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Repression as Reform: Islam in Uzbekistan during the Early *Glasnost*' Period

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The role of Islam in postsoviet Uzbek society remains unclear and controversial. The containment of a 'fundamentalist threat' in the region is a central policy goal not only in Tashkent, but in Moscow and Washington as well. Current policy owes much to its precursor from the late Soviet era, and an assessment of that policy helps to shed light on official contemporary attitudes and approaches, as well as provide details about the evolution of religious policy during Uzbekistan's transition from Soviet control to independence.

While *glasnost*' was initially articulated and promoted at the highest level of Soviet administration, it is clear that the policy was selectively applied within the Soviet state, and that in regard to Islam in Central Asia 'openness' was quite late to arrive. Indeed, for the first two years of the *glasnost*' period Uzbek Communist Party leaders, particularly the first party secretary Inamdzhani Usmankhodzhaev and the third party secretary Rano Abdullayeva, conducted a harsh campaign designed to eliminate traditional rituals and holidays.¹ A significant moderation of policy and attitude towards Islam did not appear in Uzbekistan until 1988, and then at a much slower pace than that of the moderation of religious policies in Russia, the Baltic states and other parts of the USSR.²

The discussion here will examine Soviet policy toward Islam in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic during the implementation of Mikhail Gorbachev's campaign of *glasnost*' or 'openness', as the term is generally translated in English. I shall measure *glasnost*' and its impact through an analysis of the print media, looking at statements by government officials and the positions taken by the 'elite', especially journalists, academics and others widely taken to represent official policy.

A new era in Soviet history opened as Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in early March 1985. Gorbachev's twin policies of *glasnost*' and *perestroika* (restructuring) signalled to many that the new leader was committed to sweeping reform of Soviet society. The concept of increased *glasnost*' had appeared in the Soviet press some time before,³ although this does not imply that the policy of *glasnost*' was not Gorbachev's brainchild, as Konstantin Chernenko had been in poor health for several months and may well have passed control to his understudy. Chernenko's death, after a lengthy period of poor health, did not catch the Politburo unprepared and Gorbachev may have been directing events for a good while prior to his predecessor's demise.

Glasnost' held the promise of an altered approach to Islamic issues in Uzbekistan

and the surrounding republics. If a more open and honest evaluation of Central Asian history and culture was indeed imminent, then the role of Islam in the region might be assessed in terms other than its function as an instrument of control employed by 'reactionaries'. It would be impossible to ascertain precisely how hopeful Islamic believers were that such a change would come to pass; initially one could surmise that many if not most received the new policy with a 'wait and see' attitude. Those who were more hopeful must have been severely disappointed in the eventual glacial pace of religious reform in the Uzbek SSR (at least for Muslims); although Gorbachev's early political manoeuvres gave some cause for optimism in Central Asia, this was not especially evident in Uzbekistan.

***Glasnost*', Religion and the State**

Almost from the moment of his first public appearance, Mikhail Gorbachev was heralded as a new breed of Soviet leader, a liberal-minded reformer who brought a fresh approach to the councils of the Kremlin. This view was more prevalent among liberals in the West than within the USSR, whose citizens had learned that 'reformers' could abruptly halt their progress or even initiate severe measures to reverse such movement. Religious leaders undoubtedly recalled that Nikita Khrushchev had also been greeted as a 'liberal' and 'reformer', yet had eventually set in motion a campaign to crush religion. Thus, until tangible measures indicated otherwise, there was little cause for religious believers in the Soviet Union to rejoice over the change in leadership.

Eventually, Gorbachev's actions showed that he was indeed committed to a new, open approach to some religious groups living within his huge nation. On a personal level, Gorbachev revealed facts about himself that previous Soviet leaders would have taken great pains to conceal, such as his childhood baptism. Public pledges of more religious freedom and an unprecedented meeting with the pope in 1989 reinforced Gorbachev's standing as a general secretary of the Communist Party who was quite capable of discarding the harsh antireligious policies promulgated since the inception of the USSR. But *glasnost*', the vehicle for this transformation, was not promoted or applied in an identical fashion to all religious denominations within the Soviet realm.

In the early months of 1986, approximately one year after Gorbachev became general secretary, some moderation of Soviet religious policy appeared on the horizon. Religious topics were addressed widely in the Soviet press and a more finely shaded, variegated approach began to emerge. The clear beneficiary of this new approach was the Russian Orthodox Church, which underwent a remarkable expansion after 1985. During the period 1985–86 6228 new religious organisations registered with the Soviet administration, as required by law. Of that total, 4312, or 70 per cent, belonged to the Russian Orthodox. At the same time, 5500 new parishes were established and an even larger percentage of these were Russian Orthodox.⁴

Certain other denominations also made great strides. The Georgian Orthodox Church, for example, succeeded in increasing its registered parishes sixfold, from 51 to 296. Similarly, Soviet Buddhist groups grew from a paltry two to 12. During the same period, Soviet Muslims also showed substantial increases, moving from 392 to well over 1000 registered organisations.⁵ Yet the apparent increase for Soviet Muslims is misleading. On a percentage basis, Soviet Muslims should have ranked directly behind the Russian Orthodox in number of registrations, since Muslims were the second largest religious group in the USSR. In fact, some groups which had far

fewer members than the Muslims greatly surpassed them in number of registrations. Baptists and Pentecostals, for example, had registered 2841 groups as of July 1990, while Muslim registrations numbered only 1103 – less than half that figure.⁶ This imbalance was not due entirely to differences in tolerance on the part of the Soviet administration, of course. Evangelical Christians, perhaps because of a highly organised administrative structure and a focus on proselytism, already had 2537 congregations registered before the Gorbachev era.⁷ Yet Soviet Muslims, unlike these smaller Christian groups, possessed an officially created and officially sanctioned administrative apparatus, which should have facilitated the registration of new groups. Nevertheless, in July 1990 the Seventh-Day Adventists of the USSR had almost half as many registrations as Soviet Muslims and the Lutherans more than half,⁸ although neither of these denominations had even one tenth of the numerical strength of the Muslims.⁹

Muslims registered with the Soviet government in much smaller numbers than expected for a variety of reasons. The most important was probably the aggressive, sometimes virulent, stance by the Kremlin, including by Mikhail Gorbachev personally, towards Islam in the USSR. Although he was openly conciliatory towards the Russian Orthodox Church during the first years of his administration, Gorbachev was deliberately hostile towards Islam. By late 1986 much of the antireligious propaganda aimed at the Russian Orthodox and other Christian denominations was diminishing in both volume and shrillness; simultaneously, however, both the Uzbek and the Russian press in Uzbekistan (and other Muslim regions) maintained a high level of invective critical of Muslim traditions and castigating any who observed them, especially Communist Party members.

Initially then, Gorbachev followed a dual-track policy. Such a divided approach was not wholly unexpected, given the long history of conflict between mostly Christian Slavs and Muslims in the region. Unlike Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, with its strong external affinities and origins, represented a clear danger to the Soviet Union. Islam had served as the main force uniting fissiparous Afghan tribes against the Soviet Army, enabling them to battle that force to a stalemate, and in the mid-1980s the possibility of the conflict spilling across into Soviet territory was undoubtedly real. The Gorbachev administration could not afford the luxury of extending religious *glasnost* to the Muslim regions and instead chose to limit the scope of reform there. This policy was not articulated publicly, in order to avoid charges of preferential treatment and Russian chauvinism: Gorbachev had received an early lesson in how inflammatory such perceptions could be among his Muslim subjects.¹⁰ It is unlikely that Mikhail Gorbachev entered his new role with his religious policy already mapped out, however. Rather, his notions in this area were inchoate and evolved as he sought to guide his vast and complex country along the course of *glasnost*.

New Policy, or New Label?

After coming to power, Gorbachev moved swiftly to remove elements in the Communist Party which he deemed unreliable or antiquated. In the Central Asian republics he initiated a purge of top officials. The most widespread replacement of party functionaries occurred in Uzbekistan, although the first party secretary of the Uzbek Republic Communist Party, I. B. Usmankhodzhayev, a holdover from the Andropov era, was not among the casualties.¹¹ Among all the first secretaries in the Central Asian republics he was unique in this distinction, which implies that Gorbachev regarded him as an ally, or at least as a fellow-communist who shared

similar views to his own. It is hard to accept the suggestion that Usmanhodzhayev was simply too entrenched for Gorbachev to oust him, since he had been at his post for only two years. His retention did not portend a move towards greater religious liberalisation, since he had been a willing and enthusiastic participant in the anti-Islamic campaign since his election as first secretary in 1983.

Gorbachev remained reticent on religious matters during the first months following his rise to power. His deputy in Uzbekistan did not, however, and there was no indication of *glasnost* towards Islam in the Uzbek press. On 30 March the main Russian-language daily of Uzbekistan, *Pravda Vostoka*, published a statement by Usmanhodzhayev in which he severely criticised party committees which were 'displaying spinelessness' towards 'communists who participate in ceremonies that are clearly religious in nature'. He urged communists to 'wage a resolute struggle against religious prejudices and other vestiges of the past' and strongly condemned the media for distorting Soviet reality and violating the 'Leninist principle of party spirit'.¹² His criticisms extended to the population at large and did not give much hope to Muslims for a relaxation of repression.

Special emphasis must be given to the atheistic education of the population. Proper attention has not been given to these problems until recently; there has been excessive toleration and lack of resistance to religion, and sometimes even a dabbling with it. It has come to the point where in certain cities and districts self-styled priests are now virtually out of control and are blatantly interfering in people's lives.¹³

The Uzbek-language press also continued regularly to feature articles attacking 'religious vestiges', a common euphemism for Islamic ceremonies. On 4 April the author of a book¹⁴ reviewed in the newspaper *Yash Leninchi*, A. I. Abdursamedov, was described by the reviewer as having 'made a profound study of the essence of Islam'. In his book he called for the elimination of 'religious survivals' and for the establishment of a 'scientific world-view'; but the reviewer provided some hint as to the extent of Islamic belief: 'the influence of religious survivals is quite palpable in people's family and everyday life'.¹⁵

Rather than pursuing a more open policy, the Soviet authorities were actively devising new techniques to counter the influence of Islam in Uzbek society. The authorities viewed doctors as potentially powerful propagandists because of their social interaction with the population and their high social standing. In the spring of 1985 seminars for doctors were held in which participants exchanged information concerning the increased promotion of atheistic propaganda and the eradication of 'old customs'.¹⁶ Holy sites also drew the attention of the communist authorities. In many cases these were not mosques or other recognised Islamic property; rather they were often natural features (springs, wells, trees) to which local believers ascribed religious powers. Not even the dead were exempt from inquiry. Tombs which Islamic believers considered holy were excavated in Samarkand by Soviet archaeologists bent on proving that such beliefs were unsubstantiated. Not surprisingly, the scientists did not uncover any evidence to support claims of holiness.¹⁷ That such behaviour would be offensive to Muslims seems axiomatic, and indicates the callous and hostile attitudes of scholars and government officials alike.

Academics were allowed generous space in the popular press to denounce Islam.¹⁸ A Professor Ortiqov held that 'ceremonies, rituals, traditions and customs comprise the most widespread, tenacious, harmful and dangerous element of Islam, and must not be viewed with tolerance.' Ortiqov denounced a specific *kolkhoz* which he

considered notorious for exhibiting blatant apathy in the face of religious encroachment. He suggested that the activists on the *kolkhoz* were badly remiss in the performance of their duties and he called communists and *Komsomol* members once more to arms in the struggle against 'religious fanaticism'.¹⁹ Another academic cited religion as the source of most of the conflict in human history. According to this scholar, 'over the last 6000 years there have been about 14,000 wars on earth that have resulted in the deaths of nearly 3.6 billion people. Prejudices and religious teachings are responsible for most of them.'²⁰

Indeed, not only was *glasnost*' slow in appearing, but it seemed that the anti-Islamic campaign of the early 1980s was being reignited. In the late summer of 1985, nearly five months after Gorbachev had issued his first official calls for increased *glasnost*', the Party in Uzbekistan initiated an intensive anti-Islamic programme involving the establishment of committees charged with the propagation of new Soviet traditions.²¹ The anti-Islamic drive was led by the republic's secretary for ideology, Rano Abdullayeva. Before she was removed in April 1987 and charged with corruption, Abdullayeva conducted such a harsh campaign against Islam that some Uzbek intellectuals were moved to compare her policies with those of Stalin.²² The new programme had radical aims: 'We will have to conduct widespread and determined work to introduce progressive traditions and ceremonies into the life of every family.'²³ Even Communist Party members were targeted:

The *raikom* ... has taken a principled stance toward CPSU members who ... have even joined in religious activities themselves. A. Muradov, N. Artykov and A. Babakalanov have been expelled from the Party. Once they were fairly good organisers and administrators, but after retirement they began to lead a different lifestyle. ...²⁴

Most scholarly commentary on Islam in the Soviet Union appeared in the form of articles in journals. Few Soviet scholars seemed inclined to engage in the scale of research required to publish longer studies, including books on the subject. One reason for this is no doubt the fact that until quite late in the Gorbachev era the study of religion in the USSR was officially considered a dead (or at least dying) field, and the number of researchers attracted to it was small. Such scholarly works as were published in the mid-1980s, moreover, had to meet certain ideological standards even to appear in print.

One of the principal scholarly vehicles published in Uzbekistan in the late Soviet era was the monthly *Obshchestvennyye nauki v Uzbekistane*. In the latter part of 1985 virtually every issue of this periodical carried an article criticising the views of western sovietologists on Islam in Soviet Central Asia. The authors appear to be especially sensitive to western claims concerning young people.

The goal of bourgeois 'specialists' with regard to Soviet youth is to show that 'there is no need' for the formation of a new type of personality and a new culture of human relations under socialism. They make their assertions as if there had been no fundamental changes in the spiritual character of young people in Central Asia today ...²⁵

In an issue published in the late summer of 1985, A. Artykov reported on the problem of displacing Islamic traditions with new Soviet practices. According to Artykov, 'today the influence of Islam and of the Islamic clergy appears especially strong ... on the level of social psychology rather than of ideology'.²⁶ Artykov's piece is particularly interesting in that it includes some rare statistical data. He notes,

for example, that in a survey conducted in Bukhara fully 75 per cent of the respondents replied in the affirmative when asked 'Do religion and religious ceremonies have a negative effect on the introduction of Soviet ceremonies?' Only 10 per cent answered 'no' to this question; the remainder were 'don't knows'.²⁷ He also found that a significant number of those surveyed (27.5 per cent) saw a link between religion and nationalism.

A Differentiation of Religious Policy between Moscow and Tashkent: 1986-87

In the early months of 1986 some western observers saw indications that changes to Soviet legislation on religion might be imminent.²⁸ Indeed, the all-Union media devoted considerable attention to religious matters during 1986. As mentioned earlier, however, any greater tolerance applied essentially to the Russian Orthodox Church only, while Islam was consistently attacked by party officials and others, and theoretical refutations of religion as such continued to appear in the press.²⁹

The *Komsomol* in Uzbekistan began the year by convening a meeting of 'atheist young people' in Samarkand, and reported that the atheistic education of these young people had for the most part been adequate.

Komsomol organisations in Samarkand *oblast'* pay a great deal of attention to the atheistic education of young people. ... Not long ago a congress of atheist young people was held. The programme contained the most diverse questions. ... The majority of young men and women responded correctly and thoroughly.³⁰

At the 21st Congress of the Uzbekistan Communist Party, held in late January 1986, first secretary Usmankhodzhayev issued a strong reproach to party organisations which he said 'openly flirt with religion and indulge backward traditions and customs'.³¹ He singled out for special criticism Namangan *oblast'*, in the Fergana valley, berating the Party Committee there for failing to attach 'political significance to attempts to revive obsolete customs'. He went on to make it quite clear that religion in his view was not compatible with socialism, and was responsible for a host of problems in Soviet society:

It follows that one must constantly remember that religion clears the path to nationalism and chauvinism, and presents a great obstacle to social, economic and socialist development, to the strengthening of the socialist way of life and communist morality. The petty bourgeois element and private-owner psychology, and a multitude of negative phenomena in religious survivals, outdated rituals and ways of thinking are closely interwoven with regressive changes in our lives.

A month later Gorbachev himself addressed the issue of relations between nationalities in his speech to the 27th Congress of the CPSU. After lauding Soviet achievements in building socialism and respect for national culture, he warned against the 'degeneration' of national identity into isolation from the 'convergence of national cultures' and pointed out in this context that some literary works contained 'religious vestiges that are at variance with our ideology'.³² There was no mention in his speech of increased tolerance towards religion or more open discussion of religious beliefs.

Usmankhodzhayev followed up the general secretary's remarks when he addressed the Congress two days later. He mentioned an 'Islamic factor' which he labelled as

part of a network of calumny organised by 'class enemies'. He employed the standard clichés in his call to 'combat old prejudices and harmful customs'³³ and, like Gorbachev, made no reference to reforms in the Soviet attitude towards Islam. Some scholars saw Usmankhodzhayev as implying that Islam was no longer of any importance in Soviet society.³⁴

Usmankhodzhayev's remarks were followed up by actions on the part of the Presidium of the Uzbek Republic Supreme Soviet. *Pravda Vostoka* reported in July 1986 that the Presidium had reviewed the efforts of the Soviets of People's Deputies in enforcing Soviet legislation on 'religious cults' and had found them lacking. The Soviets were upbraided *inter alia* for tolerating 'religious instruction of children',³⁵ and 'law enforcement agencies' were criticised for failing to identify violators and bring them to justice. The Presidium set about galvanising the bureaucracy to apply the laws more strictly.³⁶

Rather than diminishing, the anti-Islamic campaign gained momentum as the year progressed. In late July *Pravda Vostoka* carried an article by a professor in Fergana describing a student who had failed to gain entrance to an institute because of his reliance on the 'supernatural' instead of devoting himself to study. The author demanded more attention to the atheistic education of children and greater emphasis on Soviet ceremonies.³⁷

By September 1986 the campaign had reached fever pitch, with a surge of anti-Islamic material in the Uzbek-language press. Every aspect of 'nationalist tradition' was attacked, beginning with a diatribe against the folk practice of *kalym*, which was labelled 'an ugly sickness and a harmful vestige'.³⁸ The author called for a 'concerted effort to banish this illness'.³⁹ The next week a report appeared on a conference designed to further the development of atheistic education in Kashkadar'ya *oblast'*. An official warned that 'numerous deficiencies' existed in atheistic work there and stated that 'measures had been outlined' to remedy the situation.⁴⁰ Later in the month articles were published condemning Islamic funeral rites,⁴¹ reporting on a commission charged with the 'elimination of backward customs',⁴² and criticising a *raikom*⁴³ for a lackadaisical performance in controlling 'unofficial religious activities' and allowing a monument to be converted into a holy site.⁴⁴

In November 1986, on his way to India for a state visit, Mikhail Gorbachev stopped in Tashkent. Seizing the opportunity to address the Uzbeks directly, he finally made quite clear what his position was with regard to the Islamic issue. His comments did not indicate 'new thinking' or openness in any way. He spoke about

... the critical and uncompromising struggle with religious manifestations, and the reinforcement of mass political work and of atheistic propaganda. In this activity, the slightest gap between words and deeds is intolerable. We require a great deal from, first of all, communists and people in leadership positions, and especially from those who, while verbally fighting for our morals and ideals, nevertheless in their deeds show indulgence towards outdated views and themselves take part in religious ceremonies.⁴⁵

The harsh and belligerent nature of Gorbachev's remarks would surely have discouraged any local officials who might have been entertaining notions of liberalising their stance towards Islam, and can be seen only as fully supportive of the efforts of Usmankhodzhayev and others to eradicate Islam in the republic. Rumours have surfaced that Gorbachev's speech was not published in its entirety because of its extreme harshness, but given the aggressive tenor of statements and articles recently appearing in the Uzbek press, this is somewhat difficult to accept.

In January 1987 Gorbachev addressed the plenary session of the Central Committee of the CPSU, where he briefly spoke on the issue of relations between nationalities. He stressed the importance of internationalism as a cure for inertia in the movement towards overcoming 'ethnic chauvinism'.⁴⁶ Most of his comments concerning nationalities policy bordered on the mundane, however. He presented no new initiatives and simply restated his determination to combat forces which he viewed as antithetical to the 'traditions of Bolshevism'.⁴⁷ Given his comments in Tashkent two months before, one may surmise that Islam was one of these 'forces'.

Trends in the Media: 1986–87

In support of this official hostility, a litany of anti-Islamic commentary from the Uzbek academic community continued. *Kommunist Uzbekistana* featured numerous articles over the course of the year attacking Islam and urging an intensification of atheistic education. Islam outside the Soviet Union also received rough treatment, as it had in the previous year. In the view of one writer

... Islam retains the features inherent in every religion which permit it to be characterised as the 'opium of the people', poisoning the consciousness of the masses and promoting their spiritual enslavement. Islam has always been a hindrance to the social progress of mankind. It disparages reason, and arouses disbelief in one's own abilities. Islam trains one not to be a person proud of his knowledge and accomplishments in work, but to be a person submissive to fate, who cannot live the full life of a free toiler.⁴⁸

In spite of the fact that the Party and Usmankhodzhayev were redoubling their work and rhetoric against Islam, the author found himself able to praise the great success of atheistic work in Uzbekistan:

In traditions of socialist society many national customs and traditions are completely freed from extraneous religious features. On the basis of a materialist world-view and progressive science, party, soviet and social organisations strengthen and develop the rich atheistic traditions seven times over, and they appear as the means of founding of a new, socialist way of life and an authentic humanist culture.⁴⁹

Western 'falsifiers' were also taken to task. With remarkable polemical gymnastics, one commentator tried to refute the 'bourgeois' scholars by using their own arguments against them:

Representatives of various trends of anticommunism identify internationalisation with forcible assimilation, attempting to 'prove' that in the Soviet Union the culture of the 'Islamic' peoples is allegedly being suppressed, persecuted or assimilated and that the 'destruction of the national culture' is taking place. What they are referring to is the fact that in our country a number of obsolete national traditions and customs are dying out and that reactionary Islamic rituals are being eradicated. ...⁵⁰

While the level of anti-Islamic invective remained highest in *Kommunist Uzbekistana*, other scholarly publications contained similar material. *Obshchestvennyye nauki v Uzbekistane*, for instance, carried a number of articles in this vein, one of which dealt with 'bourgeois falsifiers' distortions' concerning the cooperation of national groups during the Great Patriotic War.⁵¹ Other commentary focused on the

'national question' was decidedly upbeat, taking its cue perhaps from the statement in a new edition of the programme of the Communist Party, which held that 'the national question, a relic from the past, has been successfully solved in the Soviet Union'.⁵²

The all-Union media also devoted considerable attention to religious matters in 1986. Articles appearing there were less coarse and more philosophical in tone than those in the Uzbek-language media, but nevertheless remained generally antagonistic towards any religious ideology. Three representative articles from three different all-Union newspapers will suffice to indicate the attitudes and approaches of these organs. The first item appeared in *Pravda* late in September 1986, roughly at the same time as the Uzbek republic media were raising their collective anti-Islamic voice to a frenzy. The editors of *Pravda* lectured their readers that 'An acute need is arising to investigate ... the essence and nature ... and the degree of religiosity in various regions of the USSR ... and the special features of individual religions – Islam, for example, which is closely bound up with national customs in certain republics ...'.⁵³ In December *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, generally considered one of the more reform-oriented publications in the USSR, printed a letter from a reader (Ye. Yevtushenko) questioning the role of atheism in Soviet society. A response by a doctor of philosophy, Suren Kaltakhchyan, to this letter was printed adjacent to it. It should be noted that the paper chose to print the initial letter only in conjunction with a critical riposte. 'Atheism is a voluntary phenomenon and not a forcibly imposed one', wrote the reader. 'Atheism should be one of the manifestations of freedom in our society, like religious belief, but should not be imposed by violence. ... Atheism by itself is not the source of morality. The source of morality is culture ...'.⁵⁴ 'It is not for nothing', responded Kaltakhchyan, 'that the Party orients us towards the improvement of atheistic education, especially among young people, in the search for new approaches, new directions and forms for atheistic propaganda.'⁵⁵

By the end of 1986, with modifications in policy towards Soviet Christians evident on the horizon, some members of the Uzbek intelligentsia began cautiously suggesting slight changes in religious policy for their republic. One of the first to test the waters was Yevgeni Yusupov, a member of the Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek Republic. Although he made use of the standard clichés concerning 'enemies' who discuss 'Islamic nationalism', some elements of a more moderate view of Islam were also evident in his comments.⁵⁶ The sudden appearance of this somewhat moderate voice less than a year after Usmanhodzhayev's blast indicates some disagreement with the first secretary's assessment of the situation, and perhaps shows that there were some among the Uzbek elite who envisaged a broader application of *glasnost* than previously experienced. The existence of unwelcome dissent on the matter is supported by the fact that Yusupov published his views in a large-circulation newspaper in Russian, which originated beyond the control of Usmanhodzhayev. One might conjecture that Yusupov's comments were an attempt to convince Moscow to put pressure on the first secretary to relax his stance against Islam. Given Gorbachev's statement in November in Tashkent, however, such an attempt would seem courageous, if not hopeless.

The article stopped short of calling for the acceptance of Islamic tradition, but rather implied that the extreme measures adopted in the early 1980s were unnecessary, and perhaps counterproductive. For example, Yusupov pointed to what he termed 'excesses' by certain officials in this effort to combat 'survivals of religion'. By destroying a number of sacred sites, Yusupov hypothesised, overzealous officials had played into the hands of the clergy. He reminded readers (especially those in

high positions) that a spirit of community at the local level is useful in times of crisis and should be allowed to develop.⁵⁷

If Yusupov's somewhat muted call for *glasnost* moved policymakers in Moscow, no effect of this was relayed back to the upper echelons of the Uzbek Communist Party. In the spring of 1987 the minister of justice of the Uzbek SSR described what he termed the 'unofficial and illegal activities' of Muslim clergy in Uzbekistan. He indicated that Islamic believers were not waiting for official approval to put *glasnost* into action: 'Numerous religious ceremonies and customs are increasingly being observed in regions, cities, villages ... and neighbourhoods'. Namangan *oblast* was again mentioned as an area where religious activity was especially prevalent. This powerful minister made the startling statement that on religious holidays '*hundreds of thousands* of people attend places of worship' (emphasis added).⁵⁸

Academics also generally failed to heed Yusupov's muted message against 'excesses' towards Islam, and continued to join battle in the Uzbek media. One or two calls for a more moderate line were heard. A teacher of scientific atheism remarked in late May 1987 on the modernisation of religion – 'Most religious establishments are equipped with microphones and loudspeakers through which to blare their messages' – but went on to reveal some displeasure with Uzbek party policy. After the usual clichés noting how 'former Nazis and traitors' were being employed by the CIA to influence the situation in Central Asia, the author cautioned against extremism in the struggle against Islam, drawing an interesting comparison between the activities of some contemporary administrators and those of their counterparts of the 1930s, when 'mosques and madrassahs were destroyed without cause'.⁵⁹ Calls among the Uzbek elite for a more pragmatic approach were isolated voices, however. Islamic customs, especially 'life rituals' such as marriages and funerals, were continually denounced and often by those who spoke from personal experience. A young Uzbek scholar related in the largest-circulation Uzbek-language newspaper that the obligations associated with Islamic burials were so onerous they resulted in his own sister-in-law's death.⁶⁰ Other articles informed readers of recently organised atheistic meetings in certain neighbourhoods⁶¹ of Tashkent and of the success rate of the Tashkent customs in intercepting 'ideologically harmful materials'.⁶²

Most of the scholarly literature thus continued to attack Islam and deviations from the party line can be detected only rarely. Clearly, many scholars of 'scientific atheism' were caught off guard by the resurgence of religious observance in Soviet society at this time. They responded by redefining aspects of 'religiosity' in terms of 'cultural identity'. This exercise allowed 'religious deviation' to be defined quite broadly, and thus served to justify an intensified crackdown on Islam. At the same time, commentators tried to have it both ways. Increased requests for Islamic burials, for example, were said to indicate increased 'religiosity', but it would often simultaneously be argued that those making such requests were not in fact 'religious' in the strict sense.

The Changing of the Guard: A New Era for Uzbekistan?

A reading of the Soviet popular and scholarly media shows that from early 1985 through 1987 there was little evidence of a softening of the Party's position towards Islam in Uzbekistan, or indeed in any other Muslim region of the Soviet Union. Indeed, almost three years after the official introduction of the concept of *glasnost*, the policies of the Andropov and Chernenko administrations towards Islam were still clearly in vogue. Was the cause simple inertia, or was there a more structural factor

inhibiting a rethinking of party attitudes?

In retrospect, it seems clear that the Party would have stood to gain little by fully applying *glasnost* to Soviet Muslims. The war in Afghanistan was continuing apace, and few foreign policy gains were possible among Middle Eastern nations (or other Islamic countries) by showing more flexibility in regard to domestic Islam. The dangers of *glasnost* in the Muslim regions, especially Uzbekistan, were clear, however. The edifice of 'socialist brotherhood' having already begun to crumble by 1986, fears on the part of the Soviet government of intensified centrifugal movements in Soviet Central Asia were not entirely unwarranted.

The Usmankhodzhayev era in the Uzbek SSR ended abruptly. In January 1988 he retired from the post of first secretary, ostensibly for reasons of poor health. Ten months later he was indicted on charges of corruption, a fate he shared with many of his former subordinates.⁶³ Within three years, the Soviet republic he had presided over embarked on the path of independence and the sovereign state of Uzbekistan assumed the role of a regional leader. The status of Islam in the new state, however, continued as a contentious and problematic issue, which even after a decade of independence remains unresolved.

Notes and References

- ¹ For details of this campaign, particularly actions taken by Abdullayeva, see *Yash Leninchi*, 25 February 1988, and *Sovet Ozbekistani*, 18 March 1988.
- ² An excellent discussion of this transition is provided in William Fierman, 'Glasnost' in practice: the Uzbek experience', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1–45.
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- ⁵ *loc. cit.*
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- ⁹ For statistical data on religious groups in the USSR, see Paul D. Steeves, *Keeping the Faiths: Religion and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Holmes and Meier, New York, 1989).
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