism that was imposed from outside during the period of Soviet rule and in which today’s secular system of norms, the self-understanding of the state, and the socio-political identity of the secular elite are rooted has simultaneously become eroded.

2. In view of the depth of its impact on society, the transformation of political, economic, socio-economic, and religious-cultural systems in the historically short period of less than 20 years since independence can be considered nothing less than revolutionary. At the same time, however, the transformation of these various fields has proceeded at different rates: While political and economic transformation was pushed through rapidly and “from

above”, change in the religious and cultural spheres has so far been evolutionary.

Nonetheless, although the revival of Islam in the popular consciousness has proceeded in an evolutionary manner, this should not be taken as grounds for complacency. Under certain circumstances, this evolutionary process could become a politically revolutionary eruption in which the majority of religious citizens cease to feel ties of loyalty to the ruling elites. In addition, Islam could become an ideological integrating force for various social and political groupings that are dissatisfied with the political regime, high unemployment, and deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

3. During the transformation and state-formation process, the secular state has become entangled with Islam and is now no longer able to free itself. Islam will therefore determine its political fate. The ability to adapt to Islam and Muslim elites will become a basic survival factor for Central Asian political regimes. Under these conditions, the instruments that the state has used in the past to control Islam and its representatives come up against their limits. While repressive instruments are increasingly losing their effectiveness, state authorities in Central Asia – with the exception of Kazakhstan – lack the economic and financial means to bring about a rapid improvement of the precarious economic and financial situation. The secular power is thus forced into dialogue with Islam – with Muslim clerics, elites, and political activists, but above all with “nationally minded” Muslims. At the very least, it is necessary to achieve a political *modus vivendi* with them. This will crucially require the development of democratic mechanisms that can not only guarantee the peaceful coexistence of both sides but also their co-operation on strategically important issues, thereby safeguarding the political stability of their shared state.

Kyrgyz Reality

In order to analyse relations between state and religion in practice, it is necessary first to consider their historical development, and second, to examine the thesis proposed above that Islam, as the religion of the majority, is an organic component of Kyrgyz society and national culture and has a real influence on socio-political processes.

This thesis has some theoretical justification. However, it remains to be considered whether and to what extent each of its elements is equally true of Kyrgyzstan in practice, and particularly as regards the maturity of Islam and the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan.

In practical terms, it is also necessary to ask to what extent the stability and legitimacy of state power depend upon the loyalty of Kyrgyzstan’s Muslim majority. A closely related question concerns the position of secularism within Kyrgyz society. How effective can the secular tradition still be in view

of the growing impact of the “Islamic factor”? To what extent have the secular identity of the state and its secular socio-political orientation been transformed under this growing influence? Evaluating current developments in Islam in Kyrgyzstan therefore requires us to determine the degree of interdependence between state and religion.

These opening theoretical remarks indicate the possibilities that exist for the state to “nationalize” Islam, and the steps by which it could achieve this.

At the same time, the state must act in a way that takes account of the potential of the Muslim community and the demands the latter will make upon the former in the course of establishing mutual relations.

As far as Islam’s evolutionary expansion is concerned, it is also important to ask how and in which circumstances this process could take on a politically revolutionary character, and whether this could lead to a loss of loyalty to the state on the part of the majority of the religious population.

Finally, in evaluating the potential of both the state and the Muslim community, it is also important to determine the extent to which mutual influence between the two sides may contribute to strengthening state power structures and improve opportunities for further state-formation, but also the extent to which they may contribute to anchoring Islam more firmly in Kyrgyzstan’s social and political structures.

Relations between the State and Islam in Kyrgyzstan in Detail

The first phase in the relationship between the state and Islam in Kyrgyzstan can be characterized as liberal. It saw the establishment of comprehensive freedom of conscience and belief in accordance with the 1991 “Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations”, which remained in force until 2008.

In this phase, the state took the position of a neutral observer, whose activity was limited to the registration of religious organizations. However, this passive stance led to the state losing hold of more powerful means of asserting control over religious communities. One consequence of this was the emergence of a large number of diverse religious groups that possessed no traditional roots in Kyrgyz society. In the context of this emerging religious plurality, Kyrgyzstan’s Muslim community did not stand out, despite the palpable “Islamic renaissance”. Nonetheless, the liberal policies of this period enabled Muslims in Kyrgyzstan to create more extensive links with the broader Islamic world and thus gradually to establish the foundation for a transformation of the role of Islam in Kyrgyz politics and society.

In this period, both religious feeling among the population and the influence of Islam on Kyrgyz politics and society were weak. Consequently, the state paid the topic little attention. Islam was in any case perceived at the time in terms of traditional practices closely tied to nationalist movements

and the efforts of ethnic Kyrgyz to free themselves of their Soviet (Russian) heritage. This was true with regard to the ordinary people, the intelligentsia, and a number of political actors.

Yet this changed abruptly as it became clear that neither nationalism nor religion (Islam) had a sound theoretical underpinning in the country while both also failed to resonate with the population, particularly in such an ethnically and religiously pluralistic country.

At the same time, the growing threat of religious terrorism and extremism in Central Asia and the continuing instability of Afghanistan again focused the attention of the Kyrgyz state authorities on Islam in their own country. This ushered in the second phase in the relationship between state and religion. Now, however, at the start of the 21st century, the state was confronted with a society very different from the one that had existed at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Religion now occupied a central place in the value system – not only among the traditionally religious (sedentary) portion of the population, but also among the titular nation as a whole. The growth of religious feeling among the population was not only evinced by the spread of Islamic rites and customs in the everyday life of the Kyrgyz people but also the beginnings of Islam's development into a political ideology.

The fact that, in a context of economic and social difficulties, large sections of the Kyrgyz population have turned to forms of Islam that had previously been unknown in the region was only the logical result of the expansion of Islamic religious education in the country. The Muslim community at that time simply absorbed everything provided by missionaries representing movements, groups, and organizations from all parts of the Islamic world without regard for the quality and origins of the materials provided.

The Kyrgyz state attempted to deal with the problem of religious extremism by treating the activities of the Muslim community as hostile to secularism. By doing so, however, it has also had the effect of alienating Muslims from mainstream socio-political processes. This alienation led to the parallel development of two systems – a secular system, embodied by the state, and a religious system in the form of the Muslim community.

The third stage in the evolution of relations between state and Islam is characterized by awareness that Islam has taken on a new orientation and by the increasing efforts on the part of the Islamic community to defend its interests in various ways within socio-political processes.

Since 2006, it has been increasingly clear to the state that it could not limit its religious policy to combating religious extremism and terrorism, but that the latest developments demanded a more differentiated approach to Islam and the Muslim community. This basically boils down to a recognition by the state of the special role that Islam plays in Kyrgyz society.

A further factor that influenced the attitude of the state towards Islam was the failure of nationalist and other ideologies in Kyrgyzstan at a point in

time when Islam was slowly succeeding in establishing itself as a stable system of ideas with an influence on the formation of the state and society.

During the presidential elections that followed the overthrow of the Akaev government in March 2005, one of the candidates, Tusunbai Bakir, openly campaigned on an “Islamic platform”, and targeted primarily Muslim voters. According to unofficial figures, he received 30 per cent of the vote. During a phase of instability and increased activity on the part of opposition groups in 2006 and 2007, both pro-government and pro-opposition Muslim groups also appeared, aiming to mobilize the population for one side or the other.

At this point, the state began to see Islam as an instrument it could use to strengthen its power, and the Muslim community as embodying a potentially powerful mechanism that it could use to mobilize the population to solve specific political problems.

The 2009 elections were remarkable for the instrumentalization of religious rhetoric in politics. One candidate openly announced that he would introduce Sharia law if elected to the presidency. Although this candidate, Nurlan Motuev, had little support in the Muslim community, his campaign set a precedent by introducing religious rhetoric into Kyrgyzstan’s political sphere for the first time. The most remarkable thing about this election was, however, less that this candidate was not prohibited from using Islamic campaign rhetoric, but rather that it could now no longer be assumed that future candidates who might possess religious authority and enjoy broad support in the Muslim population would not follow his example.

In the meantime, the state began to send signals that could be interpreted as an attempt to “sound out” the Islamic community. In November 2009, at a meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Istanbul, the then Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, argued that the state and the Muslim community of Kyrgyzstan should develop joint initiatives and present themselves as partners. He also mentioned that the government was interested in the creation of a joint Islamic research and education centre. Bakiev also remarked that “we now face the necessity of viewing the relationship between the Islamic community and the state from a new perspective and deepening the substantive understanding of the secular state”, in the context of which he no longer ruled out re-examining the definition of the secular state. In his message to the Kurultai, the traditional people’s assembly, in 2010, Bakiev argued that it was important for politics to start genuine co-operation with the country’s religious organizations.

All of these attempts indicate not only a serious rethinking of state policy towards Kyrgyzstan’s Muslim community, but also evince the gradual recognition that Islam has capabilities to influence socio-political processes.

On the Legitimacy of Power from an Islamic Perspective

Regardless of the objective conditions that have led to increasing interdependence between the state and Islam, we should nonetheless acknowledge that the Muslim community is itself not yet capable of presenting its own consolidated political demands.

As studies have shown, Kyrgyzstan's Muslim community has, in the last five years, still failed to fully come to understand itself as an important political power in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, it would be accurate to say that it finds itself at the start of the process of self-determination within Kyrgyzstan's system of political co-ordinates, although it continually insists that the actions of state employees must reflect religious feeling, morality, and spirituality in politics.

Nonetheless, the main factor preventing the further expansion of Islam as a factor in domestic politics is another important phenomenon in Kyrgyz society, which we can provisionally label "pre-Islamic national culture".

Analytical attempts to isolate this pre-Islamic culture from the general Islamic context are nonetheless bound to fail, as, under the growing influence of Islam over the years, it has transformed itself considerably, and can only be found in its original form in isolated mountain regions. Recently, however, the modern interpretation of this "pre-Islamic culture" as propagated by supporters of Kyrgyz nationalism has claimed a special place in Kyrgyzstan's political and cultural life. Nonetheless, given the growing strength of Islam's social role, it is unlikely that this phenomenon will survive for much longer.

The foundation of Kyrgyzstan's pre-Islamic culture is the nomadic way of life. The modernization of society, which started in the Soviet period and has continued to this day, albeit in a different form and at an accelerated pace, had the effect of gradually erasing the "pure, pre-Islamic culture and history" from Kyrgyzstan's historical memory.

As a result, most ordinary people can now no longer distinguish the norms of *adat* (customary law) from the imported Islamic norms of Sharia law. In the course of time, shamanistic beliefs, *adat*, and monotheism have become combined in a single culture and have become popular traditions.

Precisely determining the proportion of Islam and the pre-Islamic traditions in Kyrgyz culture would be a major research project. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the bearers of "pre-Islamic culture" are not the "ordinary" people, but rather individuals, who are more or less attached to the worlds of academia and science.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the resulting ideological vacuum, many of the former atheists who made up the intelligentsia rode the wave of nationalism and began to see the future of the country in Kyrgyzstan's pre-Islamic past.

Kyrgyzstan's ruling elite was particularly influenced by the turn to Tengrianism and other forms of shamanism by individual groups of intellectuals,

and this ensured that Islam and political power would develop in parallel in the first 15 years after independence.

However, the influence of intellectual nationalists and hence of the pre-Islamic past has started to wane as one generation of Kyrgyzstan's intellectual and ruling elite is replaced by another.

Furthermore, the end of the northern clans' dominance over the clans in the south as a result of the events of 2005 has almost entirely severed the links between the political elite and the intelligentsia, with their penchant for pre-Islamic culture. As the south had always felt the influence of Islam more strongly than the north – including during Soviet times – this power shift effectively ended the influence of pre-Islamic ideas on Kyrgyz power structures.

Popular religiosity is also a post-Soviet development. It requires no religious knowledge, being characterized rather by an emotional bond between the believers and their faith, its norms and behavioural rules, respect for which is a prerequisite for social status and reputation.

In South Kyrgyzstan, therefore, the public demonstration of personal religiosity is an essential component of everyday culture – but no more than that.

This explains why, immediately following the rise to power of the southern clans, an “attributive Islamization” rapidly spread throughout the ranks of state employees. In order to avoid standing out from the crowd, they began to demonstrate their Islamic faith via the open display of books, posters, framed verses from the Koran, and other pious artefacts.

On the other hand, in northern Kyrgyzstan, where the capital Bishkek is located, members of the titular nation have always enjoyed a higher level of education than their co-nationals in the south, and this left its mark on the “rebirth of Islam”. Nineteen years of Islamic education in the north has led to a deeper examination of the substance of Islam by the population, and thus the beginnings of an Islamic socio-political idea. The growing volume of information and educational resources that Islam has at its disposal is particularly evident in the capital.

Among state employees, these and other factors had the effect of gradually bringing about a move from “attributive” Islam to a more intensive engagement with the religion as a system of norms and values in the life of the individual, society, and the state. This effect was enhanced by the gradual loosening of the Soviet-era intelligentsia's hold on power and the inability of Kyrgyz society to bring forth a new generation of intellectuals.

The last initiatives taken by the government of Kyrgyzstan in the area of religions policy before it fell in April 2010 show that it was slowly beginning to make use of Islam as a means for strengthening legitimacy.

It can be assumed that this will become increasingly necessary to the extent that Islam and the Muslim community are successful in maintaining their rapid expansion.

Is the Social "Nationalization of Islam" also a Political Option for the State?

As the state pursues its rapprochement with Islam, it should bear in mind that developing this kind of closeness not only grants it rights, but also brings new obligations. It also needs to grasp that the non-fulfilment of these obligations could bring the collapse of the secular foundations of the state in its wake.

Under these circumstances, the state has a choice between two paths of development: On the one hand, it can attempt to use Islam for its own specific political purposes. In return, it would recognize the key role played by Islam in the establishment of a new form of statehood, while acknowledging Islam's sphere of influence in society. This development path could be called the "contractual variant".

The second path of development consists in using Islam to consolidate state power. Even if the mutual obligations of the state and Islam could be determined, this variant would amount to a de facto attempt to subordinate the Muslim community to the state's domestic political interests. This development path could be called the "declarative variant".

The first variant would require an enormous intellectual, political, and legal effort on the part of the state and the Muslim community, which would be in the interest of an evolutionary development in relations between the secular state and Islam. In practice, however, neither side shows signs of either being able or willing to undertake this. The Muslim community is not yet in a position to meet the state as intellectual equals. At the same time, the political elites do not have time to allow relations with Islam to develop gradually, as they face the need to produce results at short notice.

In the second scenario, the state, in the manner typical of Oriental government culture, would subordinate compliant clerics to its reason of state, rule alone and grant Islam the role of an intermediate for the propagation of government decisions. This path would guarantee the growth of oppositional feeling among the rest of the Muslim population, and could even lead to the development of revolutionary sentiment among the majority of the population.

Today it is already apparent that the rapidity with which Islamic education is expanding will inevitably lead to the expansion of the Islamic influence on socio-political processes in Kyrgyzstan.

The state thus already faces the need to decide between a conflict-free or a conflict-laden development of its relations with Islam.

One thing is certain: The model of the secular state in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia as a whole may face major changes in the none too distant future.