State, Society and Islam in Central Asia: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Guest Editors’ Introduction

This special issue of the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs features selected research papers with an emphasis on Central Asia—a region generally defined as the five post-Communist states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, plus Afghanistan and China’s northwest province of Xinjiang, wherein aside from millions of Han Chinese, close to eight million ethnic Turkic Muslims, most commonly referred to as Uighur, also reside. Based on this geographical designation, therefore, Central Asia encompasses a massive territory—estimated at 6.3 million km²—consisting of six states and a large province of another, and a total population nearing 100 million people. Our focus on Central Asia is all the more significant given the region’s problematic political climate, wherein instability and various degrees of dictatorial and authoritarian rule has been the norm for much of the region; and potentially extremist Islamist groups have taken footholds; where there is a widening intra- and inter-state income gap; and where natural resources (of petroleum, natural gas, cotton, gold, silver, and other minerals) are increasingly becoming sources of interest for rich consuming nations. The general interest in the region and the relative shortage of information and facts coming out from Central Asia also makes the focus of this special issue to be of importance.

The Collection

This special issue includes eight papers from authors who had presented the original versions at two scholarly conferences in the United States last year: “The Middle East & Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference” at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, 8–10 September 2005; and “The Central Eurasian Studies Society, Sixth Annual Conference” at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 29 September–2 October 2005.

In the lead article Meghan Simpson surveys the phenomena of women’s organizing in Central Asia and analyzes it on the basis of a balanced and highly complex theoretical study she conducted on gender politics and the globalization of women’s organizations in the region. Simpson based her analysis on the field work she conducted for two case studies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Simpson uses the term “globalizing gender politics”, identifying it as a “growing presence of gender in the discourses and practices” of domestic and regional actors, including the flourishing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society entities, involved with international development projects. She carefully dissects the stereotypes and assumptions—established a la “orientalism”—through which Western observers have often viewed the activities of the post-Communist East. She focuses on the “processes of localization” to alleviate
wrongfully held general assumptions, and what she labels as the “uncritical” taking up of
gender politics by the mainstream, of women’s groups and various forms of women’s
organizing in Central Asia. A critical analysis of the issue, she posits, would both focus
on the chasm of gender inequity in decision making in Central Asian societies and
grant ample focus on grassroots, traditional, and often informal—and non-Western—
community organizing where local women have played significant parts, such as the
ubiquitous mahalla entities.

The hardships encountered by a minority community are brought to our attention by
Malika Mirkhanova as she surveys the life and experiences of the Meskhetian Turks
(Akhyskha Turkleri) of the former Soviet Union. The author points out that the origins
of the Meskhetian Turks go back centuries, and that they may have been Georgian Chris-
tians who converted to Islam and adopted the Turkish language, or they may have been
part of the original Turkic tribes that settled in the Anatolian Plateau and the Caucasus.
No matter what the accurate ancient history of the Meskhetians may be, what is known is
that in contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century history, the Meskhetians have
endured much hardship, discrimination and violations of their basic human rights that
began with the Stalinist purges and exile—which took away nearly all of their wealth
and tens of thousands of surviving members from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944.
This was followed by ethnic conflict in one of their adopted homelands (Uzbekistan’s
side of the Fergana Valley in 1989) where tens, perhaps hundreds, were reportedly
slaughtered ironically by other Muslim, Turkic-speaking Central Asians, and later suf-
f ered subtle and outright discrimination in yet another relocated home, that of the
region of Krasnodar in post-Communist Russia. For her qualitative study, Mirkhanova
interviewed several households of ethnic Meskhetians who have settled, of all places,
in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, and have retold their personal accounts and what they
remember from their forefathers, and their long plight for simple existence among
fellow beings, Muslim, Christian, or otherwise. Mirkhanova concludes that, as with
nearly all other minorities persecuted by majority rule worldwide, “the hardships of
the Meskhetian Turks are derived from social and political conditions not of their
making”. We comprehend from Mirkhanova’s important study that atrocities experi-
enced by minority groups, such as the Meskhetians, take place at times of economic
and/or political crises (such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the ongoing economic
hardships encountered by millions living in the post-Communist space), particularly
in places where local and national governments are highly corrupt and the rule of law
is de facto nonexistent or selective when enforced.

Three contributions in this issue enhance our understanding of the Xinjiang region. In
the first paper, Jennifer Taynen delves into a fascinating analysis of ethnicity and ethnic
politics within and between the major ethnic groups in China’s Xinjiang Uighur
Autonomous Region. Having lived and worked at the heart of the region, in the
ancient city of Urumqi, for two years, Taynen sees distinctions emerging within the
main non-Chinese population of Xinjiang, the ethnic Uighur community, who thanks
to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) skewed emigration and discriminatory
ethnic policies, now constitute a minority in their own motherland. She dissects
the peculiarities—cultural, psychological, political, and particularly lingual and
educational—of the Uighur, comparing two prototypes: the Min kao Min, those who
are schooled and communicate easily in the Uighur language, and the Min kao Han,
the growing minority of Uighurs who have been increasingly “sinofied”, attending
Han schools, communicating primarily in Chinese, and often living and co-mingling
mainly within the Han community. Aside from interesting anecdotal evidence of the
distinctions between the two prototypical groups, Taynen concludes that the factors of globalization (a.k.a. Westernization), the rising numbers of Han immigrants in Xinjiang, and the impending CCP educational reforms that are expected to de facto ban the teaching of Uighur language (already eliminated from the tertiary education system) from all levels of education in Xinjiang, to be highly instrumental in determining the future role of the Min kao Han. Taynen claims that though the ultimate place of the Min kao Han will likely be determined by an interaction of the said factors, the future of both inter- and intra-ethnic relations in Xinjiang is still not fully determined, with the Min kao Han’s future lying anywhere in the spectrum ranging from a leadership position among the general Uighur population; to a threat to the Chinese majority, “pawns who remain external and of little significance to the main [Sino-Uighur] conflict”; or even to become a potential tool for Sino-Uighur reconciliation.

Kristian Petersen provides us with an analysis of cyber-nationalism, mainly that of the Uighur diaspora established in the West. Among them, there have appeared a series of websites devoted to Uighur or East Turkistan nationalism, many calling for outright independence from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Petersen correctly concludes that the use of the Internet for nationalistic purposes has resulted in the reification of the Uighur identity. More importantly, he cautions that the various websites and their subjective information, important as they may be, may not provide a proper record of Uighur public opinion within Xinjiang. Whereas the Uighur cyber-leadership, for example, is generally calling for eventual and outright independence for Xinjiang and its supposed “homogenous” non-Han Turkic population, and whereas it has used cyberspace as a post-modern tool of an imagined community of Uighur nationalism, the reality may be that of a non-homogenous population, which nevertheless rightly seeks autonomy, increased cultural freedoms, and respect for its fundamental human rights, but not necessarily secession from China.

Eric Hyer has conducted a survey of China’s policy towards Uighur nationalism. Chinese policy on this issue, according to Hyer, has been multifarious: on the one hand it has attempted to suppress any call for greater autonomy, which it views as being synonymous to an outright demand for secession; on the other, in recent years, with the establishment of the so called “Shanghai-Six” forum—made up of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—China has begun a regional security club to fight what it perceives as the “three evils” of “separatism, extremism, and terrorism”, all being issues that, to a variety of degrees, Central Asian states and Russia also have their own concerns about. Furthermore, due to its insatiable appetite for energy and a need to forge expanding regional economic links, China is viewing Central Asia—especially the petrol-rich state of Kazakhstan—as a region of opportunity that it finds of interest to influence. Needless to say, China’s interest in the region has raised regional and global eyebrows, notably Russia and the USA—and likely India as well. With regards to Uighur nationalism and China’s interests in Central Asia, Hyer brings a fascinating quote from a Chinese scholar that succinctly sums up Chinese interests and also dilemma: “[E]ither way we lose. If the Central Asian states fall apart, chaos spreads to China. If they manage to survive, Chinese minorities say, “Look, it works there. Why can’t we have a state of our own?” Thus, despite China’s brutal methods of suppressing dissent, including the persecution of Uighur nationalists, one thing that is clear is that it seeks secure relations with its neighbours and is not interested in instability in its bordering republics; and yet, success of China’s post-Soviet republics which were created on warped Stalinist imaginary ethnic boundaries, will also pose as “demonstration effect” for China’s own ethnic
minorities, whose sense of nationalism is likely to increase, rather than subside, in the coming years.

In one of the three papers focusing on Uzbekistan and the neighbouring region, Jason Strakes posits a theoretical model in determining the sources of political management in post-Communist Central Asia, those of elite control over natural resources (primarily petroleum, natural gas, and cotton fibre) which serve as sources of capital and cooption of the populace and interest groups; and the presence of informal social organizations based primarily on kinship ties and allegiance to local authorities, which assist the structuring of political association working as intermediaries between the state and the normally disparate multi-ethnic populations of Central Asian states. Strakes picks the three Central Asian cases of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, all petrol-rich states (as opposed to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which in their present conditions can be categorized as hydro-rich). He finds differences in the degree to which the independent variables of natural resource endowment and informal social structures serve as determinants for strength of political management. Among his three case studies, Strakes finds today’s Kazakh leadership as having the most success in establishing a concrete national identity, the Uzbek leadership resorting to violent repression, and the Turkmen state relying on a highly artificial nationalism, one with unlikely sustainable long-term prospects.

Vera Exnerova provides an analysis of the reasons for the survival of religious (Muslim) traditions in Central Asia, despite nearly seven decades of Communist rule. Exnerova conducted a study of Soviet Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley for the period 1930s through 1980s using archival material from both Russia and Uzbekistan. She tells us why local authorities in Uzbekistan—as in nearly all of Central Asia, were relied upon by Moscow to enforce Soviet anti-religious and atheistic regulations—were generally unsuccessful in their haphazard efforts. Exnerova’s essay is evidence that the pull of the local and traditional, the mahalla, and the syncretic Islamic norms and rituals practiced in Central Asia have been far stronger than that of the Soviet-imposed ideal of atheism and international Communism. Exnerova’s work confirms what S. Enders Wimbush had stated several years prior to the dissolution of the USSR: “common sense suggests that fourteen centuries of brilliant Irano-Turkic-Islamic culture cannot be quickly swept away by sixty-eight years of Russian-dominated Marxist–Leninist pseudo-culture.” Exnerova argues that aside from the attempt of the imposition of Soviet anti-religious policies in Central Asia, other important processes of demographic changes—in the form of a massive increase in the numbers of Central Asian Muslims as opposed to the emigrating Slavic population—were taking place, which in addition to socioeconomic challenges facing the region may well present a better understanding of the enduring influence of Islam and traditionalism in Soviet—and post-Soviet—Central Asia.

In a related theme, Didier Chaudet poses a critical question of concern to those interested in the whys and hows of the spread of extremist religious ideology, including terrorism and state violence. He asks: “Is Hizb ut-Tahrir an Islamist Threat to Central Asia?” Chaudet’s paper sheds light on the understudied theme of religious extremism in the post-Communist space. He gives us a brief historical background on the origins of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation, HT) and dissects the reasons for the attractiveness of the Party to at least a segment of the population in the region. He reminds us that the phenomenon of Islamism and religious extremism is often simplified in the minds of the leaders of the transitional states of Central Asia, Western policy makers, and many students and scholars of the region. After the events of September 11 2001,
Chaudet contends, the “complexity of Islamism, the multiple causes of the insurgency and terrorism in Iraq, the roots of Muslim unrest, all factors that could result in a more complex analysis were avoided” by many scholars and researchers. He uses a process of elimination to analyze the impact and role of HT in Central Asia, pointing out that aside from HT, other currently viable forms of Islamisms in the region are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant organization that made headline news in the Autumn of 2000 when its armed members took three American mountain climbers and later four Japanese geologists hostage in southern Kyrgyzstan; and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), a bona fide political organization in Tajikistan, which once fought a nasty civil war against remnants of the Tajik Soviet sympathizers (who continue to run the country today), a conflict that took over 50,000 lives. Chaudet argues that, as opposed to HT, the IMU lacks sufficient ideological base, an element required for long-term success and organizational consolidation. By the end of the 1990s, however, writes Chaudet, “the ‘theoretical’ branch of IMU [was] put aside in favour of the branch that was more jihadist and less inclined to intellectual or political thought and ideological complexities”. HT, on the other hand, is today composed of a “system of beliefs or ideology, which provides simple answers to complex questions”. Furthermore, as opposed to the IRP, which is a “national” political organization functioning solely in Tajikistan, HT is a pan-Central Asian and multinational organization vying to eventually form an ideal Islamic state in the region run by the Caliphate.

Chaudet agrees with the general posit that HT can indeed pose an extremist and violent Islamist threat in Central Asia, but he cautions that such a threat can be a self-fulfilling prophecy given the fact that at the time being HT is still a non-violent group. However, it is possible that with the Central Asian governments’ hostility towards suspected Islamist activists, and the chronic economic woes still facing a large segment of an increasingly young Central Asian population, HT’s practice of non-violence may eventually change.

NOTES

1. Please note that the spelling “Uighur” appears to be more commonly used than “Uyghur”, thus “Uighur” has been used throughout this issue of the journal, except where “Uyghur” is part of a direct quote or is from the title of a specific source or from the name of an organization.

Map of Central Asia