

Rise of Political Islam in Central Asia: A Study of Pre and Post 9/11 era

Shabir Ahmad Mugloo

Abstract

Islam in Central Asia is the most widely practiced religion. The form of Islam favored by the Central Asian governments of today is based on the teachings of orthodox Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence, although some Shi'a Muslims were also present there. The governments in all central Asian republics are secular in nature. The rise of political Islam in Central Asia Rains ground only after the collapse of Soviet rule which led to the creation of an ideological vacuum, which is to be filled by the Islamic rhetoric. Political Islam in the region is a direct response to autocratic rule, but whether this response is domestic or foreign, it will be examined in this paper. Also one of the main factors for the rise of political Islam in the region is to establish a Khalifah in each republic. Different radical movements arise in central Asia for this purpose. The most prominent among them are Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-tahrir-al-Islami (HTI), and Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP).

Key words: *Islam, Political Islam, Central Asia, IMU, IRP, HTI, 9/11.*

Introduction

Islam came to Central Asia in the early part of the Muslim conquest of the region. The battle of *Talas* fought between the Abbasid caliphate and the Chinese *Tang* dynasty in 751 C.E for control of Central Asia, was turning point initiating mass conversion into Islam in the region.¹

Shabir Ahmad Mugloo is Ph.D Research Scholar in Islamic Studies, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, (J & K) India.

Email ID: shabirmugloo11@gmail.com

¹ H.A.R. Gibb, *Arab conquest in Central Asia*, AMS PRESS, New York, 1970, p.97.

Islam has a profound impact on the cultures in the region moulding them as a part of Islamic civilization. After the collapse of Soviet Union 1991, the revival accelerated in Central Asia with building new mosques, publishing literature, and opening new religious schools. Although, Central Asian republics remain secular after independence, Islam remains attractive for them, because it offered alternatives and solutions to the myriad political and economic problems. Some religious organizations were formed in the republics of Central Asia to fight against the autocratic rule. These organizations were based on the fact that they will establish Islamic government and to form a system of *caliphate*.

But, when independence came in Central Asia in 1991, they passed through an ideological crisis. External religious influences and Muslim activists of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States started penetrating in the region for gaining popularity. However they failed to acknowledge or respect indigenous Central Asian religious histories.² In the contemporary situation to combat the secular system of government in Central Asia and to establish an Islamic government in the region, the groups like IMU, IRP and HTI are provided with financial aid by the countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Most financial aid is given by Saudi Arabia for establishing an Islamic state of radical nature. Turkey provides financial support to the organizations/associations in the region to establish an Islamic government of traditional nature. Iran is also providing finance in the region for spreading *shi'ism* in Central Asian republics.

Political Islam in Central Asia

Islam has always been the main factor of the religious and cultural identity of Central Asia, even if this self-identification existed unofficially under the Soviet government. In the official ideology, religious and national traditions were viewed separately. Today, dual self-identification as Uzbek Muslim, Tajik Muslim, and so on, has come back with a vengeance, and these terms sound as natural as Arab Muslim or Persian Muslim. In the mid-

² Russal Zanca, "Explaining Islam in Central Asia: An anthropological approach for Uzbekistan", *Journal of Muslim Affairs*, vol. 24, No. 1, April 2004, p.105.

1990s, 78.8 percent of the Kazakhs, 95 percent of the Kyrgyz, and more than 90 percent of the Uzbeks considered themselves Muslims.³

Beginning in the early 1990s, the ideology of political Islam began to become an important factor in Central Asian political life. Politicization of Islam in the region arise due to some factors as (i) the lack of a strong and independent *ulama*, (ii) the high level of secularization and concomitant lack of knowledge of basic Islamic precepts among the population, (iii) the lack of any convincing precedent for such a state in Central Asian history over the past two hundred years and (iv) all Central Asian states are in varying degrees, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional.⁴

Bernard Lewis, both a scholar of Middle Eastern history and an advisor to the Bush administration, writes in his 1990's article, "The roots of Muslim rage", that political Islam is "perhaps [an] irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular past, and the worldwide expansion of both".⁵ But this is totally in contrast with the genuine definition of the term. In Islamic perspective, political Islam means to give careful consideration to good organization around the principles of public interest within the framework of Qur'an and *Sunnah*. There exist three forms of Islam in Central Asia, which are described as 'traditional Islam', 'government sponsored Islam', and 'radical Islam'.⁶

- (i) Traditional Islam: The term 'traditional' Islam is used to describe the conservative, overall rather passive attitude to religion that continues to characterize the outlook of the great majority of Central Asian Muslims.

³ Aleksei Malashenko, *Islam and politics in Central Asian States*. <http://Islamandpolitics> in Central Asia.html, accessed on 7-4-2015

⁴ Shrin Akiner, "Islam, the state and ethnicity in Central Asia in historical perspective", *Religion, State and Society*, vol.24, no's 2/3, Keston institute, 1996, p.124.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, "The roots of Muslim rage". *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990. www.theatlantic.com/issues/90/sep/rage.htm.

⁶ Shrin Akiner, "The politicization of Islam in post soviet Central Asia", *Religion, State and Society*, vol.31. no.2, Keston Institute, 2003, pp. 102-105.

- (ii) Government sponsored Islam: ‘Government sponsored’ Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia is a continuation of the attempt to co-opt religion to serve the needs of the state that marked official policies towards Islam in the late 1980s. Today the constitutions of all the Central Asian countries enshrine the principle of the division of religion and state.
- (iii) Radical Islam: This term is used to describe those groups who want to purge Islam of the ‘innovations’ that have been introduced over time. They are collectively referred to as ‘*wahabis*’. They want to establish an Islamic state in Central Asian republics.

Causes responsible for the rise of political Islam in Central Asia:

- (i) The continued suppression of Islam by the Soviets was the main reason for the Islamic resurgence in the region.⁷ According to Alexandra Bennigsen, “Central Asia was deeply distressed by and thoroughly discontented with the soviet experience and the suppression of Islam was the foremost reason of their anger. As Islam provided the strongest anchor to hold traditional life in Central Asia, the soviet government was bent upon eliminating its influence root and branch.”⁸
- (ii) There is a lack of one homogenous group with one overriding identity of Islam. They are also affected by strong ideological and clan loyalties that negate and oppose the unifying appeal of Islam⁹ and therefore the search for the collective identity becomes another factor responsible for division in the region like *Jadidist* or Modernist and *Qadimist* or Conservative.
- (iii) The economic deprivations also lead to extremism in the region as the poor socio-economic conditions are the cause of Islamic militancy. The general assumption is

⁷ Vitaly v. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia Between pen and rifle*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, New York, INC, 2005, p.25.

⁸ Nandini Bhattacharya, *Dueling Islam, Soviet and regional identity in Central Asia*, Shipra publications, Delhi, 2008, p.120.

⁹ Ajay Patnaik, *Nation, Minorities, and states in Central Asia*, Anamika publishers and distributors (p) limited, New Delhi, 2003, p.162.

that poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment and other grievances give birth to extremism.¹⁰

- (iv) Dictatorial regimes which causes the violation of constitutional rights of ordinary citizens and leads to the suffering of the innocents and creation of militant resurgence.

Emergence of radical movements in Central Asia:

The spread of political Islam is a direct product of foreign intervention, which consequently lead to the domestic response to an autocratic rule. Evidence from Chechnya, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and now Iraq confirms that foreign nationals are active in promoting a wide spectrum of Islamist based mobilization movements.¹¹In Central Asia, the focus of Islamic revival and of radical groups has been the Farghana valley, a densely populated and ethnically, mainly Uzbek territory, divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The valley has traditionally been a centre of Islamic fervor, and was the area where foreign radicals first established a presence.

Aside from the Farghana valley, the other main localities of radicalism have been Tajikistan and Southern Kyrgyzstan. The spread of radical Islamic political movement in Tajikistan in the 1980s was very much a result of the growing interaction between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during the soviet occupation, and spread to Tajikistan where important political movements on an Islamic basis emerged.¹²The main radical groups emerging in Central Asia are:

¹⁰ Vitaly v. Naumkin, *op.cit*, p.22

¹¹ Eric McGlinchey, “ The making of militants: the state and Islam in Central Asia”, *Comparative studies of south Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 25, No. 3, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 558.

¹² Zeyno Baran, *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: implications for the EU*, Central Asia-Caucasus institute and Silk Road studies program, Washington DC, 2006, p. 17.

(1) Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU):

IMU was created by Tohir Yuldashev in 1996. He and his field commander Jumaboy Ahmadjunovich Khojiyer also known as Juma Namangani and Tojiboy were instrumental in expanding and strengthening the base of IMU in the region.¹³ The IMU received support from the Taliban, Pakistan's interservices intelligence agency, and Osama bin Laden. Taliban provided IMU with a training base in Qunduz where many foreign fighters also trained. Yoldoshev spent time in Peshawar, from where he travelled to Saudi Arabia, The Gulf, and the Caucasus in search of funding and recruits. Uzbekistan's homegrown dissent met the jihadist culture that had emerged in Afghanistan and became entangled in its global networks.¹⁴ The IMU is a militant jihadist organization that seeks the overthrow, violent if necessary, of the Karimov regime and its replacement by an Islamic state.¹⁵ In an interview with the Voice of America, Yuldashev set out the IMU's goals, 'the activities are fighting against oppression within our own country, against bribery, against inequalities and also the freeing of our Muslim brothers from prison'.¹⁶

The IMU acquired many of the characteristic features of jihadist Islam, a fascination with armed struggle in its pursuit of an Islamic state, to the exclusion of any other political program, and a vitriolic rhetoric that mixed anti-American, anti-Jewish, and anti-Israeli motifs.¹⁷ Uzbekistan has become a hotbed for the ferocious Islamic movements in Central Asia despite the fact that its decline in living standards has been less than that of other Central Asian countries in the post-soviet period.¹⁸

¹³ Ramakant Dwivedi, "Challenges of religious extremism in Uzbekistan", *Himalayan and Central Asian studies*, Vol.9, No.1-2, jan-june, 2005, p.128.

¹⁴ The most detailed information on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is in Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*. (New Haven, Conn., 2002), pp.145-182.

¹⁵ Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and politics in Central Asia*, University of California press, Ltd. London, England, 2007, p. 156.

¹⁶ J.K.Mohanty, *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, Kalpaz publications, New Delhi, 2006, p. 112.

¹⁷ Adeb Khalid, *op.cit*, p.156.

¹⁸ Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, University of California, Berkeley, 2003, p. 6.

(2) Hizb-ut-Tahrir Islami (HTI):

Hizb-ut-tahrir Islami or simply Hizb-ut-tahrir is a different kind of organization active in Central Asia. It was founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqi-al-din Nabhani, an Islamic scholar of Palestinian origin. In the decades since its establishment, HTI has become an international movement with tens of thousands of followers worldwide. Although the group is primarily active in Central Asia, it has also a large following in a number of western countries, including the United States. Today, HTI is led by Ata Abu Rushta, a Palestinian civil engineer who studied in Cairo and previously served as the party's spokesman in Jordan.¹⁹

HTI does not view itself as a religious organization, but as a political party based on Islamic values. HTI's political doctrine is founded on two principles. The first is the need of Islamic Law or *sharia*, to regulate all aspects of human life, politics, economics, science and ethics. The second principle is the need for an authentic Islamic state, which would pave the way for the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate. According to HTI, a "just" society can only be achieved within such a political entity.²⁰

The HTI arrived in Central Asia in the mid 1990s and has enjoyed substantial growth since then. Its main activities in the region are organizing study circles and printing and distributing leaflets in local languages or Russian. HTI is denounced by "official" *ulama* as an extremist organization inimical to Islam, and the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have blamed it for various acts on their territory. The government of Uzbekistan wants the party to be listed as a terrorist organization and banned worldwide.²¹ The success of the HTI in Central Asia is at first glance, surprising. The ideologization of Islam, its emphasis on the unity of *Ummah*,²² and the concomitant denigration of national peculiarities all go against the way Islam and nations are generally understood in the region.

¹⁹ Adeeb Khalid, *op.cit*, p. 160.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 160-161.

²¹ Adeeb Khalid, *op.cit*, p. 161.

²² The worldwide community of Muslims.

(3) Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP):

The IRP was established in 1991 as an outgrowth of Gorbachev's reforms for the purpose of protecting the Islamic identity of the Muslims in the former Soviet Union.²³ IRP emerged in Tajikistan as a major political actor in the late soviet period and played a crucial role in the civil war that wrecked the country between 1992 and 1997.²⁴ The main goal of IRP was to restore the basics of Islam to society and to begin the process of bringing Islamic knowledge and Islamic values back into public life.²⁵ The party claimed to support a moderate, nationalist version of Islam, was part of a larger anti-government coalition active during the Tajik civil war.

Although many labeled the party "fundamentalist", the IRP sought to unite clans during the civil war, and did not use the party to push for establishment of an Islamic state in Tajikistan. The IRP is the only legally recognized religious party in Central Asia and entered the Tajik government as a result of a peace agreement ending the conflict. Since becoming part of the government, the IRP has kept its commitment to work within the constitutional framework of Tajikistan. IRP deputy chairman Muhiddin Kabiri has emerged as the face of the party. He says that the IRP supports the existence of a secular democratic Tajikistan, but notes that the party approves of increasing religious traditions and values in state political life.²⁶

Some observers have argued that the success of the IRP in working within the Tajik coalition government must not go unnoticed. Referring to IRP's participation in Tajikistan's governance, president of the European foundation Charles Maynes said, "Unfortunately, the success of which could have had profound implications for the way that the western world reacts to resurgent political Islam elsewhere... the Tajik example could well inform political developments in the region and elsewhere- and should help define western perceptions of

²³ Tiffy Petros, "Islam in Central Asia: the emergence and growth of radicalism in the post-communist era", In the tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's path to the 21st century, Dan Burghart, (ed.). Washington: 2004, p. 151.

²⁴ Adeeb Khalid, *op.cit*, p. 147.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ Tiffy Petros, *op.cit*, p.151.

Islam”.²⁷ Although Tajikistan continues to face multiple political and economic challenges, there is evidence that it remains one of the more open countries in Central Asia.

Impact of 9/11 on radical movements in Central Asia:

Beginning in the early 1990’s the ideology of political Islam and Islamist organizations began to become important factors in Central Asian political life. Until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, Islam in Central Asia received scant attention abroad.²⁸

The IMU was listed by the US state department as a terrorist organization for the first time in 2000. It is a militant and extremist Islamic organization that has operated mostly within the borders of one state (Uzbekistan). Nonetheless, it is closely linked to international Islamic networks. It has also used armed struggle and terrorism in an effort to topple the regime of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s president.²⁹ The other radical movements in Central Asia are the Hizb-ut-tahrir al-Islami (HTI) and the Islamic revival party (IRP). Both are quite different from IMU. The HTI has to date advocated non-violent political struggle. Its principle mode has been education and dissemination of printed material while IRP from an alliance with democratic parties after the Tajik civil war which broke out in 1992 and finally IRP agreed to a peace treaty.³⁰

IMU has been losing influence in the wake of post-September 11 and the launching of global war on terror, the HTI has been gaining popularity. Central Asia’s acute socio-economic and political problems as well as the inability of its ruling elites to find a formula for successful modernization and democratization, are increasing social frustration and disaffection, which in turn provide fuel for Islamists of all types, especially those that do not espouse violence such as the HT. The persecution of Islamist activists by Central Asian

²⁷ Charles William Maynes, “America discovers Central Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, 2003, pp. 120-132.

²⁸ Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, p.3.

²⁹ idem

³⁰ Ibid,p.4.

governments also creates new martyrs, increasing the HTI's popularity and broadcasting its social support.³¹

Since September 11, a number of authoritarian or oppressive regimes have shown themselves to be enthusiastic supporters of the "war on terrorism". They thus internationalize long running domestic disputes and justify their brutal suppression in an internationally acceptable language.³²

Thus there are three perspectives on political Islam in Central Asia:

- I. The perspective of US government analysts.
- II. The perspective of central Asian leaders.
- III. The perspective of Central Asian society.³³

US government analysts view IMU and HTI as radical Islamists, Central Asian leaders perceive all Muslim groups other than the state *Muftiates* as Islamist and the everyday Central Asian Muslims view the *Muftiate* as Islamists.

	US government Analysts	Central Asian leaders	Central Asian society
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan(IMU)	✓	✓	
Hizb-ut-tahrir al-Islami(HTI)	✓	✓	
Reformists/conservatives/salafi		✓	
Tablighi Jamaat		✓	
Muftiate			✓

[Table showing Central Asian Muslim groups & who perceives them as Islamists]

³¹ idem

³² Adeeb Khalid, *op.cit*, p. 169.

³³ Eric Mcglinchey, *three perspectives on political Islam in Central Asia*, George Mason University, September 2009, PONARS Eurasia policy memo no. 76.

Conclusion:

The states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have faced multiple and varied internal and external pressures since gaining independence, which have contributed to differing levels of support for Islamic radicalism. These pressures include: increasing government corruption and repression, declining economic conditions, and growing influence from foreign Islamic elements. The majority of the Central Asian regimes have labeled all non-governmental sanctioned Islamic activity as “radical” and banned Islamic groups as “terrorist” organizations. In order to combat the spread of radical Islam in the region, the US government and the Central Asian regimes should work to promote and incorporate moderate strains of Islam in a way that does not allow it to destroy the current order. By banning all unauthorized Islamic activity the regional regimes have effectively eliminated independent, moderate voices of Islam, which could be used to attract people away from radical groups and activities. Islam in Central Asia is the dominant religion and it could become a political force which could take the creation of an Islamic state and its use as a legitimizing force only when extremist and violent methods of demonstration are avoided. Islam will play a growing role in public and private life in all the Central Asian states, only after the establishment of an Islamic state, which will be possible only when peaceful and legitimate methods are taken into consideration.

Bibliography

- Akiner, S. (1996). Islam, The State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective. *Religion, State and Society* , 24 (2/3).
- Akiner, S. (2003). The politicisation of Islam in post soviet Central Asia. *Religion , State and Society* , 31 (2).
- Baran, Z. (2006). *Islamic Radiccalism in Central Asia and Caucasus: implications for the EU*. Washington,DC: Central Asia-Caucasus institute and silk road study program.

- Bhattacharya, N. (2008). *Dueling Islam, Soviet and regional identity in Central Asia*. Delhi: Shipra publications.
- Dwivedi, R. (2005). Challenges of religious extremism in Uzbekistan. *Himalayan and Central Asian studies* , 9 (1-2).
- Eric, M. (2005). The making of militants: the state and Islam in Central Asia. *Comparative study of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* , 25 (3).
- Gibb, H. (1970). *Arab conquests in Central Asia*. New York: AMS PRESS.
- Khalid, A. (2007). *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. London: University of California Press Ltd.
- Lewis, B. (1990, september). The roots of Muslim rage. *Atlantic Monthly* .
- Maynes, C. W. (2003). America discovers Central Asia. *Foreign Affairs* , 82, 120-132.
- McGlinchey, E. (2009). *Three perspectives on political Islam in Central Asia*. New York: George Mason University.
- Mohanty, J. (2006). *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*. New Delhi: Kalpaz publishers.
- Naumkin, v. v. (2003). *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Naumkin, v. v. (2005). *Radical Islam in Central Asia Between Pen and Rifle*. New York, INC.: Rowman and Little Field Publishers.
- Patnaik, A. (2003). *Nation, Minorities, and States in Central Asia*. New Delhi: Anamika publishers and distributors (p) limited.
- Patros, T. (2004). Islam in Central Asia: The emergence and growth of radicalism in the post-Communist Era. In D. Burghart, *In the tracks of tamerlane: Central Asia's path to 21st century* (pp. 139-155). Washington: National Defence University.
- Zanca, R. (2004). Explaining Islam in central Asia: An anthropological approach for Uzbekistan. *Journal of Muslim Affairs* , 24 (1).