

The Religious Situation in Kazakhstan: The Main Trends and Challenges

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Abstract: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the religious situation in the region was not stable: post-Soviet countries faced many problems: religious extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism and terrorism. During the last two decades, Kazakhstan has been an exception in this regard. It is considered an exemplary model of interfaith harmony and tolerance. State policy towards religious organizations and the National Law on «Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations» are considered the most liberal in post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan, as well as other former Soviet countries and Muslim societies of the world, has faced challenges: lack of religious pluralism, religious radicalism and extremism, illegal activities by religious organizations and the problems of national and religious identification. During the first decade of independence, lack of attention by the government of Kazakhstan to these given issues led to the spread of fundamentalist and extremist ideologies and to the rise of religious organizations that pose a threat to socio-political stability. This article provides a comprehensive analysis, including an examination of the current religious situation in the country, the emergence of Islamic ideology and its impact on public consciousness and national security.

Key words: Religious situation • Religious associations • Islamic ideology • Extremist • Laws

INTRODUCTION

During the first decade of its independence, the Republic of Kazakhstan has undergone radical changes in almost every area of its public life and has experienced the influence of the intensive process of globalization. Since the collapse of Soviet totalitarian ideology, Kazakhstan has been directly involved in current international relations. Globalization presents challenges common to all countries, including environmental, political and economic, as well as those of preserving cultural and national identity. In this respect, the intellectual and spiritual crisis in the post-Soviet countries due to a loss of ideological direction has led to the spread of various religious groups from abroad. After gaining independence, the vast majority of former Soviet republics strengthened their national laws in an attempt to preserve their national unity and traditional culture. For example, in laws on «Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations» (in most former Soviet states the title and contents of these laws are identical) they emphasize the role of traditional religions and confessions while strictly

limiting the activity of non-traditional (as it is widely referred to in post-Soviet space) religious organizations on many issues. Kazakhstan's National Law on «Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations» was the most liberal one among the former Soviet countries [1].

Due to liberal legislation on religion, the penetration and proliferation of various new religious movements have led to many problems in society, from poor relations between state and religious organizations, to clashes between different ethnic groups and confessions. These are the challenges that every post-Soviet country has faced over the last 20 years. A number of terrorist acts and instances of religious extremism have taken place in the Russian Federation, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan has not faced such phenomena until last year. According to many of Kazakhstan's scholars, the explanation lies in the Kazakh people's mentality and tolerance of other religious denominations, as well as the state policy regulating interreligious relations and consent. Nevertheless, socio-economic conditions, the religious illiteracy of the population and the absence of concrete laws on

preventing radical and destructive religious organizations have greatly contributed to the worsening of the religious situation in the country. The issues mentioned above are characteristic of every post-Soviet country [2]. Currently, Kazakhstan is trying to form its strategy in religious policy according to International norms on freedom of religion, at the same time to solve the challenges in its inner religious situation. The solution of given challenges will determine the religious policy of the government.

Islamic Ideology in Post-soviet Space: The current spreading of Islamic religious-political extremism in the context of geopolitical interests has a global character. Trans national Islamic organization strives to establish their view of world order and socio-political relations based on the Quran and the Prophet's teachings, calling on Muslims to support them [3]. Having a predominantly Muslim population, Kazakhstan is not an exception in this regard. The processes of modernization in traditional Islamic societies have apparently paved the way for the spread of Islamic religious-political extremism in the modern world. Serious economic crises and political conflicts observed taking place in the Islamic world, in most cases stem from socio-economic disharmony and unsuccessful attempts to modernize according to the Western model of industrial and consumer development. Current acute social, economic, environmental and other problems in most Muslim countries apparently reveal the systemic crises in these countries. The processes of modernization in traditional Muslim societies led to an Islamic opposition, in which the latter's radical parts act as the main, active elements [4]. The ability to influence the development of a radical Islamic opposition differs substantially by country. It is dependent on the «scale of social and political changes taking place in Islamic societies». Muslim communities in post-Soviet countries have been undergoing modernization and have faced the same problems as other Islamic societies in economic, socio-political and intellectual spheres [5]. These conditions explain why radical Islamic ideas find support mostly in economically vulnerable groups. Authors [6] "Restoring American Leadership" wrote «Islamism supplied a rough but ready ideology to fill the void left by the receding grand narratives of the 20th Century. The slogan "Islam is the solution," championed and popularized in Arab societies most especially by the Muslim Brotherhood, provided a romantic alternative for the disillusioned base of the increasingly decrepit nationalist and leftist ideological movements that had yielded little more than repression

and oppression to their own constituencies [6]. Indeed, in searching and attempting to fill the vacuum left by 70 years of old Communist ideology, the Muslim population in post-Soviet countries welcomed Islam. However, the post-Soviet Muslims knew little about Islam, so in discovering the legacy of Islam, they, for the most part, opened doors to the missionaries and Islamic organizations from the Arab world. This in turn, led to clashes between national, more traditional and Islamic ideas. For many years, Muslims of the former Soviet Union have considered Islam as part of their traditional culture, yet it never dominated their everyday life. They have not practiced all the mandatory tenets of Islam, as Muslims in the Arab-Muslim world have. Nationalism held sway over Islamism. However, the situation has changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of Arabic Islam.

Let us refer to the following citation: *Indeed, for much of the 20th Century in many key parts of the Arab world (with the notable exception of Saudi Arabia) Arab nationalism rather than Islam has been the dominant and most dynamic framework for political discourse and activity.*

In post-Soviet space, nationalism has been the dominant framework of discourse and activity for the Muslim population [7]. At the same time, many groups and movements have been trying to establish an Islamic government. There are some identical factors and a range of common features between the Arab World and former Soviet countries with predominantly Muslim populations that determined the emergence of radical movements. Due to the opening of borders and active involvement of Kazakhstan in the world community, various religious-political organizations and Islamic ideologies have penetrated into Kazakhstan [8]. They filled the void left by the Communist ideology, indicated by a veering of the vast majority of the population toward religion.

Radical Islamic ideas of protest behavior towards relatives, government authorities and believers who do not share fundamentalist views, as well as wearing of Islamic religious clothes not inherent in traditional culture, have been spreading in Kazakhstan [9]. Most citizens of Kazakhstan have a negative attitude towards different pseudo-religious organizations, neo-paganism, occultism, satanism and radical Islamic organizations that stay under the radar. There have been many cases of imposing religious exclusiveness and intolerance, acts of vandalism and inflicting harm on psychological and mental health. Therefore, Kazakhstan, like other former Soviet countries, has strengthened its policy towards new non-traditional

religious groups and religious-political organizations [10]. Creation of political parties based on religious ideas and values is prohibited by the constitution. At the same time, the countries of the CIS are rendering aid to the religions traditionally practiced by the majority of the population: Islam and Orthodox Christianity. The growing number of religious-extremist movements and radical Islamic groups in the CIS countries became a serious threat to stability. It should be noted that in Kazakhstan the signs of religious extremism have not been visible as much as in other neighboring countries. However, some scholars do not discount the threat.

Islamic Movements and Communities: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have experienced the revival of Islamic tradition and faced the radical Islamic ideologies observed globally in Muslim countries [11]. Islam is the main religion not only for ethnic Kazakh people, but also for Kazakhstani of Turkish, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Uzbek and other Asian ethnicities. The formation of new socio-political cultural realities in post-Soviet space determined the growth of national self-consciousness and the change in spiritual-intellectual direction. This is clearly seen in how the populations of the former Soviet states view religious values and customs. The religious revival in the Central Asian countries was quickly detected by the Islamic world.

Among the first countries to offer assistance to Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan and Iran. In the 1990s, they sponsored education in their countries for Kazakhstan's Muslim youth [12]. Many religious preachers from these countries have advocated alternative ideologies. They opened educational centers and other charitable organizations to teach Arabic and the fundamentals of the religion. Sharia set to enlighten people with religious education. Time and experience have shown that this emergence of Islamic ideology led to confessional strife and to the spreading of extremist ideas, thus posing a serious threat to national security in Central Asian countries. There are approximately 1700 Muslim associations in Kazakhstan. Most of them are branches of Sunni Islam that follow the Hanafi school of thought. That school is considered to be the most tolerant, liberal to traditional culture and accepting of the local traditional norms [13].

Currently, the most active and radical Islamic organizations in Kazakhstan are Wahhabist, *Hisbut Tahrir*, *Tabligi Jamaat*, *Takphir*, *Salafist* and *Sufi branches*.

In the 1990s, Islamic fundamentalism spread with the revival of Islam in the CIS countries. At that time, fundamentalism was synonymous with «Wahhabism». Today's mass media defines and accepts «Wahhabism» as «radicalism» and «extremism».

The spread of Wahhabi and Salafi ideology in the religious space of Kazakhstan is dangerous, mainly for the younger generation that tends to search for and practice the pure form of Islam. The official Islamic ideology of many Arab countries advocates fundamentalist Islam calling for following of the rules and principles practiced in the age of the Prophet Muhammad and his four righteous caliphs. It preaches the destruction of the established traditional system of norms and the worldview of local people. Mostly by targeting the youth, Wahhabist and Salafi Islamic organizations spread intolerance towards other Islamic and non-Islamic religious faiths [14].

The ideas of Islamic fundamentalism are also spread by the activity of the religious Islamic organization «Hisbut-Tahrir». This organization is outlawed in Russia and the Central Asian countries. Some other countries like Egypt, Syria and Libya prohibit its functioning on their territories. Hisbut-Tahrir was first noticed in Kazakhstan in a small town (Turkistan) before gradually spreading to Almaty (the biggest city).

Hisbut-Tahrir (Release Party) – is one of the religious political parties that aim at re-creating the Islamic Caliphate and changing the established political system. Many Islamic scholars strongly criticized the views of this organization on many Sharia issues. As a religious-extremist organization, Hisbut-Tahrir is on the list of religious organizations prohibited in Kazakhstan. Its radical ideas pose a threat to national security, citizens' rights, public consensus and stability. The members of Hizbut-Tahrir interpret the Quran and Prophet's sayings on their own terms with distortions, spreading aggressive leaflets with a call for a change of political system.

«Takphir» ideology began to spread in Kazakhstan in the mid-1990s.

The main views of the Takphir Islamic community are the following:

- Those who do not practice the mandatory tenets, or do them in a wrong way, are not Muslims;
- The Islamic community of Takphir considers itself the true «Muslim community» and calls for fighting with other, impure, Islamic communities;

- Themembers of thiscommunityclaimthatreligious and secular education (pagan education) are incompatible. Therefore, they call for a boycott of secular education and advocate quitting jobs, schools, institutions, universities and public organizations. The Takphir movement is mostly found in the western part of Kazakhstan.

In the present analysis, we underscore the main signs of Islamic radical, extremist activity and ideology:

- Spreading of intolerance and aggressiveness towards the current political system and institutions;
- Condemnation of the established political system and traditional cultural values, calling them pagan;
- Interpretation and use of Jihadism as a political tool and a tool for struggle ;
- Not recognizing the traditional culture of local people and four Islamic legal schools of thought;
- Substantiation of the Caliphate concept;
- Full subordination to their leaders.

Radical Islamic Organizations and Their Impact on Public Consciousness: In his article “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups” Thomas Hegghammer distinguishes two types of Islamic ideologies: revolutionary and global jihadist. Revolutionary Islam advocates military confrontation with Muslim regimes in order to topple them and capture the state. Global Jihadism promotes military confrontation with the United States and its allies to avenge and deter non-Muslim oppression of Muslims.

Revolutionary violence is directed against representatives and symbols of Muslim regimes, such as security forces and police stations, ministers and ministries. Global jihadist violence is directed at representatives or symbols of non-Muslims’ oppression of Muslims, such as Western embassies, military bases and tourists [15]. Following this typology, there are several revolutionary Islamic organizations carrying out underground activity in Kazakhstan. In 2011, several terrorist acts took place in the cities of Aktau, Atirau, Taraz, Astana and Almaty. They were mainly directed at government authorities, law enforcement and police stations [16].

Terrorism has never been considered a real threat to Kazakhstan, but rather a potential one. As a result, the national security system has been more focused on avoidance and prevention of other threats, like inter-ethnic conflicts, drug-trafficking, economic threats and

corruption. Even among experts, the problem of terrorism in Kazakhstan has not been viewed as stand-alone. It has been considered only within the framework of the situation in Central Asia. During the first few years of independence, activity of radical Islamic organizations had not manifested itself. Still, there were calls in the mass media and in public discourse for precautionary measures to prevent the spread of radical Islamic groups and their ideas.

According to Kazakhstan’s political scientist C. Akimbekov «the first cause leading to radicalization of Islamic movements is the depth and scale of the consequences of modernization undertaken in certain countries. The second is an external influence, which has an impact only when a society is susceptible to such influences. The environment is ripe for the spread of radical Islamic movements when a substantial part of society is disillusioned with the consequences of the process of modernization, the actions of the traditional elite and with the increased presence of “Ulama”.

Atthesametime, somescholars focus predominantly on the external factors. Forinstance, well-known Russian researcher A. Ignatenkostates «that events of the last three decades indicate that Islamic extremism is a «contagious» phenomenon. In almost every manifestation of Islamic organizations one can observe the evidence of external influence as the determining factor.

Islam and State Religious Policy in Post-soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan is the largest republic in Central Asia, occupying 2,717,300 square kilometers [1,049,175 square miles]. It is also one of the largest countries in the region by population, with an estimated 16 million, much larger than most Central Asian states and second only to Uzbekistan, where the population is estimated to be nearly 27 million.

One of the features of Kazakhstan directly impacting the religious situation is the fact that it is the only Central Asian state where Russians, who are historically Orthodox Christians, make up almost half of the population. Ethnic Kazakhs through much of their history have been a nomadic people and in general are regarded as not particularly devout Muslims. Among Kazakhs, Islam is practiced at a superficial level in everyday life and is closely connected with pagan rituals. The most devout Muslims in Kazakhstan are normally ethnic Uzbeks, who mainly live in densely populated areas in southwestern districts, on the border with Uzbekistan. So, compared to other Central Asian states, the threat of

Islamic fundamentalism is much less acute in Kazakhstan. In its ethno-cultural characteristics, Kazakhstan is closer to its northern neighbors of Altai and Tuva (autonomous regions within Russia) and to its eastern neighbor Mongolia, than to other Central Asian countries.

Another characteristic specific to Kazakhstan impacting the religious situation is the relative health of the state's economy compared to other Central Asian states. Kazakhstan is the only country in the region where a relatively large wealthy class of entrepreneurs has formed, estimated to be around 10 per cent of the population. The higher standard of living in Kazakhstan has led to a massive influx of illegal workers from other Central Asian countries. Economic development has also attracted many Western investors, making Almaty, Kazakhstan's commercial capital the most cosmopolitan city in the region. This allows many smaller towns to offer a range of services normally found in developed countries. Relatively high income allows many people to travel internationally. All of this contributes to a greater informal religious tolerance in society – despite state hostility to many religious communities - than in other Central Asian countries.

Modern Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country with sustainable economic growth, a stable political situation and social consent. More than 40 faiths and denominations are present in the country.

The head of the Agency for Religious Affairs of Kazakhstan, Kairat Lama Sharif, described the current religious situation in the following way:

- *«Today, the religious situation is stable in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, we should note the substantial influence of religion on Kazakhstan society. The increasing number of religious associations and organizations is an indication of this. Currently, there are 4551 religious associations (for comparison: in 1990 there were only 670). Predominantly, the population of Kazakhstan considers religion a part of its ethnic culture. The scale of the influence of traditional religious institutions is expanding, the number of people converting to religion is increasing, social functions of religious organizations are strengthening and the role of religious education is increasing».*

Nonetheless, the above-mentioned issues and the proliferation of religious branches have generated many problems in the religious life of the society. As we have mentioned, Kazakhstan was one of the post-Soviet countries where the evidence of radical religious extremism has not been observed as much as in other CIS countries. However, ideological trends and clashes between divergent Islamic communities currently taking place in Muslim societies have not bypassed Kazakhstan. Due to fundamentalist Islam, imported mostly from Arab countries, Kazakhstan's Muslims are divided into various Islamic organizations and cannot find a consensus among themselves. The fundamentalists spread intolerance and secession in society. As a result, there were clashes between Islamic organizations and law enforcement authorities last year. Like those of most post-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan's government has begun toughening state policy towards religious organizations and made some changes to previous Laws on "Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations". On October 25, 2011, Kazakhstan's government adopted a new Law on "Religious Activity and Religious Associations" that complicates the registration process for religious organizations, prohibiting worship in public organizations. This generated negative reaction and resonance from international human rights organizations, as well as from some radical extremist Islamic groups that carried out underground activities in the country. Kazakhstan's government, as well as those of other post-Soviet countries, has to strengthen its policy towards religious organizations with the purpose of protecting national security and public safety.

- *The main intellectual energies of modern Arab Islamism and of Islamism more generally, have not been devoted to the cultivation of theoretical or practical thinking about social, political, or economic affairs. Indeed, all of these areas of human thought and practice were underdeveloped in the Islamic scholastic tradition appropriated by Islamism and this meant that modern Islamist intellectuals had very little to build upon. Instead, Arab Islamist political theory has focused its energies largely on identity construction and on the political reformulation of Islamic theology. While "Islam", as understood by Islamists, is posited as the "Solution" to all that ails the Umma in the modern world, different Islamist movements,*

ncluding the Muslim Brotherhood, have not produced a body of practical thinking about politics and economics that rises to Islamism's utopian claims of comprehensiveness.

So, in Kazakhstan we can see the same situation, manifested in emerging Islamic ideology, religious practices and attitudes towards traditional culture and government. Due to both external and internal factors, a common Muslim school of thought has not yet been established, not only in Kazakhstan, but also in the Central Asian and Caucasus countries. This has been the main reason for confessional strife. Thereupon, the governments of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan adopted new laws on religious freedom and religious association to hinder various radical Islamic ideologies. They declared the Sunni branch and Hanafi legal school of thought as important and the official branch for the Muslim population in their countries. In some former Soviet countries missionary activities are allowed only by citizens of the given countries. The government of Kazakhstan recognized the historical and traditional importance of the Sunni branch and the Hanafi legal school of thought in the new law adopted on October 25, 2011.

Many Central Asian and Caucasus governments are trying to keep their secular principles, pursuing strict policies towards radical Islamic organizations. Let us mention the following quote: *«Yet despite the accomplishments of these foreign Islamic movements and the striking pace of dissemination in Azerbaijan, they still have had a relatively small impact on Azeri society compared to Muslim societies elsewhere. The secular characteristics of Azeri society remain very strong and continue to dominate public life. The general population appreciates the Islamic aspect of their identity but does not yet seem prepared to give up on their secular achievements, or on the promise of a secular future. At the same time, there can be little doubt that Azerbaijan's re-Islamization is far from finished»*. We can see the same situation in Kazakhstan's society and those of other Central Asian states. According to recent research conducted by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Research, 66,6% of Kazakhstan's citizens would like to see their future with secular government. At the same time, due to the influence of current Islamic ideology in the country, there are an increasing number of citizens willing to live under Sharia Law.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all the newly independent countries strived to maintain their national and traditional cultures. Governments and the vast majority of the population consider that new non-traditional and various radical Islamic branches and schools pose threats to the traditional culture and socio-political stability, while spreading controversy among the nations.

The President of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev, noted that: "Religious fanaticism is not a result of an abundance of religiosity, but of a lack of religious culture. In general, the ideas of radical Islamic organizations have spread among a few in Kazakhstan and it is unlikely that they will spread widely. Citizens of Kazakhstan see their future in democratic and secular development. At the same time, however, there are many objective external and internal factors and circumstances."

CONCLUSION

The religious situation in Kazakhstan is not only a function of the government's domestic policy. There are many external factors that greatly influence it. The activity and impact of foreign religious organizations advocating their values and views is increasing. These cultural and religious values are often incompatible with the traditional ones. Nevertheless, the Republic of Kazakhstan, due to its responsibilities and obligations, cannot limit and prohibit their activities. In recent years, much has been written and argued about the negative and destructive influence of new religious movements on traditional religions and cultures. But the percentage of non-traditional religious groups is small next to that of traditional ones. According to the Database of the Center for Liberal Studies, the percentage of non-traditional religions comprises approximately 4%, however they remain very active. During the first years of independence they were very appealing and spread widely. Currently however, they do not enjoy the same popularity.

Along with new non-traditional religions, religious-political organizations and communities mostly coming from the Arab-Muslim world create many difficulties for Kazakhstan's society. Kazakhstan has a predominantly Muslim population, so the possible impact of radical and fundamentalist ideas of such organizations on the secular features of Kazakhstan's society is uncertain. For this reason, strict government policy towards radical religious organizations is crucial.

As for internal factors influencing the religious situation in Kazakhstan, according to a range of scholars, they include: the process of democratization in the country, the difficult economic, social and political situation, uncertainty, religious illiteracy and the lack of a stable religious and cultural context.

Today, we see that the younger generation actively participates in religion. This happens because young people are illiterate in religious matters and they are easily influenced by foreign extremist ideas. Therefore, one of the main priorities nowadays should be increasing the level of education and religious literacy.

In other words, it's necessary to combine the efforts of government and society. This would allow keeping a public eye on the anti-terrorist activities of the government, striking a balance between national security and human rights. The absence of such a balance may lead to deadlock and generate more radicalism. So, scholars from Kazakhstan have offered a model that includes six interrelated parts: analytical, informational-educational, anti-terrorist training for the population, legal (legislation), scientific-technical and governmental (law enforcement).

The main task of these interrelated parts is to prevent extremism and terrorism. Today, it's important for Kazakhstan to keep secular features of government, while at the same time learning to live in conditions of increasing religious consciousness.

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