



## Education and Change in Religious Practices in Uzbekistan

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### Abstract

Islamic education in Uzbekistan had a long history like other sister republic states. Uzbekistan was a hub of Islamic learning from thousand years. Soviets tried to discard the religious activities from the life of the people of Central Asia and an example of which is that mosques, Churches and other religious centres were banned and finally closed, and the same was the case with Islamic education. Soviets ideology was that religious activities or teaching gave an orthodox view about life which hinders the growth of development or change for betterment. The main reasons for changing religious practices in soviet were due to renaissance, growth of science, expansion of modern education, urbanization etc. Soviets succeeded in suppressing Islam in public life. However, in both suppression and repression conditions, Islam and Islamic education continued to survive in Central Asia including Uzbekistan. After obtaining independence Uzbek government assesses the content of Islam in public life through Islamic education and restores mosques and Churches.

**Keywords:** Education, religion, uzbekistan, people, society.

### Introduction

Religious education in Uzbekistan lost their dynamism after the Timurid period and Russian conquest in the nineteenth century brought Central Asia's Muslims into contact with changing trends in religious education. This included access to fundamentalist ideas like *salifiya* and *jadidya* who were concerned with reform of the educational system. Both these educational movements gave new impetus to the Uzbek society in removing backwardness and also help them to come out with new look or view for religious education by applying mastery of materials in systematic Arabic language instructions. The new Soviet educational system was pushed forward by enormous administrative machinery and with all the structural power which was at its disposal. Nonetheless, it turned out to be extremely difficult for the Bolsheviks to eliminate all traditional Islamic schools. The Bolsheviks were not interested in the reformation of Islamic madrassas rather they wanted all schools to be not only secular but also strictly atheist. The collapse of soviet rule has brought Islam much more emphatically back into public life of Uzbek population because they demanded it immediate aftermath of independence. Islamic educational institutions were deeply rooted in local religious practice, social traditions, and family ties. Public interest in religion grew to an almost immoderate level with hundreds of unsanctioned locally organized madrassas and mosques appearing seemingly overnight. There was a demand for Quran and other religious books in Uzbek society. Many young people both men and women began experimenting with religion by adopting Islamic dress, beards for men and *hijab* for women. The Uzbek government has been struggling with the challenge of how to reintroduce religious education without compromising the state building goals of the present.

### Methodology

In the present research paper the study is mainly based on secondary data. The study is mainly focused on education and change in religious practices in Uzbekistan. During research I have relied on secondary sources that comprise information collected from books, journals, reports, newspapers, periodicals, and internet. The study will be primarily based on interdisciplinary approach however an attempt will be made to introduce some of the relevant sociological approaches adopted by functionalists and conflict theorists. There is lot of scope for applying interdisciplinary approach as part of research which deals Soviet education system with religious institution.

**Islamic Schools and Religion during Soviets:** In pre-Soviet Muslim society, Islamic schools were maintained by means of *Vaqf* incomes and voluntary donations from private persons (*ihsan*, *Khayr-sadaqa*, *nadhr*). In order to prevent abuse, the Russian government tried to gain influence on these schools by controlling the *qadis* who were responsible for producing and renewing *vaqf* documents and for the supervisors (*ra'is*, *sadr*) of the *vaqf* properties. The local communities in their turn tried to keep their influence on the educational institutions through the local *vaqf* administrators (*mutavali*).

The teaching staff (*muktab-dar*, *mullah*, *qari*, *mudaris*, *akhumd*, *ustadh*) organized the educational process in an autonomous fashion. The *shaykhal-islam*, formally the highest religious functionary, barely exercised any control over the quality and methods of teaching. At the beginning, *maktab* pupils had to acquire skills in reading and reciting the Quran by memorizing at least on seventh of the Quran (*Haft-i-yak*). The majority of pupils did not go beyond this level. More talented pupils had the

opportunity to continue their studies at a madrasa, the next level of education, that offered the following disciplines: Arabic philology (*al Arabiya*), Quran studies (*ulum al Quran*), *hadith* (*ulum- al -hadith*), theological doctrine and logic (*al- aqa id walmantiq*) and Islamic law (*al fiqh*). Studies of Islamic law were largely based on the Hanafi School. Studies of hadith and theology, however presented a combination of *Hanifi* and *Shaafi* tradition.

The system of Islamic learning prevailing in Central Asia was developed mainly during the Timurid era (1370-1506). It has been preserved until the present day with only insignificant modification. Such changes included, for example, Persian and Turkic translations of the classical Arabic textbooks and a stronger differentiation of some madrassas into autonomous institutes for the training of specialized Quran readers (*qari-khana*). Philological and historical studies were also a fundamental part of the Islamic curriculum. As the essential task of these schools was the training of highly qualified Islamic functionaries (*mullas, ulama*), the educational system did not include any genuinely secular disciplines<sup>1</sup>.

Uzbekistan became thus an important Islamic Centre for having produced the theologian of world reputed A1- Bukhari and A1-Tirmizi in addition to such Sufi scholars as Bahauddin Naqashbandi, the founder of the naqshbandi order of Sufism<sup>2</sup>. Here the *Ulema* (Muslim Clergy) had a dominating role in the society as Islamic laws governed the state.

**Changes in Religious Practices after October Revolution:** By 1917, the native Muslim population in Turkestan could choose between three types of schools: i. Maktabs and Madrassas following the old teaching methods. ii. *Jadid* schools applying new teaching methods that combined religious and secular elements and iii. Secular Russian native schools. The traditional Islamic schools still enjoyed the highest popularity among the Muslim population<sup>3</sup>. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the *usul-i-jadid* reform movement reached Turkestan. Initially the *jadids* demanded educational reforms that would merge traditional values with European school model. *Jadidi* reformers tried to establish new, innovative schools in opposition to the traditional institutions. Compared with the majority of conservative inhabitants, however, the total number of *Jadidi* activists was not very large. Nevertheless, maktabs that applied new teaching methods soon held a significant position in the educational system and provided a realistic alternative to the secular Russian native schools and the Soviet schools that were opened after October 1917.

After the revolution of 1917, the urge for freedom had become very strong all over the Russian Empire. However, each of the three Central Asian states (the Turkistan *Krai* and the two former Russian protectorates, the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva) developed along different lines. In 1920, the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva were also transformed into soviet republics. These three entities were

merged into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924. The Uzbek SSR existed until the end of the Soviet union in 1991. In all three political entities the institution of Islamic education shared a traditional basis and showed a number of similarities. Since October 1917, Islamic schools had to respond to the new political circumstances created by the rule of the Bolsheviks. They were able to hold their own under increased pressure until November 1928 when the Fourth Meeting of the Central Executive Committee of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic issued the decree on the liquidation of all old method schools and madrasas. In the following year the great majority of all old method schools in Uzbekistan was closed down. The Central government hardly exercised any control. This situation was of particular significance for the educational system which was part of the internal affairs of the respective governments. After the Islamic centres in Central Asia (Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, Kokand) had been devastated, it was the city of Tashkent that gained a dominant position. Tashkent had been the centres of the Turkestan province and became the capital of Uzbekistan in 1924. The town also became an important focus of Islamic activities. In addition to this, "unofficial Islamic education" and *Sufi* circles (*halqa*), became the most important factor of continuity in education during the years of anti-Islamic propaganda (1921-1928) and of the massive persecution of '*Ulama*'. The main aim of the anti-Islamic propagation was the elimination of Islamic spirit from the minds of the people, weakening the influence of *Ulama* in the society, developing anti-Islamic and communist values and habits and convincing the public that their salvation lay on scientific (communist) progress<sup>4</sup>.

Since the soviets had to face the Islamic world (in their foreign affairs) and also in order to establish credibility among its Muslim subjects, they presented a Soviet form of Islam. Some selected *Ulama* were recognized as the registered *Ulama* under Muslim religious boards headed by *muftis* and *sheikhs* and they were given training in recognized educational institutions. These red *Ulama* as (they were known) presented Soviet Union as just a state where all religious communities enjoyed equal rights, which was contrary to the existing reality<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, in spite of the drastic measures adopted by Soviet government to uproot the religion, Islam survived with tradition and rituals; it survived in the original form through "clandestine activities" mosques and so called unregistered *Ulama*. But there were also many vital undercurrent causes that kept Islam alive. The tenacity of religious survival in the USSR was in terms of ideological lag, external capitalist influence, the war and the above all, the neglect or inadequacy of anti-religious propaganda and the persistent activities of clerics<sup>6</sup>. The establishment of Soviet rule, particularly in the educational system, took shape during the years of the Civil War (1918-1920). During a meeting of functionaries of the departments of national education on 23 may 1920, the Turkistani People's Commissar of Education Nazir Tiurakiulov (Nadhir Turaqulov,

1892-1937) made the following statement in his report on the main tasks of communist education in Turkestan.

The Muslim society holds the ideal that people have to be loyal to the political regime. Muslims are hardworking people, submissive and devout believers. Our task is to redirect their political loyalty. It is absolutely necessary to destroy the Muslim school system, for the process of destruction has not yet come to an end<sup>7</sup>.

The development of Islamic education in the Uzbek SSR was deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of society and corresponded to the customary educational standards. The government began to cut down the development of religious education when it realized in the mid- 1920s that religious educational institutions emerged as a serious competitor to Soviet schools. The destruction of Islamic school begun in 1927-1928 when the sixth plenum of the Uzbekistan communist party (13-15 June 1927) adopted a resolution which called for various measures to weaken the spiritual directorate, to stop the reform process in Islamic schools, to eliminate Islamic schools in general by depriving them of their financial foundation and finally, to ban Islamic scholars and mullahs from teaching. During the late 1920s, the traditional system of education suffered from fundamental social restructurings. In Central Asia, the horrors of Cultural Revolution and collectivization were preceded by the land and water reform of 1927 to 1932, during which the communist tried to seize power over the entire *vaqaf* property. In addition the Bolsheviks launched the famous *hujum* campaign to “liberate” women by unveiling them by force<sup>8</sup>. The Soviet state was applying every possible method to launch the final attack on religion.

**Religious Practices after Independence:** After obtaining state sovereignty, the young state of Uzbekistan attempted to formulate its own religious policy. Two major tasks had to be accomplished. In the first place it was essential to reorganize the existing executive structures. These had, until then, acted on the instructions of higher ranking authorities and were now able to take control over their own fields. Second it was necessary to regain control of the instable situation that had arisen out of the perestroika and the dissolution of Soviet Union.

Radical Islamist groups were at the head of the political opposition. Initially the government took measures particularly against these groups. Later it began to broaden the focus of interest in order to restore order in a more general sense. The fact that all religious organizations and schools had to apply for a renewal of state registration played a very important role in this context. The number of Uzbek madrassas in 1992 amounted to more than 100 schools. Twenty of them existed under the immediate jurisdiction of the Directorate of Muslims in Uzbekistan as a legal successor to SADUM (The Autonomous Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in Central Asia and Kazakhstan which was founded on 31 July 1943)<sup>9</sup>. Other schools were later considered not complying with Uzbek educational

standards and were closed. Many madrassas were closed in 1998 in the course of registration formalities. Their list gives a good impression about the development of Islamic education in the first years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. Many madrassas did not have any didactical materials. Most of the teachers were not graduate specialists but well educated religious scholars. In contrast to the Soviet madrassas, the new Islamic schools mainly concentrated on the teaching of religious contents. A great diversity of opinions existed among their teachers and students. The Uzbek government sought to oppose fundamentalism and Islamism at the madrassas. For a certain period the authorities were trying to use the “humanitarian spirit” of Sufism for these proposes<sup>11</sup>. Female teachers launched extraordinary activities especially with regard to the Islamic education of young girls. These women managed to gather large numbers of girls in their auditoria<sup>12</sup>.

Religious policy in post-Soviet Uzbekistan mainly follows two principles: i. The republic of Uzbekistan is a secular state ii. Religious policy is based on tolerance, i.e. the government establishes equal relationships to all religions and tries to develop a productive cooperation with them<sup>13</sup>. Muslims of course form the major community in Uzbekistan and make up 90% of the population. In 2003 there were 2119 legally registered religious organizations in Uzbekistan. The largest of them are the Directorate of Muslims in Uzbekistan (UMU), the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Tashkent and Central Asia, the Baptist church, the Roman-Catholic Church, the Church of the Complete Gospel, and the bible Society of Uzbekistan. There are 1940 mosques, 168 Christian churches, seven Jewish synagogues, seven Baha’i societies, two Krishna societies and one Buddhist temple. Thirteen religious educational institutions have obtained state registration have obtained state registration, including one Islamic institute, ten madrassas, one Russian Orthodox and one Protestant seminary<sup>14</sup>.

The government took many measures to keep the religious organizations under reinforced state surveillance<sup>15</sup>. The juridical reinforcement brought about a more rigorous registration process for religious communities (congregations), with more documents required and more agencies involved; for instance, the establishment of a religious organization now requires the signatures of not less than one hundred citizens of age. Based on the idea of a secular state, religious education is strictly prohibited in state schools. At the same time however it is also banned in private; the *hujr as*, which had safeguarded a minimum of independent Islamic education in the Soviet era, are again prohibited. Muslim communities who intend to open a religious school have to first apply to UMU, which after scrutinizing the proposal, then submits it to the Committee for Religious Affairs, where a special *kollegiia* comprising several ministries and organs deals with it. Teachers of religious contents must have completed a religious education; accordingly most mullahs and scholars from the *hujra* milieu who lack state diplomas are formally excluded from teaching.

Teaching religion to underage persons is prohibited as well and students of religious education must have completed a secular general secondary education. Accordingly there is no way for the development of a religious secondary educational system. In addition, the import of Islamic literature from abroad requires scrutiny by an official expert report. Mosques that are classified as “objects of cultural heritage” are kept as property of the state, which can be provided to religious communities on a contractual basis<sup>16</sup>.

In the course of these developments the government a multi-layered hierarchy of state officials and institutions authorized to implement the national policies in the field of religion: i. The President’s Counsellor for Religious Affairs: Since 1995, the administrative structures of the Counsellor for Religious Affairs are incorporated into the apparatus of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Religious issues were previously in the competence of various departments, including the department for culture and human resources department. Between 1991 and 1993, a section of Religious Affairs worked within the presidential apparatus as a sub unit of the State Service of the President’s Counsellor for International Affairs<sup>17</sup>. ii. Committee for Religious Affairs is under the jurisdiction of the Uzbek Council of Ministers and represents the second link in the official set up of institutions. it had been taken from the old state apparatus and transformed into a new institution on the basis of the presidential decree of 7 March 1992. The Committee is subdivided into the following administrative units: a) department for cooperation with Muslim organizations; b) department for cooperation with other religious groups; c) department of religious education d) department of international relations e) accounts department. The committee carries out consulting and monitoring functions. It produces specialists’ reports and takes control measures. The Committee’s responsibilities were continuously broadened. Further amendments were introduced by the council of ministers on 27 January 1995. The committee is involved in the process of state registration of religious schools and universities. Furthermore the competences of the committee now compromise the monitoring of religious organizations, communities, religious educational institutions and religious publishing house. It was authorized to require information from the religious organizations and has the right to participate in their conferences and other events. It also organizes the *hajj* and ‘*umrapil*’ pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina and issues export reports on religious literature to be published in Uzbekistan<sup>18</sup>. iii. Local Departments: Both the ministry of Justice and the local administrations (Uzb. *hakimiyat*) in the *oblast’s* (*vilayat*) and *raions*(*tuman*) have their own departments for religious affairs which carry out the actual registration of religious organizations. These departments closely cooperate with the committee and other authorities<sup>19</sup>.

State run schools and universities in Uzbekistan stress the absolutely secular character of education in general, and there are no courses based on confessional bases. Currently, a

standardized national system is being elaborated, which is to provide equal religious education for all levels of society. On the basis of national (Uzbek) and spiritual (Islamic) values, the methodical textbook “Book of Ethics” (*odob-nama, adabnama*) has been drawn up which is being tested in preparatory pre-schools and is taught only in Uzbek. Early forms of religious faith (Shamanism, animism, mythologies etc.) and national religions (Judaism, Hinduism, etc. and Islam is being taught at primary to middle level in schools. Teaching of religious history focuses on special role of Uzbekistan in the history of Zoroastrism, Buddhism and Islam.

Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan maintains a collection of manuscripts and documents in Arabic graphic. The total quantity comprises some 30,000 archival units<sup>21</sup>. The Institute of Historical Studies (Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan) aims at becoming the Central academic institution coordinating research on the entire history of Uzbekistan. Islamic studies are incorporated into research on the history of Uzbekistan<sup>22</sup>. The Institute of Strategic and Inter Regional Studies is integrated into the political apparatus of the president of Uzbekistan. It conducts research on religion and Islam with emphasis on contemporary studies. *Ijtima’ifikr* is an opinion research institute which carries out sociological surveys in Uzbekistan. One of its publications deals with the level of religiousness among the people of Uzbekistan. The International Foundation of Imam Al-Bukhari which was restructured in 2003 into the Republican Research Centre of Imam Al-Bukhari, based on a presidential decree of 17 August On the future protection and development of the memorial complex of imam al Bukhari exploring and spreading the cultural heritage of the great ancestor<sup>23</sup>.

## Conclusion

Religion in Uzbekistan suffered drastic changes in the region. The fascination for religion has been growing particularly among the youth. When the soviet union disintegration number of mosques began to increase, due to reopening of old mosques which were closed during Soviet period and construction of new mosques. The government encouraged religious education and opened religious schools (*maktabs*). In spite of this present government passes certain laws like “The law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” which restricts religious freedom in real sense.

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