Uzbekness and Islam: A Survey-based Analysis of Identity in Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan came into being as an independent nation-state with the break-up of the Soviet Union toward the end of 1991, retaining the boundaries of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Unlike some of the USSR’s 15 successor states, Uzbekistan – like its four Central Asian neighbors – had not had a meaningful national movement through the 1980s. The few nationalistically inclined groups and parties, such as Erk and Birlik, that surfaced in the second half of the decade had put forward nationalist platforms in an attempt to provide an alternative to the established hierarchy that ruled the Uzbek union republic. They had, however, no significant constituency and stood little chance against the well-oiled and politically experienced establishment that took over the new state framework.

Inevitably, one of the tasks of the old-new rulers was to provide the new state with an ideology or collective value system and identity that would supplant the defunct Marxist-Leninist framework.1 This was essential in light of the much-publicized threat of an Islamist takeover such as was imminent in neighboring Afghanistan, where Islamist opposition factions had engulfed the country in civil war, and seemed at one point likely to jeopardize Tajikistan. The Uzbek SSR’s Communist Party First Secretary, Islam Karimov, became independent Uzbekistan’s first – and so far only – president. Early in the independence era, he encountered a single pocket of serious resistance to his rule, in Namangan in the Fergana Valley. Throughout the Soviet period, Namangan had been the main center of popular, non-institutionalized Islam and had from time to time been a major headache for the Communist regime. After a

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1 Upon acquiring independence, the Soviet Union’s fourteen non-Russian successor states had to embark on nation-building, a process that became caught up “in a form of identity politics ... designed to produce and reproduce nationally defined contours of community and to reflect nationally defined interests and values predicated on fulfilling a normative concept of statehood in which nation and statehood should be spatially congruent.” G. Smith, V. Law, A. Wilson, A. Bohr, and E. Allworth, *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.
few compromises and concessions, Karimov was able to establish control over that restive area.

Karimov, with his sharp political acumen, opted for a path that was grounded neither in Islam nor in ethnic nationalism. His credo was wholly secular, although he paid lip-service to Islam when creating a new Uzbekistani national identity. While focusing on the Uzbeks, who comprised the overwhelming majority of his citizenry, and on the Uzbek tongue, which became the state language, this new identity highlighted the new state's historical heritage as the region’s leading body politic, heir to the great Timurid Empire of Timurlane. Indeed, Timurlane has been adopted as a – if not the – father of the Uzbek nation, “the embodiment of Uzbek national identity.”

To ensure the success of his enterprise, Karimov suppressed the Islamic resurgence of the first half of the 1990s, closed down most of the madrasas, or seats of Islamic learning, that mushroomed in this period, as well as a large number of mosques, instituting draconic legislation on the registration of prayer-houses of all faiths. As the great majority of these prayer-houses were mosques, the Muslim faith was necessarily the most affected by these laws. Forum 18, a Norwegian-based human rights organization dedicated to promoting religious freedom and recording religious persecution in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and a number of other countries, reports periodically cases of persecution of Muslims (and adherents of other faiths) in Uzbekistan, mostly on the pretext of Islamic “extremism.” At the same time, Karimov incorporated a number of Islamic customs into his new ethos; for instance, he made both Ruza Hayit (‘Id al-Fitr) and the first day of Qurbon

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2 Uzbek officially became the state language of the Uzbek SSR as of 1989; the 1995 version of the Law on the State Language further promoted its status.


5 This trend had evolved in the late Soviet period, when “Uzbeks tended to claim the entire heritage of the region as their own,” contending that figures such as Abu Rayhan Berumi, Ibn Sina, Alisher Navoiy, and Mirza Ulughbek were all Uzbeks. See A. Khalid, Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2007), 96.