

# Editorial

After half a century of oppression and persecution Islam in the Soviet Union is now in a strong position, perhaps stronger than the Church. Muslim leaders "may justifiably view the future with optimism" conclude Professor Bennigsen and Mme Lemercier-Quellejey in their article "Official Islam in the Soviet Union" (pp. 148-59). The Soviet Muslim population is already large (45-50 million as against 140 million Russians) and, in contrast to the Russians whose birthrate is falling, the Muslim population is growing. Professor Bennigsen and Mme Lemercier-Quellejey pointed out in their previous article published in *RCL* ("Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR", *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 153-61) that after the turn of the century the Muslims may challenge the Russians as the leading community in the USSR. So no student of the Soviet Union can ignore the importance of Islam.

The official Muslim hierarchy is completely loyal to the Soviet government and acts as a useful ally in the government's relations with foreign Muslim countries. The four Spiritual Directorates which supervise Muslim religious life in the USSR are docile and uncritical of internal Soviet policy, which continues to be hostile towards Islam. But there is another "unofficial" Islam, which is secret, militant and highly conservative. This "face" of Islam is far from being under the control of the Soviet authorities, who must surely fear this movement of secret Sufi brotherhoods which, according to Professor Bennigsen and Mme Lemercier-Quellejey, command enormous support among Soviet Muslims. Quoting a Soviet source, these two authors claim that in the North Caucasus alone "there are more than half a million adepts, a fantastic number for an underground society which is banned by Soviet law" (*RCL* Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 156). The Sufi brotherhoods follow a conservative form of Islam and aim at building a world in which Islam penetrates every aspect of human life, both public and private. They are tightly-knit organizations with a strong leadership and are committed to a *jihad* (Holy War) against the "infidel".

Afghanistan which borders on the Soviet republics of Turkmenistan

and Uzbekistan is the scene at present of a conflict between the Moscow-backed communist regime of President Noor Mohammad Tarraki and Islamic "holy fighters" who have declared a *jihad*. Bruce Loudon, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* of 14 March 1979, reported that the formal declaration of the *jihad* had been announced by the Afghanistan National Liberation Front which is the largest of three guerrilla insurgent movements involved in the struggle. According to Mr Loudon an Afghan Muslim cleric declared, "Our men are fighting with their rifles in one hand and the Koran in the other . . . They are fighting a pagan regime which has no place in Afghanistan. The *jihad* will surely mean the end of the communists, and the triumph of Islam, just as it has triumphed in Iran and Pakistan." Such a belligerent declaration must remind the Soviet authorities of the potential conflict within their own borders.

Unlike "unofficial" Islam in the USSR, the official leadership presents no threat at all to the Soviet authorities. The Muslim leaders echo the Soviet government's propaganda about the advantages which Muslims who live in the USSR have gained, and encourage Soviet Muslims to adapt themselves to Soviet "reality". For example, in order to prevent the observance of Ramadan conflicting with a citizen's duty to work, many categories of believers have been exempted from the fast. Also, in many cases Muslims are not required to observe all the Muslim times of prayer. According to the Mufti of Tashkent, Zia ud-Din Babakhanov, "Muslims in the Soviet Union live a free life . . . There is no pressure or ban by the government of the Soviet Union with respect to Muslims performing their religious rites or printing the Koran or other religious books" (*Radio Moscow*, in Persian to Iran 22 January 1979, 10.30 GMT). It is true that a limited amount of Muslim literature is produced in the USSR and that several small editions of the Koran have been printed, but few mosques are open and functioning, and only two small institutions for training Muslim clergy remain.

In its relations with the Muslim world abroad, the Soviet government is careful to gloss over any conflict which exists between Islam and Marxism-Leninism. For example, in an attempt to cultivate good relations with the new regime in Iran, Soviet broadcasts to Iran say that Islam and communism are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, within their own borders the Soviet authorities maintain unceasing pressure against Islam as they do against other faiths.

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