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Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Soviet government saw all religions as an opposite ideological threat having capacity to create hindrance in the establishment of communist society, thus it started to control or destroy Islam as it did with other religions. Followers of Islam experienced sever repression in the time of Soviet. Many great learning centers in the form of Madrasas were systematically destroyed. Peoples were not allowed to carry any religious books even privately. This had great effects on the identities and civilizational significance on the Islamic and Muslim communities of erstwhile USSR. Islamic practices remained suspended in Uzbekistan for as long as it was under the Godless Communism. During the 1990s in a dramatic turn when the union disintegrated, Uzbekistan gained its independence. The people of the former colony whose religiosity was coercively suppressed began to revive and restore their lost Islamic heritage and past. This paper attempts to examine how new revivalist movements in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan has contributed in the restoration of religious legacy. Spiritual Administration of Muslim of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), and others organizations.

Key Words: USSR, Uzbekistan, Islam, SADUM, Revivalism.

The current examination assumes contemporary significance as the making of religious identity is very crucial in modern Central Asia especially in Uzbekistan. After the Bolshevik revolution, the new Soviet regime tried to crackdown Islamic ideology, religious institutions as well as clergies in Central Asia. Statistically In 1917 there were around 20,000 mosques in Central Asian region and by 1935 most of them were closed and only around hundred were functioning. In terms of Muslim population, former USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) had fifth position in the world just after Indonesia, India, and Pakistan.¹ The Muslim population in the former USSR was 56 million, 20 percent of the total population.

Communist government saw all religions as an opposite ideological threat having capacity to create hindrance in the establishment of communist society, thus it started to control or destroy Islam as it did with other religions. Followers of Islam experienced sever repression in the time of Soviet. Many great learning centres in the form of *Madrasas* were systematically destroyed. Peoples were not allowed to carry any religious books even privately². This had great effects on the identities and civilizational significance on the Islamic and Muslim communities of erstwhile USSR.

Stalin's regime which lasted from 1924-1953 opted even more severe restrictions on religion with the help of many laws and regulations. However, this Soviet policy was relaxed during the Second World War. Government allowed only those clerics to perform religious activities that were registered with the state under the system of state controlled religion. Consequently, institutional

Islam not only lost its influence in this Islamic region but knowledge and understanding of Islam as well among the people of the region relatively declined during that era. Notwithstanding, particularly after the end of World War II till the creation of independent Uzbekistan, it was seen in the escalation of Islamic practices in the region. Even in the rural areas Islamic practices were on the rise as the communist regime tried hard to control it. In Uzbekistan people continued with the practice, learning and teachings of Islam in a protected way.

Meanwhile regime's position to restrict all religions was continued until the end of World War II. During the war, USSR government created a body called, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (*SADUM*). This official body was responsible for control and administration of all kind of Islamic activities of all present time Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union. A Mufti was appointed as its head. He was assigned to regulate the registration of *Mosques*, *Imam's* (clergy) appointment and dictated the content of sermons of Friday prayer and what would be the nature of 'proper' Islamic practice. There was no option but to co-opt and take cues from the leaders of the Communist party. As Oliver Roy rightly explained the system of 'Muftiate' as "it undermine and even attempt to destroy popular Islam, particularly the connections between national and religious identities, and to create a token, regulated, officially appointed clergy in order to manage the few remaining religious institutions, and after 1955, to improve relations with friendly Muslim countries".³

Although normal but relaxation in the control of Islam and Muslim practice could be understood as a need for Muslim contribution in the war related activities for the rise of Soviet Union as a super power in global sphere. Foreign policy of Soviet Union was also at that time trying to increase its sphere of influence in the Arab World. This approach was followed by the regime till the mid 1950's as the effects of the war slowed down and authorities didn't need any religious supports further.

Under the state's stern control, *SADUM* was also responsible for clergy-training and publication of religion based books and pamphlets.⁴ The head office of organization was situated in Tashkent (modern-day Uzbekistan). It had also many regional centres like Moscow, Ufa for Ulga-Ural region and Makachkala in Caucasus. *SADUM* came into existence in the year of 1943 and remained functional for the next 50 years. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, newly formed five Muslim sovereign states transformed their branches into their national Islamic institutions.⁵

However it was not a new organisation, a similar kind of spiritual assembly was also created during the Russian Empire in the year of 1788 in Orenburg. Like *SADUM*, the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly was also headed by head Mufti. He was also responsible for the appointment of Imams and management of various mosques across the Russian empire.⁶ But state's attitude changed drastically towards all religion when Soviet Union came into power in a communist revolution. Although the Union at the beginning was not antagonistic to activities related to the religion, for example, Soviet regime supported a movement run by some young Muslim reformers under the name of *Jadids* who wanted to promote "modernized" Islam, had objectives considered compatible with the ideas of Soviet ideals. Further, the regime even approved the locally establishment religious boards across Central Asia. In fact many duties and functions of boards were actually adopted by *SADUM* though on a more limited scale in the 1940s. These boards were generally perceived as "the link between the government and the people, to conduct the reform of religious affairs and to struggle with the unnecessary superstructures of Islam and the wrong interpretations of Islam".⁷

This situation started to change particularly from mid 1920s. Once the regime consolidated its power in USSR, it started to interfere and increase its control towards all religion. In the case of Islam, next few decades saw the gradual destruction of historical and important Mosques. Similarly many *Madradas* were closed down. A law was introduced in 1929 that consequently banned all publicly visible religious activities in the USSR. At the same time many Islamic scholars and leaders, including leaders of *Jadids*, were "liquidated" during Stalin's *Great Purge*.⁸

Era of Reconciliation: The SADUM occurred at the time of the World War II and Soviet regime was fighting for its survivals which required supports from all quarters of its population, consequently it relaxation in the restrictions against religion.⁹ Thus religious persecution was sometime paused and Mosques began to re-open, this was seen as an opportunity by the Central Asian *Ulema* to persuade authority for some concessions. For example, leaders of the *Ulema* requested the than chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Kalinin in June 1943, for a conference of religious scholar of Central Asia. In Tashkent. Conference planned a foundation for a creation of a central Islamic organization in which they argued that the proposed organization would be used for the better coordination in the cases of regional war.¹⁰ In order to get the supports of Muslim population in the war, the Presidium agreed for the establishment of a Tashkent based Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. It was formally established in October 1943. It helped in the re-opening of some local Islamic institutions and tied to established relationship with the other parts of the Muslim world. For example, it organised a meeting with Saudi king Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1945, consequently Suadi Arab opened its gates for Haji pilgrim for Soviet Muslims. Similarly, *Mir-i-Arab Madrasas* in Bukhara was reopened in the year 1946.

In 1990, Kazakhstan removed its *qaziyat* from SADUM and established an independent *Mufiate* for the Muslims of Kazakhstan. This new organization was renamed as the Religious Administration of Kazakhstan's Muslims. A meeting of the Muslims of Kazakhstan was held in January 1990, in which Ratbek Hadji Nysanbayev, the top SADUM figure in Kazakhstan, was appointed Kazakhstan's new *mufti*. The president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, also opened an Islamic Institute in Almaty to provided training in the field of religious affairs.¹¹

SADUM had a responsibility to look into the matters of the Muslims of the Soviet empire however its post of Grand Mufti was not insulated from controversy. Almost for the entire period of the SADUM, Baba Khan family was held the post of grand *Mufti* for three generations which become a point of discontent among other eligible individuals. This prompted an internal *coup* in the 1989 by a foreign-educated *imam* from Andijon Muhammad-Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf against the last *Baba Khan mufti*. End of Soviet Union resulted into disintegration of SADUM into various state-run organizations. Muhammad Yusuf was continued as the first mufti of Uzbekistan. He was removed from the post of *Mufti* in 1993.¹²

Islam in Post-Soviet Era: Integration of Soviet Union and independence of Central Asian Republics began the process of the revival of Islam in the region. However some scholars argued that the process had already started from the end of the 1980s when Gorbachev introduced the policy of freedom of religion. The result of this particular freedom was visible in the whole of Central Asian region. It was evident in terms of number and level of activities of Muslim institutions. For example, number of mosques increased from 160 to 5000 in just one year from 1990-91¹³. Arab and other Muslim countries supported Central Asian Muslims after the declaration

of Independence. Officially recognised clergies became an ally of the authorities in conflict with each other and all members of official clergy opposed the formation of a party on religious basis.

Uzbekistan got independence in the year of 1991. Since then Uzbek society is facing many fundamental transformation particularly in the sphere of public life. During Soviet period, most important common cultural factor among the people of the state was Islam followed by the majority of people. With the disintegration of Soviet Union, Uzbekistan witnessed an increase in religious interest. Many Mosques and religious institution (*Madrasas*) were built in Uzbekistan. Through the Uzbek constitution also declares itself as a secular state. In 1997 the first Islamic university was opened in Central Asian region at Tashkent. It was an initiative of the government; the university explores the belief of Islam and its historical and philosophical origin.

Another Islamic learning Institutions in Uzbekistan is the Imam Bukhari Higher Islamic Institution with about 200 hundred students.¹⁴ After the completion of four year in the *madrasa*, a student may continue his studies at the Islamic institute. Around five or six students from top *madrasas* are selected to study in Al-Azhar University sponsored by the Uzbek government. Students also travel abroad through cultural exchange program to abroad. From the early to mid 1990's Uzbekistan was an attractive underground study destination for Muslims from neighboring states seeking religious instruction.¹⁵

President Karimov sporadically used religious symbolism through his tenure as holding the Quran in one hand and the Uzbek Constitution on the other in oath taking ceremony of independent Uzbekistan in 1991. Karimov made pilgrimage to *Macca* for the *Hajj*.¹⁶ During the first year of independence; he also restored Islamic heritage sites that had been desecrated during the Soviet time. The Uzbek Government also continues to encourage education of its people with other countries with whom the newly independent Uzbekistan was establishing relation. Islamic existence for modern Uzbekistan was focal point of nationalism and the formation of national identity. It also gave new provision for religious institutions and organizations. All religious things were disassociated with the state. It gives equal status to all before law and the state should not interfere with their activities. However Islamic revivalism in Central Asia and especially in Uzbekistan was a challenge for both the nation and the national government.

A new law was passed by the *Oily Majlis* (Parliament of Uzbekistan) on 1st May 1998, which controlled or imposed restriction on religious organizations and institutions.¹⁷ Before the imposition of this law many Islamic organizations were functioning in Uzbekistan. However, the two most important religious movements were *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Hizbut-Tahrir al-Islamic (H.T.)* and *Wahabism* which is also seen as milestone of religious understanding in Uzbekistan. The majority of the Central Asian population is Sunni following the *Hanafi* sect. Shia Muslims form a small minority. Mosque, Islamic Education is popular among young Muslims who wish to take Islam as their career. At present around 380 *madrasas* are working in Uzbekistan since its independence.¹⁸ These newly created *madrasas* have their own syllabus, which covered wide range of Islamic history, culture and civilization.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia donated 1000,000 copies of the holy Quran to the various religious institutions based in Uzbekistan. Thousands of young Muslims enrolled in the Islamic learning centre and many also learned through the mosque in Uzbekistan. Participation in Friday prayers is one of the most significant acts of the Islamic faith and it is on a rise in Uzbekistan. Fasting during the month of Ramadan has made a significant comeback in Uzbekistan. Muslim pilgrimage from Central Asia to *Macca* has increased since 1990 and the largest group of pilgrims from Central Asia

belonging to the Uzbekistan. Women belonging to the Faraghana Valley of Uzbekistan are reported to follow the Islamic dress code.

Conclusion: Soviet Union began to completely ban the Islamic identity with the start of its Exercise of power. The God-less communist master consider religion as impediment to progress and development thus always constrained its practices. But the religion and religious seminaries were remained covertly active in the region. Though it is fact that Soviet rule provided opportunity to Central Asian society to get acquaintance with modern civic amenities, modern education, modern industrialization and urbanizations. But the Muslim of the Soviet Union specially Central Asian region kept the religious flame in their soul and practiced it secretly. After the disintegrations of the Soviet Union the hidden wishes of the religious practices resurfaced. The Muslim nation and organization now facilitated the more spiritual and genuine Islamic practices.

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