

A REVIEW OF ISLAM AND THE MEDIA IN UZBEKISTAN

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“Hold the Quran in your one hand and a computer in the other,” was a popular slogan in the early 1990s with traditionally-minded intellectuals of Uzbekistan. Today the media cling to the Quran with both hands as they take up the issue of Islam.

When reading the Uzbek-language periodicals, hearing radio broadcasts or watching television reports, you notice the casual use of ‘Allah’ and ‘Islamic’ values. This is common at the Islamic University, but also more now among prominent figures in society, culture, technology, and politics.

They extend praises to Allah both on grand and trivial occasions, sometimes with no cause at all (“Allah be praised that we live in such a time”).

You start to doubt whether Uzbekistan is still a secular state. Uzbekistan’s state owned and private news media are preoccupied by disseminating ideological propaganda - a propaganda meant to imprint religious tenets disguised as national traditions, instead of promoting the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

Meanwhile, there are no reports whatever about the activities of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir radical Islamic party; no accounts of the party’s members brought to trial; nor accounts about protests staged in Ferghana province by wives and mothers of those arrested for links with informal religious organizations.

RELIGIOUS COVERAGE

The *Khurriyat* newspaper carried three articles (October 31 - November 6, 2001) dwelling on Islamic issues. The spirituality column, on the front page, ran an article ‘National Ideology as Propaganda Tool’ by Sultanmurad Olim, the deputy chairman of the Republican Center *Manaviyat va Ma’rifat* (Spirituality and Enlightenment). The author writes: “As one cannot read the Quran and Hadith without turning to comments (tafsir), so the contents of the program ‘National Ideology Idea: Concepts and Principles’ cannot be grasped by college or university students, society and population without the help of relevant explanations and propaganda.” The said program includes five guidelines, one of which asserts that it is time to put an end to the idea that “religion is opium for the people.”

In the author’s opinion, one has to know that “Society’s spiritual standards depend on how high a religion ranks in the life of society, and the situation here needs to be clarified.” The author mentions specialized pamphlets like ‘Islam and its

School’ and ‘Islam the Religion of Enlightenment’ published by the National Ideology Research Center. The same issue carries a contribution entitled ‘The Light of Enlightenment’, a review of the latest magazine of the Imam Al Bukhari’s lessons. The issue under review contains articles headlined ‘Independence and Religious Convictions’, ‘Islam and Education’, and ‘Live Conscience of Society’ focusing on Sufism. According to the reviewer, these magazines should increase their circulation so to reach into the 2,000 active mosques across Uzbekistan, while the Imam-Hatibs of the mosques should use the contents of the magazine in their speeches.

They should also seek investment from foreign Muslim embassies and business communities to pay for the higher circulation. “The magazine should find its way into every home”, insists the author. *Khurriyat*’s publications associate society’s moral and spiritual values with religion alone. With education limited solely to religion, they discard the role of culture in morals and values. To find its proper niche in the world, society must be educated and provided with scientific learning, but there’s scarcely a line about these considerations in the publications while they address the spirituality of man and society.

HOSTAGE TO RELIGION

Nowadays, the idealization and practice of customs and traditions are viewed as religious commandments. A story headlined 'The Bride's Bow' (Khalk Suzi, December 12, 2001) reads: "This old tradition grows young and gets more and more attractive year after year." Next it describes the admiration ambassadors' wives in Tashkent have for the ceremony, and the eloquence of a Pro-Rector of the Institute of World Languages as she was speaking about this beautiful tradition. Regrettably, the organizers of the Bride Bow failed to elaborate on the troubles the bride goes through during the three-day khait (Muslim holiday), and the troubles and the cost to a bride's mother to properly set a festive table. The article also makes no mention that the ritual is responsible for a rise in the miscarriage rates of young women following tiresome bride-bow ceremonies during the khait.

In another article called 'Ekhsion' (Fidokor newspaper, December 18, 2001), a prominent scientist explains that the term 'ekhsion' is understood to mean 'good deeds of any kind'. The article quotes the Quran and a number of the ayats calling for good deeds and charities. The author turns to history to cite instances of good deeds and charities performed by various rulers and people in authority. Early Islamic rulers - the Seljuqs, Timurids, Baburids - were known as generous benefactors. They erected mosques, medresehs, and hospices to host travelers and dervishes.

The author mentions charities dispensed by the incumbent re-

gional authorities of Uzbekistan and condemns business people who feel no concern for philanthropy by citing the words of the Prophet who said that "Damnation will take those who soak their hands in dinars and dirhems". The article leads one to think that charity is a phenomenon limited solely to the religious domain. The author failed to find illustrating acts of philanthropy in today's society. Fidokor's other article (which appeared December 11, 2001) also centers on religious convictions. In 'Homeland is Where People Believe', it starts with an introduction telling of the time when students were barred from fasting during Ramadan (a Moslem holy month). The next-page article tells a story of two women from Cairo who are good friends, although one of them represents a 'modern-type' woman and, in contrast, the other is a believer. This passage makes one draw a line between the 'modern' woman and the 'believer'. However, it is not explained that a 'modern' woman (with modern clothes) may well be a believer, just like hijab-wearing women are not always true believers.

The article also attacks the past-Soviet government, under which Islam was persecuted. The reader will not find anything novel in this article. Repeating old examples from the Soviet-era anti-religious practices, it lacks analysis of modernization opportunities, so vital for this country's progress.

For a more advanced insight into the relationship between religion and society, it can only be found in contributions focusing on religious extremism and terrorism.

EXTREMISM AND ISLAM

The platform shared by the opponents of religious extremism and terrorism is given in great detail in Alisher Nazar's article 'Disbelief In Faith Commandments' published by the Khurriyat newspaper (No.42, 2001). Religious extremism and terrorism, the author writes, put on "Clean clothes of Islam to achieve their goals" and that "Terrorism is a weapon of savagery." In the introduction, the author argues that terrorism is a 20th century phenomenon, which asserts that, "God and the Prophet is my own self", which in fact means unbelief. "Terrorism is aspiring to create a community of uniform thinkers, or, better still, of the mankurts - people unable to think at all. But unlike the legendary mankurts known to have lost memory, terrorists do have memory, which is far more dangerous". The author calls terrorism "A sore on the body of Islam", because unlike Islam, which represents a kind of social response to injustice, terrorism is just savagery. The author writes: "No idea falls down from the sky. All of them originate on Earth. As there is nutrient soil for a plant to grow, so there is propitious environment for terrorism to spread. Therefore, time has come to detect this environment and attack it by the joint efforts of religion experts and social scientists who should play an active role".

This issues is a central topic of some other publications as well. An article titled 'The Great Sin' (Kh.Ishmetbekov and M.Yuldashev, December 21, 2001) makes extensive use of quotations from the Quran and President Karimov's pronouncements asserting that murdering people are sins against Islam. Moreover, Islam makes it a duty of any

believer to cultivate land, engage in creative endeavor, and enjoy Allah's blessing for the believer's benefit. The article states that "Man was created by Allah to be His deputy on Earth. That's what another ayat says demonstrating man's great role assigned to him by the Quran. The Creator has bestowed so great favors on man that he should be thankful to Him and cling to His instructions and follow the life-style He bequeathed."

The article condemns the sin of self-sacrifice practiced by suicide bombers. The authors quote Imam Al Bukhari, who said that, "By killing oneself one makes a poor return for Allah-given gift of life. For this, the gate to the paradise will be closed to the sinner forever." Islam promises every person happiness both in this world and the next, if he or she follows the instructions of the Quran and the will of the Prophet and never attempts the neighbor's life, does not commit suicide, covet the neighbor's property, encroach upon other people's honor and convictions. These are the pivotal commandments of Islam."

Religious extremism and terrorism are also a topic the *Fidokor* newspaper. An article entitled 'The Last Resort' (November 22, 2001) points out that, "The concept of the jihad, apart from its religious aspect, also has a clearly military facet of which our people should be aware. In short, by declaring a jihad on neighboring countries, the terrorists and those who offer them

asylum come into antagonism with Islam, both religiously and militarily". The authors of the article, Z. Munavarov (Doctor of Political Science) and S. Evkayev (Candidate of Political Science), assess the challenge of terrorism, analyze various phases of counter-terrorist military actions, and conclude by saying, "we must be prepared to wage a daily war against the ideological menace, so it becomes an integral part of our top-priority tasks."

ISLAMIC VALUES

To conclude this review of Islam and the Uzbek-language news media, it would be safe to state that Uzbekistan's mass media works towards raising public awareness of religious rules and the resulting customs. The media contains a traditionalist outlook rather than attempting to reinstate the legal principles of a secular state by associating the concept of spirituality with religion alone, ignoring the importance of secular culture, universal values and secular learning. Staying in the grip of censorship and rigid self-censorship, Uzbekistan's news media serves the cause of propaganda without setting itself the aim of providing fellow citizens with diverse and prompt information as well as variety of comments about current events and facts. Nationally, the ideological propaganda puts religion in a prominent position as a major source of ethnic identification and spirituality. The media's

view of the future and education of society are associated not with absorbing universal values and accomplishments of world culture, scientific discoveries and modern life-styles. Rather, in embracing religious tenets they intentionally or unintentionally contribute to the imposition of a heavy religious atmosphere in society. An attempt is being made to evaluate current events in religious terms through the introduction of religious terminology and rhetoric.

"GOOD" AND "BAD" ISLAM

The media turns a blind eye to the fact that modern Islam persists as a world-vision doctrine embracing all spheres, from private life to politics. It seeks to divide 'good' Islam, sanctifying the spirituality of man and society, from 'bad' Islam, which retains its control of global politics. As a result, eulogies pronounced on 'good' Islam and curses uttered on 'bad' Islam have little force on a traditionalist society recognizing Islamic values as truly 'native' ones. At the same time, news media fails to provide insight into real reasons why religious extremism gains momentum across the world, including in Uzbekistan - reasons that relate to the fact that many Muslim countries lag economically and socially behind the West. Hence, the uncritical news media proves inefficient in cracking down on outdated religious rules that throw society back and flings believers into the hands of religious extremism.