

POINT OF VIEW

# Syncretic and “synthetic” Islam in Central Asia

*Why religious fundamentalism is unlikely to boil over*

**ALMATY (TCA) —** *With an air of festivity everywhere, younger generations of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are rushing to book parties during this special holiday season. As usual they will get together to celebrate two Christmas — one on 25 December and the other on January 7 (following the Russian Orthodox calendar) as well as New Year's eve.*

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Again, they will exchange another series of gifts and clink yet another round of vodka glasses. For many, making merry of one Christian holiday twice a year has been combined with Ramadan fasting this October. Come March 21st, these same youth will be off-work to celebrate the symbolic beginning of spring with Norouz, an event rooted in the Zoroastrian tradition and imported from pre-Islamic Persia.

Such a religiously eclectic collection of holidays reflects the frantic search of the young population [taken broadly as aged 20-40] in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for a new identity to fill up the emptied space of communist-Leninist indoctrination after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. Having been educated in Soviet schools, occasioned state-maintained recreation centers, and kept compulsory membership at the Communist Party, this generation of post-socialist youth is today widely exposed to the growing plurality of forms

of self-expression that this part of the world has to offer.

Fifteen years ago, when the Soviet Union was still intact, celebration of religious holidays was neither permitted nor known to the wider public. The collapse of the Soviet regime entailed an ideological void in the post-communist space. The basic institutions of

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communist indoctrination - schools, health, and the military - broke up with the philosophy of Leninism that provided an ideological groundwork for nearly seven decades.

In the early 1990s, every post-Soviet Muslim nation - Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan -

tried to identify what place Islam must occupy in politics as well as the daily life. Were they to follow the Turkish scenario of allowing politics and religion to co-exist, imitate Western secularism, or, on the other extreme, expect an Islamic revolution? Among other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were often defined as “potentially democratic” Muslim nations. On the premise that Soviet atheism had erased pre-communist religious beliefs and large minorities of Slavic populations might maintain this status quo, Western scholars affirmed that both states would gradually develop towards electoral democracies.

Unlike in some Middle Eastern states, where urbanized younger generations are less religious compared to their parents' generation, an inverse image is observed among their Central Asian counterparts. As worship of Lenin began to be discouraged starting in 1991 with communist institutions ending their control over peoples' minds, people have sought to fill this void by finding their own gods. In this case, notions of “agnosticism” or “atheism” are bound to fail, as they are still associated with the Soviet eradication of religions. Instead, a variety of forms of Islamic and Christian beliefs are considered as options. Located on the northern edge of the Islamic world, pre-Soviet reli-

gious traditions in both countries were relatively weak due to a nomadic life mode. What survives today is a syncretic mosaic of facets of Islam blended with pre-Islamic rituals, now rebounding from under the weight of 70 years of communism. Various notions and interpretations are assembled by a religiously uneducated public from a range of pre-Soviet spiritual streams that include periods of Tengrism (worship of

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the sky), Zoroastrianism, Shamanism and the “new schools” of usul jaded, advocated by a Turkish journalist and writer Ismail Gaspıralı in the early twentieth century. One example of this blend of in current practice is the tradition of burning pine branches to oust shaitans [demons] while Koran prayers are read at Norouz celebrations.

Similarly, modern Islam is “synthetic” in much of Central Asia. A hybrid of semi-pagan and Islamic practices is intentionally reproduced on personal, family, and state levels. Thousands of Kyrgyz annually contribute approximately a quarter of a dollar to Central mosques - people who, if

asked, would firmly claim their Muslim identity. Such facade religiosity has replaced the once popular mode of “Soviet” atheism. The nominal price for membership in the Mosque is a trade for the Party fee that provided a sense of belonging to a system and continuity of the social process.

However, against the expectations of theories connecting religion to political regime type, even with a generally moderate Muslim public, the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments appear to be shifting towards electoral authoritarianism.

The new state leaders - Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Kyrgyzstan's Kurmanbek Bakiyev - are striving to sustain a hold on power for the longest period through various approaches.

Such syncretic and “synthetic” Islam evident in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan discourages penetration of religious fundamentalist ideas by militant networks rebelling against secularism in the politics in the Central Asian states. The potential spread of fundamentalist movements such as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Akramiya, or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is largely unlikely; the wider public, especially in urban areas, is not predisposed to religious radicalism on such a scale. Most Central Asian Muslims can pray in the Mosque and live next door to Orthodox Russians.

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## Kazakhstan seeks regional leadership role

**ASTANA (NBCA) —** *Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev has announced plans for a new regional strategy, which analysts say could allow this country - with its substantial diplomatic and commercial power - to position itself as the leading country in Central Asia.*

In a speech to mark the 15th anniversary of Kazakh independence on December 16, President Nazarbayev unveiled plans for a long-term strategy designed to make Central Asia more creditworthy and competitive, and to help the region fight common threats such as drug trafficking, the proliferation of illicit weapons, and illegal migration.

Andrei Chebotarev, head of the Alternativa think

tank, believes the Central Asian strategy stems from Kazakhstan's desire to promote itself in the region, and comes at a time when many things are in the country's favour - its leading role in the CIS, its bid to chair the OSCE in 2009, and its ability to serve as mediator between western states and other Central Asian republics.

“We're now seeing Central Asian states becoming

distanced from the United States, the European Union and NATO. Last year, Uzbekistan broke off relations with various institutions after Andijan. Kyrgyzstan has some problems with the US government over the airbase located there,” said Chebotarev. “Kazakhstan can certainly become the West's leading partner in the region.”

Political scientist Eduard Poletaev, editor-in-chief of the Mir Yevrazii journal, believes Nazarbayev is seeking undisputed leadership in the region at a time when the EU is increasingly interested in Central Asia and Kazakhstan is seeking the OSCE chairmanship. “Another aspect of the strategy is to identify and avert po-

litical and economic risks that may arise if neighbouring republics go through a leadership change.”

Poletaev believes Kazakhstan has been making some bold investments in other

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Central Asian states to give itself the commercial power and diplomatic capacity to

develop and lead a long-term strategy for regional development.

“Thanks to its financial and political influence, Kazakhstan will draw other Central Asian states into its orbit,” he said. “Only Kazakhstan, with its investments, has the economic clout to ensure stability in the region.”

Political scientists say it is no accident that the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, CICA, has been made the centerpiece of the future strategy. Decisions taken by this regional grouping are not binding, so CICA will serve merely as a forum in which the strategy can be implemented.