

Islam in Nation Building: Case Studies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract : The breakdown of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the 9/11 attacks resulted in the global changes created a totally new geopolitical situation for the Muslim populated republics of the former Soviet Union. Located between great powers such as China and Russia, as well as theocratic states like Iran and Afghanistan, the newly independent Central Asian states were facing a dilemma to choose a new politico-ideological course for development. Policies dubbed Perestroika and Glasnost leading to the collapse of the world's once superpower brought about a considerable rise in the national and religious self-consciousness of the Muslim population of the USSR where the religion was prohibited under the strict communist rule. Moreover, the religious movements prohibited during the Soviet era acted as a part of national struggle to gain their freedom from Moscow. The policies adopted by the Central Asian countries to manage the religious revival and extremism in their countries vary dramatically from each other. As Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are located between Russia and China and hosting a considerable number of the Russian population, these countries treated Islamic revival more tolerantly trying benefit from it in the nation-building process. The importance of the topic could be explained with the fact that it investigates an alternative way of management of religious activities and movements. The recent developments in the Middle East, Syria and Iraq in particular, and the fact that hundreds of fighters from the Central Asian republics joined the ISIL terrorist organization once again highlights the implications of the proper regulation of religious activities not only for domestic, but also for regional and global politics. The paper is based on multiple research methods. The process trace method was exploited to better understand the Russification and anti-religious policies to which the Central Asian countries were subject during the Soviet era. The comparative analyse method was also used to better understand the common and distinct features of the politics of religion of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and the rest of the Central Asian countries. Various legislation acts, as well as secondary sources were investigated to this end. Mostly constructivist approach and a theory suggesting that religion supports national identity when there is a third cohesion that threatens both and when elements of national identity are weak. Preliminary findings suggest that in line with policies aimed at gradual reduction of Russian influence, as well as in the face of ever-increasing migration from China, the mentioned countries incorporated some Islamic elements into domestic policies as a part and parcel of national culture. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan did not suppress religious activities, which was case in neighboring states, but allowed in a controlled way Islamic movements to have a relatively freedom of action which in turn led to the less violent religious extremism further boosting national identity.

Keywords : identity, Islam, nationalism, terrorism

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