

Religious extremism and factors influencing its rise in central Asia

Sania Makna

PhD. Research Scholar, Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Religious Extremism in Central Asian Republics has been a major problem since their independence after Soviet collapse. Soviet disintegration led to poor economic and social condition of Central Asian Republics and therefore, the problem of religious extremism arose out of such insecurities. There are numerous factors which played role in the growth of religious extremism in Central Asia. The major factor was the disintegration of Soviet Union including others such as Authoritarian politics, Islamic identity, Tajik Civil War, Ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: religious extremism, soviet dissolution, Tajik civil war, ethnic conflicts

Introduction

Central Asia after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 was fearful of its future. The poor economic and social condition of Central Asia led to find out the solution through politicization of Islam and Religious Extremism. The leaders of the countries abandon Marxism-Leninism and found alternative sources of legitimacy for their rule. As after the collapse of Soviet Union leaders in Central Asia were not removed by popular rebellion except Nabyev in Tajikistan, who was ousted in 1992. Thus to retain the power the leaders of Central Asian nations took tentative attempts to embrace Islam, but afterwards political elites came to view religion as a destabilizing force with a cross-border appeal which could challenge their position of power. Therefore leaders tried to reclaim nationalism, even though it often meant the invention not only of tradition but of written language as well. Nationalism was also considered as a flexible ideology which allowed leaders to maintain their autocratic rule to preserve public order and state sovereignty. As there are many ethnic communities in Central Asia due to their uneven border division by Soviet Russia, nationalism in Central Asia is of negligible value but political Islam is very prominent in the region. Thus the Soviet attempt to create Soviet person (Sovetskii Chelovek), someone devoted to the Soviet Union and Socialism and not to one's nation was failed and for Central Asia Religion became the most important priority for collective identity as well as to improve the living standards of people. (Mike Bowker, 2007) [2].

Factors Influencing Rise of Religious Extremism in Central Asia

Before knowing the extent and influence and causes of Religious Extremism, definition of Religious Extremism will make understanding better. Religious Extremism can be defined as the religious movement or the view adopted by some group of persons by a return to fundamental principles by a rigid adherence to those principles, and often intolerance to other views and opposition to secularism. It creates a problem of terrorism. Terrorism

used by these Extremists is a particular type of violence, stemming from extremist thinking. It has specific characteristics such as

- It is premeditated and designed to create a climate of extreme fear.
- It involves attacks on random or symbolic targets, including civilians.
- It is meant to influence the political behavior of governments and other political actors.

Thus there is a common view that the perpetrators of terrorism are mostly religious fanatics and thus use religion to justify their actions. Theoretical explanations of Religious Extremism and terrorism leads to the outcome of deep frustrations resulting from social, economic deprivations combined with dissatisfaction with a lack of opportunity for political change. Moreover there is more possibility of Religious Extremism and terrorism when political system is undemocratic, prevents change, prohibits criticism in the mass media, and violates basic human rights, such as the freedom of speech and assembly. In such cases, extremists use fundamental principles of religion to attract an increasing number of followers as they appear to be void of political interests and serve the whole community. Thus economic and political unresolved grievances and social conflicts remain the root cause (IMS, Adil Soz, 2008) [5].

Major factors influencing the role of religious extremism in central Asia

- Collapse of Soviet Union and formation of statehood in Central Asia - the problem of Religious Extremism and terrorism can be better understood through formation of statehood in Central Asia after Soviet collapse. The Islamic revival is thus a grassroots movement as nonstate groupings asserting their pressure in the public realm. Moreover the significance of the changes in relation between the religion and the state and relation between the religion and the discourses of national identity since the collapse of Soviet Union is considerable for the growth of Religious extremism in Central Asia.

As independence came as a surprise to Central Asia therefore the Soviet Republics became sovereign states overnight which created responsibility on the part of these newly independent nations to create a new political and economic system for their nations. Thus the leaders while making the transition appealed to the idea of national identities to become independent nations. This was termed as “nationalizing regimes”. All these nations adopted Islam as their national identity as they considered themselves to be the part of Muslim culture because of their historical past. In Uzbekistan, president Islam Karimov presented himself as the leader of the state who promised to build a great Uzbekistan in the future. Independent Uzbekistan carried a great tradition of “Uzbek statehood” whose roots lie in the past of Temur conquest and he has been turned into the father of nation. Uzbek state tradition also celebrated as golden heritage where Islam is the significant part, and the ruling elite moved quickly to claim the re-Islamization of the country. Moreover Islam became the major part of culture and traditions in Uzbekistan Sufism had been adopted as an example of humanist tradition. Hajj was also sponsored officially, President Karimov himself travelled to Mecca.

On the other hand in Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov had adopted different as instead of celebrating continuous tradition of statehood, the regimes celebrates the tribal tradition of Turkmen people. He had taken the title as “Turkmenbashi” which means head of the Turkmen tribes. The personality of Niyazov is considered to be the same as Stalin. According to him, Islam has a certain place as an aspect of Turkmen history, but since Turkmen identity is supposed to predate Islam therefore it is not central. (Adeeb Khalid, 2004) ^[7].

Whereas the notion of national identity and statehood in case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was interrupted by the existence of Russian Minorities which were a great task for the political leaders to accommodate them which in turn needed support or union from Russian federation. Thus the regime in Kazakhstan had tried to turn the shrine of Ahmet Yesevi, the great sufi master, founder of the Yesevi order in Turkistan, into a pan-Turkic icon, but officially Islamic symbols and figures are used limited.

The case of Tajikistan seeks more attention as the country suffered from civil war between 1992 and 1997. It was only bloody conflict in Central Asia after the collapse of Soviet Union. The war was highly destructive in nature for the country like Tajik which was already very weak economically. Two groups were formed, labeled as “communists “and Islamists” which led many people to believe that “Religious Extremism” had arrived in Central Asia. The Islamists were supported by the local Mullahs. Moreover Tajik society was also converting themselves into Muslims, regardless of the fact of positioning and consequences of the civil war. Civil war ended in 1997 when a peace accord was attained by giving the Islamists a share in power.

Thus, all Central Asian states gone through the process of revolution which compelled them to adopt Islam as their national identity in order to look different from Russia and the West. Later on this Islamic identity started posing threat to these nations and therefore leaders are trying to

keep it aloof from the political culture and adopted authoritarian regime to suppress the Religion Politics, Which in turn became more serious threat for the growth of Religious extremism. Thus the statehood became very significant in the growth of Religious extremism in Central Asia.

- Civil war in Tajikistan was another factor or cause for the growth of Religious Extremism in Central Asia. The bloody civil war in Tajik was the region’s first experience of a homegrown Islamist movement to suppress political power. Due to the war many people died and many fled from the country. The war brought the various strands of Central Asian Islam by the homegrown Mullahs. These were the unofficial clergy who remained underground during Soviet period and the registered clergy of official Islam and the younger generation who were inspired by the Afghanistan war and Islamic-Tajik nationalism. This unique combination led to the revival of Islam in Central Asia and became the Islamist cause after 1991 which shocked other Central Asian leaders. The major spiritual guide for this revival was Muhammad Rustamov Hindustani who studied in India and later opened a hidden Madrassa in Dushande in the 1970s. The Tajik Islamism was operated through a party known as Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which got set up in 1990 in Russia largely by tartar intellectuals who aimed to organize the Muslims in Soviet Union and campaign for Islamic law. (Ahmed Rashid, 2001) ^[6].
- The political and economic weakness in Central Asian states: - the Central Asian countries were so much exploited by external invasions that they were made politically, economically and socially weak. During the Soviet invasion these nations were totally dependent on Soviet economy but after its breakup they were left all alone to stand again on their feet. Having least idea about politics these states adopted Muslim identity and then to suppress ethnic minorities adopted authoritarian regimes which became the root for Religious Extremism.
- Popular Islam: - this is another strand of Islam in Central Asia; it is not taught in madras’s or practiced by Sufis rather this Islam is observed mostly in pilgrimages that people take to shrines. The most popular pilgrimages are to the tombs of revered Sufi masters that developed into famous shrines. The most popular pilgrimage destination is in Solomon’s mountain in the city of Osh, in Kyrgyzstan, contains several shrines such as caves, springs and trees that are believed to help cure illness or infertility. All these practices of worshipping God are taught there and in this way popular Islam had impact not only on religious beliefs of the people but also on social structure.
- Islamists movements: - the suppressed Islam in Soviet Era got revived during its breakup which caused many islamist movements to practice in Central Asia for the revival of Islam to achieve their political and economic ends. The most salient current issue pertaining to Islam in Central Asia is the role of Islamists movements and the reactions of governments

to them. Although there are several Islamist group that have been active in the region but the most influential are – Islamic Renaissance Party or sometimes called as Islamic Rebirth Party, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

- Influence of Neighboring Muslim countries: - After the independence of Central Asian nations some of the majority-Muslims states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey started financing the projects in Central Asia to influence the form that Islam would take in the region. All these countries distributed copies of Qur'an, build mosques and subsidized pilgrims on Hajj and education.

All the above factors led to the growth of religious extremism in Central Asia. These factors are very much responsible for spread of religious terrorism.

Stages of Development of Religious Extremism in Central Asia

The different religious organizations played very important role in the development of religious extremism and terrorism throughout Central Asia and especially in Tajikistan. These activities went through various stages which led to the development of various terrorist activities in Central Asia.

1992-1994-it was the first stage of development of religious extremism in Central Asia. During this period, the beginning of the civil war and the period of active operations in central and south Tajikistan. This period brought the formation of numerous terrorist cells in Tajik and establishment of training camps for terrorist associated activities. The number of terrorists and terrorist trainers were well into thousands. During this time, especially complicated operations were undertaken by using the services of professional terrorist from abroad. Most of the foreign terrorists were from Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. It was 40 to 50% terrorist forces working against governments at that time. The key terrorist groups were:-

1. Tajik Islamist who had been trained through the facilities of international Islamic terrorist organizations
2. Professional terrorists who arrived in Tajikistan from Islamic countries to conduct what they saw as a 'jihad' against secular government.

1994 to 1996:- the second stage began with peace negotiations were signed between the President Sh. Rakhmonov and the U TO leader Mullo Abdullo. The key strategies and tactics of terrorist groups were developed during this time. Communication, reconnaissance, rapid deployment and logistics systems were created and well equipped bases, utilizing those systems were established. Underground cells were formed in the territories under the control of Tajik government (S. Saleem Ahmed, 2004) ^[4]. These terrorist cells in the region worked to intimidate the civilian population and destabilize the political and economic situation and kill military servicemen and border guards. These cells were located in Kofarnikhon district and later on the network divided into two main groups and relocated to the city of Dushande. The groups set up many explosions in 1996 even on the life of President as well as on others. These

terrorist actions led many people to die. In the similar manner from 1996 to 1998 until present the terrorist groups had broaden their influence in the region. Thus Tajik is the country which became the root or base for terrorist activities among other republics of Central Asia. Tajik and Uzbeks were the first to get influenced by religious activities than Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen. Simultaneously these three also came under the influence of religious extremism and terrorist activities. Slowly and slowly these republics became the major playground for terrorist activities in Central Asia.

Fergana Valley the Core Region for Religious Extremism

The Fergana valley is very important region to mention for the growth of religious extremism in Central Asia. It has always been the most religious region which has radical islamists on the increase. Today, it is the educational centre for religious fundamentalists. Most of the Central Asia's religious figures are still in the proselytizing phase which means they are more interested in training new clerics and increasing the level of religious learning among the population than in getting the laws of society to conform to those of Islam. "First Fergana, the Uzkeistan, and then the whole Central Asia will become an Islamic state", said Imam Abdul Ahmed in Namangan. Imams said their aim was to overthrow the communist government of Karimov and spread an Islamic revolution throughout Central Asia. Fergana valley is the fertile ground for radical extremists for expansion. Pakistan, whose track record of support for religious extremism and fundamentalism, international terrorism and armed subversion have become an important component of its regional strategy, used this opportunity through its latest manifestation- Taliban. Apart from their destructive activities, they carried out silent war of subversion and infiltration in the republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Poonam Mann, 2008) ^[3].

Uzbekistan contains the vast majority of Fergana Valley and its entire peninsular like projection locates it in Kyrgyzstan which is fertile land. From there the valley comes across the Tajik peninsula that juts in between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. At that point the valley then cuts sharply north back across Uzbekistan Territory. Kyrgyzstan connects to the valley along the edges therefore its sovereign territory swoops under the Uzbek and Tajik peninsulas and frame the outer eastern and the southern edges of the Fergana. Thus its geographical location creates political chaos. To this day radical Islamists criminal groups have taken advantage of this geographical location in order to evade the law and maintain relative independence. It is the path or ability to migrate freely with the lack of jurisdictional oversight in each state domestically that makes the Fergana Valley more attractive to radical Islamist groups who find themselves adjacent to the valley from Neighboring Iran, Afghanistan and Western China. The valley is packed tightly with Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz population. In total Fergana is home to 10 million people of different regions and the valley is quite small in comparison to population. There was demographic explosion in 1970 and 80s across all over the Central Asian states but within the Fergana

particular. This led to the loss of economy which affected the youth population by unemployment and lack of economic mobility. And due to this reason Fergana Valley became home to many religious Muslims than any other part of Central Asia and by the early 1990s the problem of overpopulation, unemployment and religious identification made religious extremists' thought to influence across the valley.

The most dominant form was Wahhabism, where Saudi Arabia propaganda and finances eagerly jumped into the ideological vacuum that emerged immediately after the fall of Soviet Union. It was during this period that Islamic revival blossomed across the region. Dozens of mosques and madras's were built. Thus Fergana valley always remained the prompt region for the growth of religious extremism. Moreover the organization like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan emerged out of the city of Namangan, one of the main Fergana Valley's cities in Uzbekistan. (Matthew Crosston, 2006) ^[1].

Conclusion

The demise of Soviet Union led Central Asian republics on their destiny and the sudden independence at their doors brought new challenges for them. During Soviet dissolution, the newly independent Central Asian countries stood again on their feet and revived their new political, social and economic structures. The Central Asian republics adopted Islamic identity as their national identity in order to counter Soviet ideology and sudden independence. The republics had no idea of politics and economy as earlier they were completely dependent on Soviet Union. All such factors became responsible for the growth of religious extremism in Central Asia.

References

1. Mathew Crosston, "*Fostering Fundamentalism: Terrorism Democracy and American Engagement in Central Asia*", Ashgate Publishers, England, 2006; 38-48.
2. Mike Bowker, "*Russia, America and the Islamic World*", Asghate Publishers, England, 2007; 145-147.
3. Poonam Mann, "Religious Extremism in Central Asia", *Strategic Analysis Journal*, Routledge Publishers, England, 2008; 1031-1032, 1032-1036.
4. Saleem Ahmed S. "Dimensions of Terrorism and Religious Extremism: Two sides of the same coin", ed in "*International Terrorism and Religious Extremism: Challenges to Central and South Asia*", by Mahavir Singh, Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 2004; 46-49, 51-54.
5. Adil Soz, "Political Extremism, Terrorism, and Media in Central Asia", A Report by International Media Support (IMS), Copenhagen, 2008.
6. Ahmed Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia", *World Policy Journal*, 2001; 18:49-51, 52-54.
7. Adeeb Khalid, "Islam in Contemporary Central Asia", ed in "*Islam in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*", by R.M. Feener, Santa Barbara Publishers, California, 2004; 147-152.