CHAPTER 2.3

CELEBRATING MISS MUSLIM PAGEANTS AND OPPOSING ROCK CONCERTS: CONTRASTING THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP OF TWO MUSLIM WOMEN IN KAZAN

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Introduction

While Russia is not popularly known as a center for Islamic activity, Muslim civil society organizations in Kazan, Russia’s third largest city, have grown in strength and number since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, Muslim women’s civil society organizations in Kazan have emerged as significant actors at the regional and national level.

Traditional understandings of Islamic authority have excluded women in many Muslim majority countries because religious authority was confined to imāms and ʿulamāʾ who received formal religious schooling in mosques and madrasahs. The situation in Tatarstan differs from other Muslim minority communities because Tatar Muslims are not a recent immigrant population. Tatars are a Turkic people, who emigrated from Siberia from the tenth to thirteenth century, and converted to Islam over 1,000 years ago.¹ Tatars are the largest ethnic minority in Russia with over five million people. In Tatarstan, 39 percent of the population is Russian and 53 percent is Tatar, numbering over two million.² Russians and Tatars have had a long period of engagement since the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan in 1552. Muslim women in Tatarstan have been claiming religious authority for centuries by performing special cultural and religious rites through female religious figures called abystay. The most recent claim comes from women activists who are part of a growing

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women’s movement in Tatarstan that asserts Muslim women’s rights and defines how they want to be viewed by society.

In this chapter, I examine how experience as religious instructors in mosques equipped two Muslim women—Naila Ziganshina and Almira Adiatullina—to become prominent leaders and activists in Kazan, Russia. In the first section, I will lay out a theoretical framework for understanding Muslim women’s authority within invited and invented spaces. Second, I will place each case study within the historical and cultural context of Tatarstan and Russia at the beginning of the new millennium. Third, I will analyse the religious and social authority of Ziganshina and Adiatullina as two examples of Muslim women in positions of leadership in a Muslim minority country.

Building on interviews with Adiatullina and Ziganshina, I argue that Tatar Muslim women have asserted authority within the informal structures of civil society organizations and the formal structures of the Islamic Spiritual Boards. The authority and voices of women within the formal structure of the Spiritual Board have been limited to issues constructed as the Muslim women’s domain, such as wearing the headscarf or caring for children. In contrast, Muslim women within civil society organizations have asserted their authority on issues ranging from public drinking to rock concerts. While religious education and teaching experience are necessary credentials for Muslim women to become leaders and activists within the Muslim community in Russia, the type of impact Muslim women’s organizations have is largely dependent on the way they are created and where they draw their legitimacy.

Invited and Invented Spaces

Religious authority is an important lens for analysis because it examines how individuals and organizations construct and claim their right to speak for Islam. This becomes more complex when considering the interaction between religious authority and social authority, in respect to both men and women leaders within Muslim communities. Particularly in Kazan, formal religious education and experience as a mosque instructor built the social capital and legitimacy of Adiatullina and Ziganshina that later allowed them to act as social leaders for their communities on issues related to religion.

Throughout this chapter, I also use the analytic frameworks of formal and informal authority in order to highlight overlapping and