

## State Response to Religious Revivalism in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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### **Abstract**

*After gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, the Islamic heritage of the Central Asian Republics became an alternative ideology to fill the political and social vacuum. Islam gradually started to take its place on the social scene following Gorbachev's Glasnost, as it partially eased the communist oppression towards religious belief and expression. Religious education institutions, mosques, and other religiously affiliated organizations began to emerge. Some of these organizations steadily led their way to political parties with Islamic agendas, and politicization of Islam became a prominent reality. While religious revivalism took sway in Central Asian societies, their governments had an instrumentalist view of religion. Religious expressions were encouraged where they contribute to the goal of nation-building and legitimization of the dominant power coalitions as defined by the power holders. Yet, Central Asian governments proceeded in the opposite direction implementing oppressive policies against extra-governmental religious groups and institutions perceived as a threat. It was anticipated for the Central Asian societies to revive their Islamic heritage that has been suppressed under the Soviet regime and combine religion with nationalist sentiments as a catalyst in the nation-building process and political transition. However, the suppressive state response to this religious revivalism was unpredicted and led to prolonged conflict between state and society. This article seeks to identify the factors that explain the competing courses of the governments' push for secularization through historical institutionalism and cultural and national values approaches.*

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Secularization, Church-State Relations, Islam in Central Asia

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## Introduction

After gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, the Islamic heritage of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan - became a potential alternative to fill the political and social vacuum.<sup>1</sup> Islam gradually took prominence in society after Gorbachev's Glasnost, which relaxed the communist oppression towards religious belief and expression. Religious education institutions, mosques, and many other forms of religiously affiliated organizations started to (re-)emerge. Some of these informal organizations steadily led their way, in some countries, to political parties with Islamic agendas, in which the politicization of Islam became a prominent reality. While the Central Asian societies were undergoing these developments and religious revivalism took sway, the Central Asian governments were largely proceeding in the opposite direction and implementing anti-religious policies. It was anticipated for the Central Asian societies to revive their Islamic heritage that has been suppressed under the Soviet regime, and combine religion with nationalist sentiments as a catalyst in the nation-building process. While this process did take place to some degree, the suppressive state response to this religious revivalism and the rigorous push for secularization was both more general and unpredicted, thus leading to prolonged conflict between state and society. This article explores the factors that explain the competing courses of the governments pushing for radical secularization to control Islam.<sup>2</sup> The main focus of this study; therefore, is on identifying and discussing the key causes of the secularization process in the CARs through historical institutionalism and cultural and national values approaches. The findings suggest that authoritarian political leaderships, the institutionalized ideology of secularism (both of which are inherited from the Soviet regime), and the political interests of the leaders to trump political rivals, explain the push for rigorous secularization by the Central Asian governments.

The question of the state policies towards religion in the Central Asian context entertained in this article is important for several reasons. Religious policies of the state have direct implications on the day to day lives of millions of Muslims in the CARs and bare ramifications for human rights. Moreover, this subject is crucial from the standpoint of the overall transition of the CARs, the stability of the region, and its

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<sup>1</sup> Islam is a system of legal codes, moral principles, property rights, social justice rules, welfare policies (provision for needy citizens from state treasury). More than merely a spiritual tradition, Islam is an all-encompassing system that sets guidelines for economic, social, spiritual, political, and personal matters. Its comprehensive nature makes Islam a plausible alternative for the CARs in transition.

<sup>2</sup> Even though the term secularism takes on different meanings when used in the West, I will refer to the religious attitude of the Central Asian governments and all the suppressive religious policies as secularization since this is the umbrella term employed by the governments themselves in public rhetoric to identify state attitudes towards religion, policies... etc. In the discussion section, I will analyze the use of this term and situate the Central Asian version of secularism with the Western version.

sociopolitical repercussions that demand scrutiny. Also, a number of countries in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa and even Europe are faced with the challenging question of what the role of Islam is or should be in a democratic system. Although the issue will be discussed in the context of the CARs, the findings and arguments have broader implications and contribute to the literature on political Islam, secularization, citizenship rights, and democratization.

In order to understand why the transitional governments push for radical secularization, it is necessary to analyze institutional government structures, political leadership, the role of Islam for the Central Asian societies (and the shifts thereof), the Islamic political parties, and government responses to these parties and other religious institutions. While tracing the attitudes of the CAR governments to USSR's policies on religion, in this paper the relevant developments in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan will be compared and contrasted.

### **Research Design**

This article employs a qualitative study of multiple country cases for the purposes of theory development and hypothesis testing. While this research is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of any particular Central Asian country, it intends to provide an overall analysis of the secularization process in the socio-political context of the region. Despite the idiosyncrasies of each country, the overall patterns of social change and development show great resemblance.<sup>3</sup> I use the process-tracing method to test my hypothesis by observing and analyzing the policies and events that took place in Central Asia since independence (although I do draw on policies and events from the Soviet era). As Van Evera states, "In process tracing the investigator explores the chain of events or the decision-making process by which initial case conditions are translated into case outcomes. The cause-effect link that connects independent variable and outcome is unwrapped and divided into smaller steps; then the investigator looks for observable evidence of each step." (Van Evera 1997, 64). Even though I will analyze the contemporary phenomenon of secularization, the actual dynamics of state-building during the transition period can only be understood by looking at the past (the state-dominated social engineering policies such as secularization of the Soviet era) and identifying the causal chains. The analysis of causes of the push for secularization requires unearthing the (formal and informal) institutional structures, the forces and ideologies that drive current policy making, and

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<sup>3</sup> The variance between the attitudes of the states certainly exists and should be analyzed in greater detail in further research. However, the purpose of this study is to identify and explain the *overall* pattern in the statist push for secularization in the CARs.

the decision making process (particularly the political leadership) that leads to the current outcomes. Therefore, I trace backward the causal process by trying to infer “what caused the cause” at each stage, and seek to pinpoint the prime cause of state imposed secularization (Van Evera 1997, 70). Thus, this case study of the CARs lends itself perfectly to this methodology, and I think process-tracing is the “method of analysis best suited to the question and the data” (Weldon 2002, 25) of this particular study.

### **Theoretical Approach**

I employ two theoretical approaches to analyze the case of secularization: historical institutionalism and cultural and national values theory. I do not argue that these two approaches are *a priori* superior to other approaches employed in political science. The specific research question of this study, the available facts, and the context are best explained by combining these two approaches.

### **Cultural and National Values Theory<sup>4</sup>**

This theory states that culture (or political culture) and national values of a country account for the contemporary policy making process, state attitudes, and policy outcomes. As Castles argues, “history leaves a legacy of ideas, customs and institutions –in sum, a **culture**- that influences the present behavior of those who shape the policies of the state and those who make demands of the state.” (Castles 1993, xvi). Therefore, there is an underlying principle of cultural continuity that helps explain the unchanging nature of cultural and religious affiliations in the CARs. Moreover, Eckstein’s theory of political change accounts for the effects of radical revolutions on the culture, and this explanation fits perfectly with the dynamics of the communist rule in the CARs. He argues that even when cultures are exposed to radical forceful reforms, and as soon as these coercive factors are lifted, people return back to their cultures even stronger than before. He defines political transformation as “the use of political power and artifice to engineer radically changed social and political structures, thus culture patterns and themes: to set society and polity on new courses toward unprecedented objectives.” (Eckstein 1988, 798). This fits perfectly with the Soviet’s transformative processes that were carried out by great power and control (Eckstein 1988, 799). Eckstein outlines the outcomes of these types of social engineering projects as:

“If the conventional norms and practices of political life are disrupted by revolution, what can be put in their place? We may posit the answer that

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<sup>4</sup> For definition of culture see Eckstein 1988, Appendix, 802.

revolutionary transformation will initially be attempted by despotic or legalistic means. What, after all, can "order" societies and polities in place of conventional, internalized culture? Only brute power, or else the use of external legal prescriptions as a surrogate for internal orientational guides to behavior." (Eckstein 1988, 799)

Moreover, he argues that the long-run outcomes of these types of revolutionary transformations will "diverge considerably from revolutionary intentions and resemble more the pre-Revolutionary condition of society." (Eckstein 1988, 800). Exactly as his theory predicts, the 'massive cultural disruptions' that took place in this region led to 'unintended outcomes', in that contemporary religious revival was what Soviets sought to eliminate. Therefore I utilize the cultural theory to explain the society side of the puzzle and account for the factors why the society underwent religious revivalism right after independence.

### **Historical Institutionalism**

Historical institutionalism explains "the way institutions shape the goals political actors pursue and the way they structure power relations among them, privileging some and putting others at a disadvantage." (Hall and Taylor 1996, 940). Similarly, to comprehend the rigorous push for secularization, it is necessary to trace the political processes and unearth the role of formal and informal institutions in policy-making (Thelen and Steinmo, 2). Also, historical institutionalism attributes 'social causation' to path dependency claiming that the effects of operative 'forces are mediated through contextual features of a situation inherited from the past.' (Hall and Taylor 1996, 942). In other words, ideas and other factors that shape society and the policy-making process of today are path dependent on the history. It is inclusive of other factors, such as ideas, beliefs, and culture, which analyzes macro contexts accounting for combined effects of institutions and processes rather than narrow contexts (Pierson and Skocpol, 3). In this study, I employ both the traditional use of the term institution and emphasize the impact of state institutions that have 'legitimate authority' (Weldon 2002, 107) as well as the concept of informal institutions. Formal institutions refer to the legislature, executive, judiciary, and the military components of the state (in other words the authoritarian nature of the state structure, and the lack of separation of powers). Whereas informal institutions represent social institutions such as culture, norms, religion, and national identity. Secularization is also analyzed as an institutionalized state objective both during the Soviet era and after independence. I utilize historical institutionalism to explain how the Soviet institutions (authoritarian political leadership and rigorous secularization) have been carried on to the new state structures of the

CARs, and demonstrate that these factors account for the current secularization process in the CARs. I therefore reject the argument that there was a sharp break when the USSR collapsed, and the institutional structures of the new independent states do not share similarities with the Soviet institutions. Here, I will demonstrate how the contemporary institutions resemble the Soviet institutions, and how religiously oppressive secularism ideology of the Soviets have been carried over to the new states.

### Literature Review, Conceptualization, and Hypothesis

There is an unanimous consensus in the literature that Central Asia has been experiencing religious resurgence since the Glasnost, which has accelerated after independence. Some scholars argue that Islam constitutes only a cultural/national identity, and has no impact on the political realm. On the other hand, others claim that Islamic resurgence in Central Asia has a fundamentalist and political nature and has great potential to lead to Islamist governments, and cause instability in the region.<sup>5</sup> I believe that the fact that fundamentalist Islam does not have wide popular support but is only represented by a small number of groups (Luong 2004; Abashin 2002; Sjukjainen 2002) is evidence that society at large is experiencing non-militant, moderate religious revivalism. Political parties are not necessarily militant but do have explicit Islamic agendas, such as demands for more religious freedom and political representation. On the other hand, there are militant groups, though small in number, which make a greater impact due to their violent activities. Therefore, in this study, I use the term **religious revivalism** broadly to refer to the revival of religious sentiments; Islamic identity and faith, the sheer increase in the number of practicing Muslims, and the observable phenomena such as increase in the number of mosques

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<sup>5</sup> One group of scholars, therefore support the **traditionalist/primordialist view** arguing that the increasing role of Islam since independence is evidence that the pre-Soviet identities have resurged. One of the leading scholars of this view who have formulated the basis for the argument in 1989 is Polyakov. He argues that the religious and social fundamentals of the CARs remained the same throughout the Soviet rule, modernization efforts were only superficial, and that Islam moved to the foreground in both political and social life. Supporting Eckstein's theory, Abashin claims that the form of Islam that is observed today is "the form of Islam that had predominated in the nineteenth and twentieth century before Russians came and religion was subjected to massive pressure." He also argues that, ironically, "atheism added more fundamentalism to the minds of Central Asian Muslims" that strengthened the Islamic heritage from the pre-Soviet era. In this view, Islam is viewed as a cultural force that is part of the national identity, and it does not function as a political ideology, and any regional Islamic militant network is rejected. Any local militant activity or group is attributed to spill overs from neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan. Other scholars support the **fundamentalism view** claiming that it is a totally different/new form of Islam that emerged after independence. Unlike the cultural form of Islam in the pre-Soviet era, the idealized form is fundamentalism with the following features: purification of religion from all later additions, different schools of thought (madhab) are rejected, outer jihad is emphasized, even other Muslims who adhere to more flexible interpretations of Islam can be targeted...etc. For instance, Luong argues that "militant Islamic groups have developed domestic roots primarily in response to post-Soviet political repression." Fundamentalism view states that there is resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and a regional network of militant Islamic groups dedicated to establish Islamic governments.

and Islamic schools,<sup>6</sup> along with the emergence of militant groups that perform violent activities, such as bombings.

Since the independent variable, suppressive secularism advanced by the state, is defined as an attitude 'in relation to a solid religious revivalism occurring in society,' it is important to explain the development of this phenomenon. Many scholars argue that in the pre-Soviet period, Central Asians were 'cultural Muslims,' and started to become 'conscious Muslims' in recent decades, especially after independence (Abashin 2002, Luong 2003, Olcott 2002). During the Soviet era, Central Asians would identify themselves as Muslim since they were born into a Muslim family, and were adhering to the cultural rituals such as the Islamic wedding ceremony and funeral. They would only be familiar with a few prayers, and not observing the fast or daily prescribed prayers was not considered a great fault (Abashin 2002, 66). However, modernization and social changes have also altered the social role of Islam in Central Asia. Islam slowly became a 'personal choice' rather than part of a tribal or communal identity. People started to observe obligatory prayers and other forms of worship, and learn the essence of their faith. There was a general awakening that Islam was not only a cultural way of life composed of rites and traditions, but a comprehensive religion with personal and social requirements. In this sense, the social changes in society brought by modernization, the relaxing of the Soviet suppression of religion, search for spiritual fulfillment after 70 years of atheist indoctrination, and the impacts of the events happening in the neighboring Muslim countries, all contributed to the religious revivalism (Luong 2003; Abashin 2002; Hunter 1996). Also, there is extensive literature arguing that Islam was the source of resistance to Soviet rule "...because modernization was equated with secularization, and Islam was depicted as the primary weapon against the forces of Soviet modernity. Thus, Islam was considered the symbol of CARs' inherent ability to resist Soviet rule and the Soviet Union's failure to achieve modernization in this region."

Compared to the plethora of studies on religious revivalism in CARs, there is surprisingly limited research conducted on the secularization process in the CARs. Most of the works analyze the nature of political Islam, Islamic resurgence, and the government suppression thereof. However, there is no in-depth study of the causes of the secularization in CARs, or why the governments have embarked upon radical

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<sup>6</sup> Since independence 5,000 new mosques opened in Uzbekistan only (Sagdeev and Eisenhower, 39), numerous political parties and Islamic organizations (legal or illegal) have been formed in each CAR, local funds were established to finance the reconstruction of religious buildings and sites that were destroyed or just left to ruins during the Soviet era, thousands of people each year started to go to Mecca to perform pilgrimage, Islamic schools opened to teach young people how to recite the Qur'an and basics of Islam, it became common to see pamphlet distributors on streets proselytizing (Gleason, 172; Olcott 1996; Hunter 1996). Trofimov's research found that the strength of religious associations in Kazakhstan increased from 46 to 1,652 between 1989 and 2003 (where he used several indicators and codified them to obtain a numerical measurement of the strength of the associations).

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secularizing reforms, and are suppressing even non-militant forms of Islam. Nonetheless, the few scholars voice a unified opinion in their analysis of the nature of the secularization process, and claim the government policies to be oppressive and detrimental to the democratization process in Central Asia (Hunter 1996; Olcott 1996; Luong 2004).<sup>7</sup> Some scholars attribute the religious oppression to the personalities of the individual political leaders and their authoritarian regimes (Polat in Sagdeev and Eisenhower 2000; Allison and Jonson 2001). Particularly, the case of Uzbekistan renders itself perfectly to this explanation since Islam Karimov has been the President under a rather authoritarian regime since independence, and has displayed a dictatorial leadership. Another explanation forwarded by Abashin and Sjukjainen is that secularization is being used as a tool to control the resurgence of militant Islam, and it came about only as a reaction to extremist movements. The state retorted to this tool to fight back the unpredictable and erratic effects of the Islamic revivalism. In other words, this argument claims that secularism came to life as a reaction to a phenomenon, and does not display any historical dependency. However, I argue that, even though individual leaders may be the apparent actors implementing the oppressive policies, and militant activities might have caused tighter control by the states, in-depth analysis of the phenomenon is required to find the underlying reasons that cause these leaders in all the CARs to pursue parallel suppressive attitudes towards religion.

To this end, I will test if the following independent variables account for the dependent variable, the suppressive secularization process advanced by the Central Asian governments:

*Independent Variable 1 and 2:* This puzzle of why the Central Asian governments have embarked upon suppressive secularization process can be explained by an institutional argument. The institutionalized secularization process and the dictatorial leadership structure of the Soviet regime have been institutionalized into the framework of the new independent states. The continuation of the rule of the former Communist Party bosses, now under different titles, in the CARs even after independence may support this view. In this perspective, the current secularization process can be viewed as a continuation of the anti-religious policies of the Soviet era that have been incorporated into the institutional structure of the Central Asian states. Current political leaders, most of whom were Communist Party officials, believe that secularism is the only way to modernize their countries. The failed democratization efforts and the lack of democratic institutions (due to path dependency to dictatorial Soviet institutions) resulting in authoritarian regimes to varying extents in different

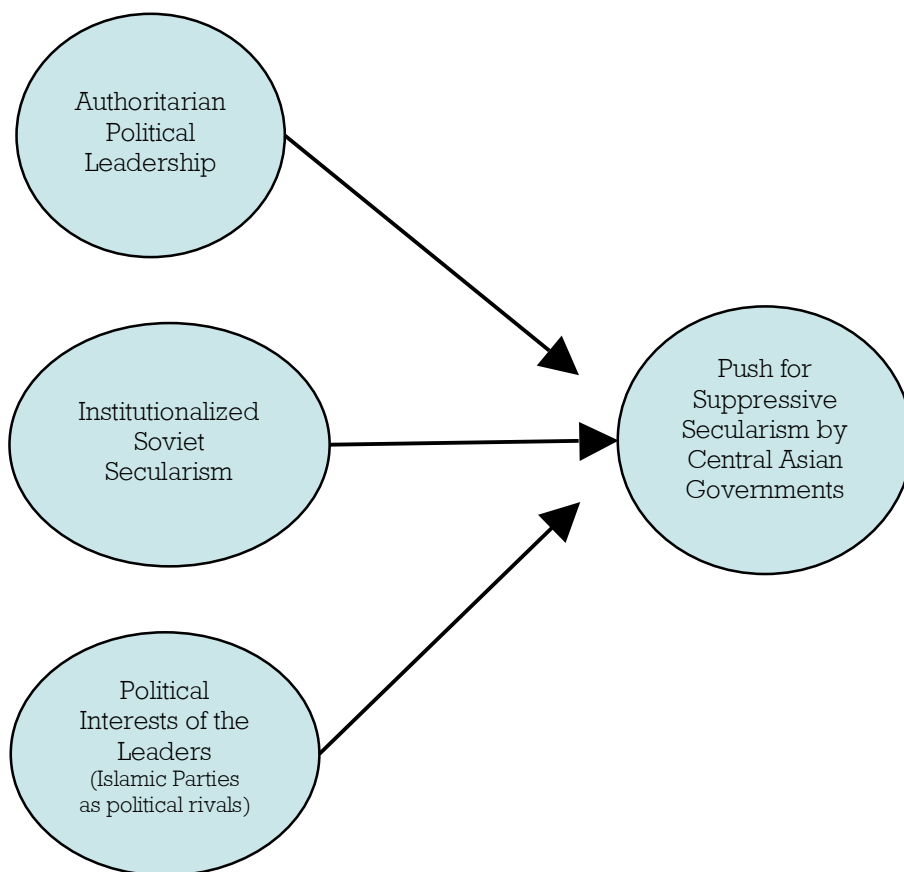
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<sup>7</sup> These authors cite numerous incidents where the government allowed officers to open fire on Islamic groups protesting, clergy disappearances, executions without fair trial, closing down of religious schools and associations...etc. in the CARs.



CARs also support this argument. This hypothesis can be substantiated with the historical institutionalism approach.

*Independent Variable 3:* Secular policies are used as means to cover the religious oppression (or the oppression of the religious groups in opposition), which serves the political interests of the leaders and help them to get rid of potential political rivals.



As illustrated in the above model, based on the historical institutionalism theory, I hypothesize that the main causes of the secularizing policies of the CARs can be attributed to the institutionalized Soviet attitudes towards religion, the lack of democratic institutions, and the political interest of the leaders to crack down on potential political rivals (Islamic political parties).

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### Comparing across Central Asia

Since 1992, Central Asian governments “have embarked on a policy of preventing all political manifestations of Islam in their countries while co-opting a quietist type of Islam” and “political parties with the slightest tinge of Islam have been banned...” (Hunter 1996, 37). The following three case studies are intended to demonstrate the state attitudes towards religion in Central Asia. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan have been selected on the basis that they illustrate different shades of politicization of Islam, domestic conflict and political instability, state policies towards religion, and social reactions to forced secularization.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Tajikistan Islamist groups are incorporated in the government, in Uzbekistan they are a strong opposition but the religious suppression of the government continues for political reasons. Among the three cases, Kazakhstan has the most secular society (Malashenko in Allison and Jonson 2001, 49) and the influence of religion in politics in the country is relatively small, yet the government still pursues restrictive religious policies.

#### Uzbekistan

The state of affairs on religious revivalism and secularism in Uzbekistan has in the most part been shaped by one person, President Karimov. Karimov's communist background and the policies he has followed causes him to be criticized as a hypocrite and apostate (Olcott 1996, 117). After independence, Karimov strategically embarked upon public efforts to construct an image as a ‘Muslim’ leader sympathetic of Islamic rituals (i.e. taking oath on the Qur'an, making pilgrimage to Mecca, establishing an Islamic university, and instituting an Islamic TV channel). Religious leaders, knowing that Karimov's legitimacy depended partly on them, used this advantage politically to extend numerous demands, including ones for religious education in public schools and Friday to become the official holiday instead of Sunday. Karimov did meet many of their demands in order to strengthen his position. However, as the political situation worsened in the neighboring Tajikistan with the outbreak of the civil war, Karimov's fear escalated, and his attitude towards various religious groups and movements shifted drastically. The-then Tajik President Nabiev's concession to share power with the Islamic and secular opposition was another potential spillover that had likely threatened Karimov's hold on power.<sup>9</sup> As summarized by Luong, when Karimov's

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<sup>8</sup> Sociological studies of Central Asia produced rankings of Islamic adherence of populations in the CARs, and accordingly the Tajiks are strongest, and in decreasing order comes Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Turkmen (Malashenko in Allison and Jonson, 51),

<sup>9</sup> Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Party of Islamic Liberation) were all Islamic political groups demanding political recognition at the time.

calculations of strengthening his legitimacy fell to the fear of opposition, his ulterior motive to eliminate all potential political rivals came out of the closet:

“President Karimov of Uzbekistan in particular has maintained Soviet attitudes toward religion and dissent. He has moved beyond the notion that the state should simply “manage” Islam by institutionalizing and depoliticizing it, however, to the conviction that it must be eliminated as an independent social force. Thus, while Karimov created his own Committee for Religious Affairs to perform essentially the same function as the Soviet Islamic Central Asian Directorate – to oversee the practice of Islam – he has also executed a widespread crack-down on nonmilitant Islamists, which includes practicing Muslims and imams in both officially recognized and unofficial mosques.” (Luong 2004, 22)

Karimov's regime “suppressed all autonomous appeals to or manifestations of Islam – a state policy that began in the city of Namangan in 1992 and accelerated out of control in 1997 with the arrest, detention, and torture of thousands of Muslims...” (Luong 2004, 18). The Uzbekistani authorities have routinely bullied the popular religious leaders and dissidents using the state-controlled mufti offices and often accusing them of the radical ideologies of wahhabism (Cichok 2003).

In the rhetoric of the Karimov government Islam has been similarly depicted as a religion incompatible with the secular nature of the Uzbek state. Reaffirming that Uzbekistan is “proceeding along the correct path towards building a new democratic and civilized state” at a meeting with foreign ambassadors and the media, Karimov stressed that “Islam shall not be raised to the political plane in our country [and] Uzbekistan shall remain a secular state” (ITAR-TASS 1999).

One possible explanation for the acute policies of official secularism is the one usually advanced by the Uzbek authorities – the presence of religious militants that aim at overturning the government and establishing a theocratic rule. Even though the Uzbek variety of Islam is seen as “the most religiously fervent” (Haghayeghi 1994, 250) in Central Asia and *some* religious movements espouse illiberal ideologies, there is no direct evidence that the adherents of different streams of unofficial Islam in Uzbekistan advocate a violent change in government (Rotar 2005). This is even true of the Wahhabis – the self-proclaimed advocates of a pure Islam. While both the authorities and the lion's share of the Uzbek Muslims are united in disliking this form of Islam (using this term rather liberally to denote anyone they disagree with or do not like), the most salient public stance of the Uzbek Salafis, as the Wahhabis are also referred to, are directed against lavish funerals and weddings popular among the great majority of Uzbeks. Salafis argue that these practices were cultivated during the Soviet times and impoverish an already poor population of the country. Believing that

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worshipping at holy places and having expensive stones are the signs of idolatry, they were accused in the mid-1990s of the destruction of some tombstones. With that exception, there was “no compelling evidence as of 2005 that Uzbek Salafis advocate the violent overthrow of the Uzbek government” (Rotar 2005).

The Tabligh Jamaat movement and Hizb ut-Tahrir are among other groups singled out by the Uzbek authorities as extremist. While the literature on Tabligh Jamaat is limited, there is a prominent view that it is a peaceful and law abiding movement expressed by a renowned French specialist on Islam Oliver Roy (Roy 2002). There is, however, an opposing view challenging Roy. Expressed by Alexiev (2005) it accuses Tabligh of a direct terrorist activity. As far as Uzbekistan is concerned, Alexiev cites the accusation of Tabligh by the Uzbek government of sending some 400 Uzbek people to the terrorist camps. The Russian translation of his article, (but not the current English online version) also blames on them the 1999 bombing in Tashkent.

While the Russian and Uzbek-speaking researchers share Alexiev's negative view of Tabligh's overall worth for world peace, there are at least two of them who are more nuanced in their assessments of the Uzbek (and Kyrgyz) Tabligh movements than are Alexiev and the Uzbek government itself. According to Bakhtiyar Babadzhanov, senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, “it is still early to talk about the direct terrorist activity in the Central Asian region of Tabligh... I do not know about the politically extremist slogans of the Tablighists. But it is possible that they are not advertised as...the Tabligh propagandists are usually used blindly”<sup>10</sup> (Fergana.ru 2009 a). When asked about the recruitment activity for terrorist organizations pointed out by Alexiev, Babadzhanov responds that despite its informed nature the article contains factual errors. For instance, Tabligh did *not* take part in orchestrating the February 1999 Tashkent explosions. He also tells that a significant part of Alexiev's sources are comprised of the Indian news agency reports and publications, which may have affected the judgment of the author. Babadzhanov also claims that “concerning the status of the recruiters for terrorist organizations, it seems that *the author did not produce direct evidence* even though his assumptions are not illogical” (Fergana.ru 2009 a, emphasis added).

In a similar vein, when asked about the hunt after Tablighi Jamaat in the neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Petr Topychkanov, research fellow at the Institute of Asian and African Studies in the Lomonosov Moscow State University, expresses his surprise and curiosity over the reasons for the Tabligh's ban. He claims that even in the

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<sup>10</sup> Translated from Russian by the second author.

countries where Tabligh is active and its members may in fact be linked to terrorism, such as India, Pakistan, and Great Britain, the organization still functions and is highly popular and respected by the society. He speculates that the action of the government is linked to the possible limitation or even cessation of the US military operation in Afghanistan. Under such conditions, the influence of Taliban-like movements is likely to increase and the government is likely taking preventive measures to check the future developments (Fergana.ru 2009 b).

Thus, despite the secretive nature of the top echelons of Tabligh, the concerns that the openly propagated ideas of peace are not sincere and merely the outcome of Tabligh's adaptation to Central Asian realities, scholars of the region refrain from accusing the organization of direct terrorist or violent activity.

While Tabligh openly denounces its involvement in politics, Hizb-ut Tahrir is open about its political goals. Its most salient political goal is to unite all Muslims in one state. While its commitment to democracy and minority rights are not clear, they are known for denouncing violence for achieving political means. Yet, while in the West the presence of Hizb-ut Tahrir is usually tolerated, the movement is banned in Uzbekistan, Russia, and other Central Asian countries.. Numerous trials of its alleged members take place in Uzbekistan and Russia's Muslim regions, among others. While the movement's ideology may raise brows among the Western and Central Asian masses and elites, the banishment and imprisonment of the essentially peaceful political organization is questionable. Even if the ban on the organization is justified by some versions of western liberalism, the lengthy sentences, torture administered by the authorities, the planting of drugs, and vague definitions of what constitutes "extremism" are certainly not.

Some Sufi adherents of mysticism in Islam, claim no repression from the Uzbek authorities. While this is partly true, there is evidence that many are followed and reported to the authorities (Rotar 2005).

This is not to say that Uzbekistan did not experience violence initiated by the religiously-based opposition. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU, renamed into the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, IMT) was the primary source of such concerns and actions. It was responsible for the 1999 car bombings in Tashkent, launching an attack in the southern part of the country from the neighboring states penetrating deep into the country as close as sixty miles from the capital Tashkent (Weitz 2004, "Terrorism in Uzbekistan: The IMU remains alive but not well.").

While IMU did pose a serious security threat to the Uzbek regime, there are several reasons for why the use of IMU as a wide-brush justification for the suppression of the general Islamic revival by the Karimov regime is problematic. First, IMU's

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influence in the region and especially in Uzbekistan is greatly diminished following the government crackdown in the aftermath of the Tashkent bombing the US led anti-Taliban military operation in Afghanistan. While IMU claimed to have 10,000 adherents in Uzbekistan, it only amounts to some 0.04 percent of the population (Weitz 2004, cited in Burton 2004). Further, in the wake of the 1999 bombing, the government had jailed some 4,000 persons belonging to Islamist organizations, while human rights groups claimed the number to be 7,000 (Burton 2004). As the base of IMU's operation is now confined to the mountainous regions of Pakistan, even there it faces problems due to the resistance from the local population and the US-led military action. Consequently, there is little real threat of violence posed by IMU to justify continuation of the repressive tactics against all non-governmental religious organization in the country.

Second, IMU failure to take on the nonviolent interpretations of the Islamic teachings has likely generated a lot of sympathy from the domestic and international publics for the Uzbek government's repressive actions for Islamic expressions outside governmental control. Yet, apart from IMU, to the best of our knowledge, there is no other religious movement in Uzbekistan and indeed in the entire (ex-Soviet) Central Asian region that advocates violence and employs bloodshed in the course of its political action. While the political message espoused by some of those groups is far from that of liberal democracy, their denunciation of violence increases their legitimacy vis-à-vis the government. Similarly, the government makes it clear that democracy does not set the rules of the game in Tashkent, yet it asymmetrically uses repressive tactics against nonviolent Islamist groups. The position of the regime might have been strengthened if they engaged in an open political debate and competed for public sympathy in a non-repressive manner.

Third, it is not clear whether the presence of IMU did in fact result in the government repression against it and not vice versa. While the government of Uzbekistan was notoriously repressive since early 1990s, the IMU did not come to existence and made its inroads to Uzbekistan until the late 1990s. It is, therefore, not illogical to argue that the repressive nature of the Karimov regime laid fertile soil for IMU's support in the country.

The overall, and less than fortunate, result of these practices is that many, if not most, Uzbeks equate Western democracy with the assertively secular but undemocratic regime of president Karimov – something that does not have base in reality (Rotar 2005).

One of the most vivid expressions of such instability are the 2005 Andijan (Andijon) events. The unrests, which resulted in at least 187 dead, were found to be instigated by

Akramiya, a Hizb-ut Tahrir's splinter group, according to the Uzbek authorities. This view is backed by Bakhtiyor Bobojonov (Bakhriyar Babadzhanov) of Tashkent's Institute of Oriental Studies who served as an expert witness for the government at the trials of the Andijon arrestees. Yet, the Uzbek government's role in the Andjan incident draw ire from the EU and the United States; it was not investigated independently and the details of the event may never be known (Corwin in RFE/RL 2006).

### **Tajikistan**

Like the other CARs, Tajikistan also became reluctantly independent.. "Russian supported neo-communist government ran by the native elite derived from the former Communist Party leadership" (Savin 1993, 1) took power immediately after the fall of USSR. In the early 1990s, the government tried to suppress the opposition composed of liberal, democratic and religious forces. As a result, large part of the opposition armed itself and employed more fundamentalist slogans in lieu of the democratic ones. What followed was a bloody civil war that was only resolved in 1998. The fighting sides signed a peace agreement through the efforts of several countries and international organizations. The government allotted 30 percent of all state positions to the opposition, which in return abandoned its radical slogans and violent agenda. The fact that a substantial part of the opposition consisted of the democratic and liberal forces may have helped them overcome extremist views and brutal tactics.

The Tajik experience was an example of the regime's incorporation of extremists into the civil government and bureaucracy structures, According to Malashenko (2001, 50), "since 1998, one-third of the seats in the ruling coalition have been assigned to the United Tajik Opposition, which is influenced by fundamentalist ideology..."<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalist ideologies waned down gradually, but democratic and liberal treatment of religious manifestations is still far from the reality. Religion is under state surveillance, and religious policies require every association, even neighborhood Qur'an teaching schools, to register with the government (Roy, 142).

The president of the country Emomali Rakhmon issued a decree prohibiting female students and pupils who wear *satr* or *hijab* from attending educational institutions starting in 2008 (Isamova in RIA Novosti 2010). The actual implementation of the ban began even earlier as the Tajik Ministry of Education's decision to prohibit wearing hijab in state and educational facilities was promulgated as early as 2007 (Sarkorova in BBC Russian 2007 a). Ironically, according to the vice rector of the Dushanbe Foreign Language Institute Zieev, not only hijab-wearers were to be banished from the university but also students in mini-skirts and "lightheaded" blouses

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(Sarkorova in BBC Russian 2007 a). The same year a Dushanbe court upheld the Ministry's position denying a woman wearing hijab (Sarkorova in BBC Russian 2007 b). Recently, in September 2010, Rakhmon demonstrated his peculiar interest to female clothing by criticizing Tajik women for wearing foreign-styled cloths. In the speech delivered at the Tajik National University and broadcasted on all channels of the state-controlled TV, Rakhmon pointed out that "if any of you [women] likes the styles of some [other] country, I will send you [there]" (Isamova in RIA Novosti 2010). In a related clarification, Tajik President's press secretary stated that the President meant women wearing traditional clothing of Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Arab, and Turkish origin (Isamova in RIA Novosti 2010). Rakhmon had repeatedly called on the ban of Muslim female head scarves in Tajik schools.

While the supreme organ governing Tajikistan's Islamic establishments – the Council of Ulema – are disappointed with the headscarf ban, the only religious party in Central Asia, the Islamic Party of Tajikistan's Revival, claimed that the prohibition was unconstitutional (Sarkorova in BBC Russian 2007 a).

In addition to the limitation on visual representation of Islamic images in public, a number of religious organizations are banned in Tajikistan. These include Hizb ut-Tahrir, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan/Turkestan, Bayyat, Salafiya, and Tablighi Jamaat (Rasul-zade in Ferghana.ru 2009). However, religious situation is more nuanced in Tajikistan than that observed in Uzbekistan. Tajikistan hosts the only in-system religious political party in the entire region. Further, official restrictions on religious dresses and Islamic movements were enacted relatively late. As religiously dressed women were not admitted to schools since 2007, the *Salafiya* movement was declared illegal by the Supreme Court of the republic in January, 2009 (Ferghana.ru 2009 c).

Yet, fresh reports point to an escalation of the situation between the Rakhmonov regime and the former opposition. On September 19, 2010, the military of the Tajik Defense Ministry were attacked resulting in three dead and two injured (Ferghana.ru 2010 a). One interpretation of this move deals with Rakhmonov's desire to do away with the former opposition figures even though they are absorbed in the country's bureaucracy (Ferghana.ru 2010 b). Consequently, the calls against the fight on terror and extremism are only a pretext for getting rid of the opposition (Ferghana.ru 2010 b). President Rakhmov has been accused for collaborating with IMU and providing them with weapons during the 1998 invasion of Uzbekistan in order to "punish and frighten Tashkent"; it is further suggested that the secret friendship between Rakhmov and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan continues to exist as it benefits Rakhmon, according to the leader of the "Vatandor" ("Patriot") movement leader and opposition journalist Dodozhon Atovulloev (Ferghana.ru 2010 b).

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### **Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan's experience with politicization of Islam has been slightly different than Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Like these countries, Kazakhstan also accepted independence rather reluctantly, (Olcott 2002, 24) and is the most secularized among the CARs without major conflicts (Malashenko in Allison and Jonson, 49). Economic and social turmoils that have affected all the CARs to different extents also hit Kazakhstan and engendered vacuums that led to frictions with radical Islamist groups (Akiner 1995; Olcott 1995; Madelbaum 1994). There have been quite a few occasions in the last decade where extremist group members were arrested and waves of Islamist ideologies would spill over from neighboring countries. However, unlike the other CAR governments, the Kazakh authorities maintained realistic and practical attitude towards this problem. They acknowledged the Islamic heritage of their society and did not take pro-active measures to cleanse of all manifestations of Islam from the private and public sphere. On the other hand, the government recognized the problems in a narrow focus, the radical groups, which included only a very small portion of the population. In 2000, the government took steps to identify the potentially 'dangerous' groups through establishing a Council for Contacts with Religious Associations. Religious groups were required to register with these local councils to enable government supervision. Indeed, the most radical groups did not register with the Council, but other groups that could have otherwise fall under the spell of the radical groups chose to register for the incentives provided by the government. Another step to deal with the situation was through the legislature. In 1999-2000, a law on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations in the Republic was drafted in order to "tighten the control over religious activities and limit the freedom of conscience (especially for the followers of the so-called nontraditional religions)." (Trofimov 2003, 48). This bill raised protests from wide segments of society and was put on the shelf by the parliament. All these measures demonstrate the legitimate concerns of the Kazakh government for the rise of uncontrollable radicalism- possibly as a result of a likely spill-over from abroad or other Central Asian countries. However, due to the lack of a major political party that has gained substantive public support, Islamic revivalism does not constitute an immediate danger to the government.

### **Institutionalized Religious Attitudes during the Soviet Era**

After describing the secularization attempts and the contemporary situation in the CARs, let us now try to trace back these state attitudes to the formal and informal (i.e. religious attitudes) institutions established during the Soviet era. In order to properly identify Soviet's attitude toward religion, it is necessary to analyze the original

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communist doctrines on religion. The Communist Manifesto outlines that communism regards religion as one of the social realities that is bound to change and deteriorate by time (Raines 2002, 143). Marx very clearly states that "...communism abolishes eternal truths; it abolishes all religion, morality..."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the Communist Party also regarded religion as a relic of the past, a sign of backwardness, and something that would fade away as people became more educated. The main issue was not about theology or doctrine but rather about the primacy of loyalty to the state (USSR) and the Party. The Party attempted to crack down the social aspect of religion and turn it into a matter of individual conscience. Turning religion into a personal issue has been the overriding goal of the Soviet government concerning religion. As long as people practiced at their homes, in private, and not form organizations to pursue public prayers and events, religion was permissible. Thus, all religious leaders and organizations were to be kept under state surveillance. Public places of worship were converted into other uses, but the state did not attempt to suppress folk religion rigorously. There is an overriding belief in communism that religion is only a phase that will eventually die out. As people are more educated and obtain a scientific approach to life, they would not need to seek spiritual fulfillment. The Party's role is to fasten this process that would otherwise take a long time on its own. However, the Party did not use direct force to abolish religion at once, but adopted policies to supervise all organized religion in order to keep it under control. Direct assault on religion was in fact denounced claiming that it creates anti-state sentiments. Also, the role of the state was outwardly stated as adherence to the policy of religious freedom, whereas engaging the religious leaders in the indoctrination of the public.

Religion is recognized as a primitive form of human consciousness that hinders advancement. Therefore, in the USSR "Islam as a religion was officially tolerated while being eradicated in full conformity with the theories of scientific atheism." (Sjukijainen 2003, 120). Similar to the attitudes of the European colonies, the Soviets saw it as their duty to enlighten and civilize the 'backward' nations of Central Asia. Luong summarizes the state's attitude towards Islam as:

"...the politicization of regional cleavages coincided with the repression and depoliticization of Islam. The Soviet regime succeeded in transforming Islam, reducing it from a potential supranational ideology to a local and primarily cultural identity marker across Central Asia. Elites who desired career advancement in the state and party organs were instructed to separate their belief in Islam from their political ideology because Islam was associated with both cultural

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<sup>11</sup> [www.anu.edu/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html](http://www.anu.edu/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html). "Manifesto of the Communist Party, 1848, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels."

backwardness and disloyalty to the Soviet state. Although the continuation of Islamic faith and rituals was allowed within local communities, the Soviet regime made it clear from the outset that atheism was the state's official ideology and that even at the local level Islam was subordinate to secular political institutions. This further weakened Islam as a political force by destroying the capacity for Islamic ties to form the basis of an organized mass movement. At the same time, more than seventy years of Soviet rule engendered the belief among Central Asian elites that Islam was more prone to instability and conflict..." (Luong 2004, 13-14)

Shahrani argues that Soviets established numerous institutions, the most effective being the education system, to implement the secularization along with discrediting Islam (Mesbahi 1994, 65). The attempts of the USSR to strip the Central Asian populations off their religious beliefs depict their views on the role of religion. Evidently, the Soviet leaders believed that religion has a major role in the lives of the Central Asian societies, it is a strong tool to mobilize and unite them, and possibly pose a threat for communism and state control. As a result of these Soviet attitudes, Islam was confined to the private sphere, and became a cultural norm more than a religious identity. However, as the cultural/national values theory predicts, the Soviet regime did not succeed to completely eradicate the Islamic heritage but drew it into the private sphere or underground (the religious revivalism observed today supports this argument).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

As the case descriptions depict, the main causes of the religious oppression of Central Asian governments are institutionally path dependent. First, political leadership is still authoritarian, continuing the institutional and political culture of the Soviet regime. According to the Freedom House's democracy index Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are 5.5, Uzbekistan is 6.5, and Turkmenistan is 7.0 out of a 1 (most democratic) to 7 scale.<sup>12</sup> In other words, none of the CARs succeeded in their democratic transition, and are either authoritarian or have many authoritarian aspects. Moreover, the Center for Religious Freedom categorizes all of the Central Asian countries as 'not free' in terms of religious freedom index. The 'not free' category is

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2003/averages.pdf>. The Freedom House organization's democracy index employs both electoral and civil freedoms attributes to define democracy. Countries are labeled on a scale of 1 (most democratic) to 7 (most democratic). Electoral freedoms include adult suffrage, competition for public offices, and legitimate influence of elected representatives on public policies. Civil rights that are taken into account are freedom of organization, freedom of expression, human rights and economic opportunities. The scores for the two attributes are averaged together and the countries are categorized as free, partly free, or not free. Although this index also has weaknesses, it is the most widely employed one since it provides data on almost all the countries around the world, and it is extremely up to date.

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described as a country where “religion is tightly controlled and basic religious freedom is denied.”<sup>13</sup>

Second, anti-religious policies of the Soviets have been institutionalized into the education system and the political structure, and elites view secularism as the necessary means to modernize their countries. Communism viewed religion as ‘the opium of the masses’ that can be easily used to exploit people, as well as an obstacle in the way of communism. Atheistic indoctrination has been the basis of all communist governments, such as China and Vietnam, and the CAR leaders could not break off from the historical dependency of these ideologies. Even though religious freedoms are protected by the constitutions of the CARs, as the highly ‘democratic’ USSR constitution, there is a deep discrepancy between theory and practice.

Third, political leaders are using secularism to oppress Islamic political opposition; therefore secularism serves the political interests of the leaders. Even though the CARs’ governments give limited religious freedoms to the people, they want to keep the populations and all movements under control. As communism is slowly fading away, CAR leaders strategically use nationalism and religion as a substitute doctrine to unite their nation.<sup>14</sup> However, the CAR leaders perceive any significant concessions to one of the religious groups, or in the same token any extensive religious freedoms, as a sign of weakness that might trigger groups to increase their demands and to gain political power. Thus, the rise in religious sentiments poses a threat undermining the legitimacy of the leaders who are suppressing religious manifestations to serve their political interests.

The overall pattern shows that state policies on religion are undemocratic and against freedom of religious belief and expression. Even though there are democratic institutions, a popularly elected legislature, a constitution, and judiciary, the functioning of the overall state mechanism is undemocratic. There are clear contradictions between what is written in the Constitutions, the inconsistent religious policies oscillating with the fears of the political leaders, and the discretionary rule of law

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/religion/pdfdocs/rfiwmap.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> After independence, religious and political leaders started to use Islam strategically to legitimize their authority. Even though Islam, in combination with the pre-Soviet cultural heritage, was seen as a threat to their political power, political leaders took advantage of it to serve their interests by deceiving the public. The irony is that most of these leaders “remember that they themselves carry considerable responsibility for religious persecution under Soviet power” (Malashenko in Allison and Jonson, 50). For instance, Uzbek President Islam Karimov took oath on the Qur’an, made pilgrimage (and made sure it was widely publicized by mass media), and approved “a secular state constitution that explicitly maintains a special status for Islam and recognizes its importance in the nations’ history” to show his support for Islam (Luong, 18). The goal was to “create a state-dominated Islamic establishment and win popular approval by building mosques and religious schools...” (Hunter, 37). This phenomenon, or strategy, is very popular in predominantly Muslim countries, such as Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries, where the politicians insincerely try to publicize their adherence to Islam to appeal to the masses.

molded by the leaders. The suppressive religious policies illustrate the power of the states over individual freedoms; which in turn is a sign that the CARs have not completed their democratic transitions. The loopholes in the Constitution, the unclear definitions of secularism, and the authoritarian nature of state secularism allow for the undemocratic rulings. In other words, the judiciary is not an independent institution, the military has the most power in judicial decision-making, and the separation of powers is non-existent.

### **Conclusion**

Even before the fall of the USSR, many scholars predicted that Islam would be the main element to fill the political and social vacuum created. Affirming these predictions, immediately after independence, Islam came out of the closet in all of the CARs. The reasons of why Islam took a dominant role in the Central Asian societies are easier to explain by theories of historical determinacy, the role of informal institutions, religion, and cultural influences. However, why the governments are taking such suppressive measures against all kinds of religious manifestations came as a surprise to scholars. In this article, I have tackled this puzzle and proposed an institutional explanation to this phenomenon.

The majority of the Central Asian populations are Muslims who have been becoming more conscious and observant. Therefore, the problem of compatibility between Islam and a secular democracy has to be addressed with effective policy solutions. The state has to resolve how to democratically reconcile demands of (the majority of) its citizens with statist goals of secularization and modernization. All the theoretical issues of secularism demand practical solutions to ease the culminating tensions between the state and citizenry before more bloody clashes emerge. It is not compatible with democracy for a state to deprive its citizens from basic human rights based on assumptions or fears of some possible 'future' threats to stability or to their personal political power. As Galeotti states it "the possibility of the free rider fundamentalist, who makes an opportunistic use of liberal institutions to destroy them, seems more a fantasy of the Western mind than a real threat." (Galeotti 1993, 602). The state should outline clearly where the demands of Islamic groups would impinge upon democratic principles of the state. For example, a demand to replace the entire constitution with Islamic Law (*Shari'ah*) would not be compatible with democracy. The state should state what democratic principle the policies are based on; i.e. harm principle, Westernization, or its own discretion?

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It is essential for the CARs to find peaceful and democratic resolutions to the demands of the peaceful religious groups, while making the distinction with the militant groups. There is a growing need to draft policies compatible with the principles of 'real neutral democratic' version of secularism and incorporate the demands of the majority of its citizens by pursuing more inclusive strategies. There are many predictions about how the Central Asian governments will deal with the issues arising from political Islam, and if the instability of the region will be resolved more undemocratically through religious suppression, or through democratic incorporation of the religious groups into a pluralist society. It seems as though, despite continuing religious oppression, the example of Tajikistan has many lessons to teach to the other CARs that have not so far displayed very promising attitudes for democracy. Islamic revivalism is triggering a vibrant civil society actively demanding more rights from the government; therefore it can be viewed as a potential antidote against authoritarian regimes. Also, the Turkish political history is suggestive of how "an Islamic opposition may integrate itself into a modern democratic system" (Ozdalga 1998, 93) therefore it constitutes a crucial example for the other Muslim countries. However, this peaceful and democratic integration is possible only if "Islamic values are not banned from politics by a fanatical call for secularism, but respected as a legitimate voice." (Ozdalga 1998, 93). Stability of CARs largely depends on the ability of the state to adopt new social contracts that accommodate ethnic and religious diversity.

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