

Unofficial Islam: a Muslim Minority in the USSR

JOHN SOPER

Soviet media occasionally acknowledge that unofficial religious leaders, who wield great influence over the Muslim population in the Soviet Union, exist alongside the officially recognized Muslim clerical organizations. For example, an article in the Kirgiz-language journal *Kommunist*, urging more effective atheist efforts, notes :

We encounter cases in which there are no mosques or registered mullahs in a number of places in the republic [i.e. Kirgiziya]. But people who call themselves "mullahs" or, in other words, "stray mullahs" are spreading propaganda about many religious rites and ceremonies. There are not just a few such people in the republic. It is necessary to put a stop to every kind of activity of theirs in every place. Even the Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan does not give these "stray mullahs" permission to conduct any Muslim customs and traditions.¹

When discussing unofficial Islam, the media, on the whole, confine themselves to generalities such as these, but occasionally they reveal more details.

A most illuminating series of articles on the subject was recently published in the Uigur-language newspaper *Kommunizm tugh'i*. The series begins with a long article entitled "Customs and Traditions or a Way to Make a Living?" which recounts the activities of a group of at least seven individuals in the Sultanqorgan quarter of Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan.² The quarter is inhabited by many Uigurs who, it becomes apparent from the series, form a tightly-knit community.³ Most of the discussion in the series is devoted to an exposé of how the mullahs take advantage of their enormous prestige in the community to obtain money. The self-proclaimed mullahs are accused of accepting an "envelope" (always in quotation marks in these articles) at weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies from the organizer of the ceremony in payment for their religious services.⁴

While this way of making a livelihood is of some inherent interest in the Soviet context, it is the description of the mullahs' activities that is of

greater interest. The rites they celebrate are quite varied – weddings, funerals, mourning ceremonies, recitations of the Koran from beginning to end, circumcision rites (*neka, ölüm-zhitim, nâzir-chiraq, khâtma-qur'an, sünnät toyi*). Among the Uigurs of the Sultanqorgan quarter alone, the number of such ceremonies can be quite large: “On weekends there are [ceremonies] in ten or so places, and on regular working days, at one or two families. That means that their number can run from 15 to 20 a week, or from 60 to 80 a month.”⁵ The unofficial mullahs can be expected to participate in each of these ceremonies, which provide them with an obvious opportunity to promote the teachings of Islam. For instance, at a funeral the mullah would rehearse the question-and-answer session which is supposed to transpire on the Day of Judgement: “Who is your Lord?” – “My Lord is Allah”; “Who is your Prophet?” – “Muhammad, the Apostle of God (*Muhämmät rasulilla*)”; “What is your Nation?” – “My Nation is that of Abraham, the Friend of God (*Millitim Ibrahim Khalilulla*).”⁶

Such observances constitute the traditional form of social-religious ceremony, but there is evidence that the activities of some Central Asian religious leaders are not limited to these. According to an article in *Kommunist Tadzhikistana* (28 April 1976) for example, some clerics organize readings from the Koran to mark certain occasions of civil significance – graduation from school or university, induction into the army. Uigur “stray mullahs” are reported to have participated in similar ceremonies, although not perhaps in the expected manner. In contrast to the official Soviet position, induction into the armed forces is not considered an occasion for rejoicing:

At a time in recent years when the tradition of festively sending young men off into the ranks of the Soviet Army and Navy is developing and becoming a part of our life, some people among the Uigur population, living in villages around Alma-Ata, invite in the whole community, and mourning ceremonies for the living boy are being conducted and the Koran is being recited. What kind of behaviour is this? Mourning ceremonies are to be held for those who earlier fought and sacrificed themselves in the Great Patriotic War. But now these young men are living and will come back after fulfilling their sacred military service. It is well-known to all that these individuals [i.e. the mullahs] conduct the mourning ceremony for the sake of the money they get for doing nothing. Shouldn't they rather gather the boy's friends and relatives and organize a party?!⁷

This much exposure at the religious functions of the Uigur community has meant that these unofficial mullahs are highly visible members of the community. According to the series of articles in *Kommunizm tughi*, these mullahs have acquired such influence that if someone does not support

their activities, he can expect a bad reputation and can even face ostracism :

If the host [of a ceremony] does not present an "envelope" to one of them [i.e. the mullahs], a negative opinion of him will be formed; word will go round that he is "a skinflint" and "a man who doesn't know the customs and traditions, the rites and rituals". Under the influence of the afore-mentioned "mullahs", there is a danger that such a person will even be kicked out of the community and left all alone.⁸

These mullahs also attract followers, or devotees (*ikhlasmän*), who commend their mullahs to others: "Oh, if I didn't have some mullah, just how would it be?! He's a holy man and an esteemed man in our homeland, he's a blessing!" or "Our customs and traditions are being preserved because there are such mullahs."⁹

Campaigns connected with unofficial Islam have been organized, although apparently only on a minor scale. One man, for instance, undertook his own campaign against the subscription drive of *Kommunizm tughi* and *Yengi hayat*.¹⁰ He engaged in what *Kommunizm tughi* calls "counter-agitation" by arguing that "these newspapers criticize the mullahs instead of praising and respecting them, so there's no need to subscribe to these papers". Another campaign consisted of a chain letter which was passed around the "Druzhba" settlement of Khäshkiläng raion. The letter stated that God had appeared in a dream to a child in the Caucasus and said: "Do not ye forget Me; if ye do, ye shall face My wrath!"¹¹ According to the authors of the letter, every person who received it should make nine copies and distribute them. Otherwise, the letter warned, a disaster would befall his house, and he would perish.

Religious activities of such an order are not just individual forms of worship; rather, they involve large segments of the community in ways that run counter to the general direction of Soviet society, promoted by the Communist Party and Soviet government. Unofficial Islam represents an obvious problem in a society where the authorities try to regulate social activities of any magnitude. Unlike "registered" mullahs and other religious leaders, who at times strive to accommodate Islam with the Soviet way of life,¹² "stray mullahs" need not make any such attempt. Thus, a student recently complained in a letter to *Kommunizm tughi* :

In answering the questions of young people [on the goal of life and the nature of good and evil], religious leaders do not shy away from slandering the policy of the Party and government. Thus religious leaders make use of any means to achieve their ends.¹³

The series of articles in *Kommunizm tughi* was obviously prepared and published in order to discourage such religious activities. But it is curious that in seeking to undermine the influence of "stray mullahs" on the

Uigur population, the writers of the series do not resort to the usual propagandistic criticism of religion which constitutes much of Soviet atheist literature. In fact, the general tone of these articles towards religious observances is restrained. One article notes in a matter-of-fact manner :

The Prophet Muhammad's birthday (the twelfth day of the month of Rabī^e al-awwal) is marked by some of the Muslim population. This is every Muslim's private affair, and no one would hinder him.¹⁴

Besides stressing the mullahs' alleged monetary aspirations, these articles make an appeal to the national pride of Uigurs. Three Tashkent Uigur pensioners and long-standing Party members remark in a letter to *Kommunizm tuzhi* :

Is not the Uigur people a people who had their own State, their own culture, and their own rich history before the acceptance of Islam? The famous "Twelve Muqams", "The Thousand Houses", and other artistic and cultural monuments, the Uigur people's language and [ancient] script have attracted the interest of scholars not only from the Middle East but also from Western Europe. . . . In this short article, it is difficult to set forth all the wonders of the Uigur people's history, of course. [But] Islam played a reactionary role in the life of the people and hindered the further development of art and culture.¹⁵

Furthermore, when a mullah claims that the believer's true nation is that of the prophet Abraham, the writers of a critical article denounce this as denying their Uigur nationality :

We were astonished at "instruction" that answers the question "What is your Nation?" with "You should say, 'My nation is that of Abraham, the Friend of God' " after a man dies – a man whose ancestors for seven generations – no rather, for seventy generations – have been called Uigurs and in whose civil passport it is written that his nationality is Uigur. Was there ever in Uigur history a patriotic man named Abraham who could have been the representative of his nation?¹⁶

The aim of such arguments is clear: they appeal to the Uigurs' sense of national pride in order to undermine their more powerful attachment to a supra-national grouping, that of the community of Muslims.¹⁷ An attachment to Islam is evidently perceived as rendering Soviet Muslims more resistant to integration into the Soviet way of life. Apparently, those who prepared this series of articles feel that if there is anything that can counteract the influence of Islam on Soviet Muslims, it is their sense of national pride.

The series of articles in *Kommunizm tuzhi* also emphasizes another

deterrent to the activities of "stray mullahs" – namely, that these activities are illegal. Several individuals – Ömär Tokhtayev, a mullah at the Alma-Ata mosque; Munajidin Garayev, a former teacher in Sinkiang;¹⁸ Heytakhun Zayitov; and Nizamidin Iminov – are "reminded" of the unlawfulness of some of their activities :

The *raion* procurator's office has been handed the task of investigating complaints from citizens about instances of parasitism, and the task of calling the guilty to account.¹⁹

These individuals are accused of conducting "large-scale religious ceremonies, which are to be celebrated in a mosque, in residential areas" without the permission of the local *soviet*, and they are charged with having kept no account of the money collected from citizens. Not just "stray mullahs" are involved, since one article speaks of "instances of the laws on religious cults being broken by the Alma-Ata mosque and the above-mentioned mullahs".²⁰ To combat unofficial Islam among the Uigurs of Alma-Ata, the article goes on to say :

It is contemplated that raids by Komsomol activists and the Commission on the observance of laws on religious cults will be organized on homes where religious ceremonies may be taking place at weekends.

But the penalties facing "stray mullahs" who are found guilty of breaking the law are not specified by *Kommunizm tuzhi*.

The extent of unofficial Islam cannot readily be determined from the descriptions presented in this series of articles. The series does not indicate how many "stray mullahs" there are among the Uigurs of Alma-Ata, and, in fact, the Soviet authorities may not even know how many there are. But it is clear that the problem has been growing more acute in recent years. One article cites a pensioner as stating :

Ten or fifteen years ago we conducted the ceremonies of our various national customs and traditions without mullahs and *qazis*. But now, the more the population in our quarter grows . . . the more the number of mullahs grows.²¹

It is also clear that the problem of unofficial Islam is not limited simply to the Uigurs of Alma-Ata.

¹ *Kommunist*, Frunze, No. 11, 1978, p. 55.

² *Kommunizm tuzhi*, Alma-Ata (although distributed in other Central Asian republics), 7 December 1978, pp. 3-4.

³ According to the 1970 census, there were 19,105 Uigurs in Alma-Ata out of a total population in the city of 729,633 (*Itogi vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1970 goda*, Moscow, 1973, Vol. 4, p. 233). How many of these Uigurs live in the Sultanqorgan quarter (*mähällä*) is not indicated.

⁴ This is not the only accusation directed at these mullahs. In the article of 13 January, a young taxi driver complains that after driving a mullah and his followers somewhere, he was paid with just a prayer. One of the followers told the

mullah, "This [young man] is a Muslim child of ours; say a prayer for the child's health and well-being."

⁵ *Kommunizm tughi*, 7 December 1978.

⁶ *Kommunizm tughi*, 13 January 1979. The last question refers to the Prophet Muhammad's claim that Islam is a continuation of the true monotheistic religion established by Abraham. In Sura 2, verse 128 of the Koran, Abraham prays that God should make him and his nation submissive to His will. The term "Islam" means submission to the will of God.

⁷ *Kommunizm tughi*, 22 February 1979.

⁸ *Kommunizm tughi*, 7 December 1978.

⁹ *Kommunizm tughi*, 13 January 1979.

¹⁰ *Yengi hayat* is the Uigur-language newspaper printed in a modified Arabic script. It is intended primarily for Uigurs who studied Uigur in Sinkiang and subsequently moved to the Soviet Union.

¹¹ *Kommunizm tughi*, 7 December 1978.

¹² See, for example, *Nauka i religiya*, No. 12, 1978, pp. 30-3.

¹³ *Kommunizm tughi*, 2 February 1979.

¹⁴ *Kommunizm tughi*, 7 December 1978.

¹⁵ *Kommunizm tughi*, 23 January 1979.

¹⁶ *Kommunizm tughi*, 13 January 1979.

¹⁷ Although an appeal to the Uigurs' sense of national pride is used here to make a point, such nationalist sentiment is not out of place in *Kommunizm tughi*. This newspaper is consistently more "nationalistic" in tone than other Turkic-language newspapers which originate in Central Asia. This may be because Uigurs enjoy a special status in the Soviet Union: they constitute a model of Soviet concern for the interests of the non-Russian nationalities, in contrast to the situation of the more than five million Uigurs living in the People's Republic of China.

¹⁸ Much of the criticism levelled against these mullahs in the first of these articles concentrates on Munajidin Garayev. Only one article mentions that he came from Sinkiang - a fact that could be significant. It is thought that the Uigurs who fled from China may have a stronger attachment to Islam than the Uigurs who have lived under Soviet rule for decades. These articles do not even indirectly place the blame for the strength of unofficial Islam upon Uigurs who came from Sinkiang. One article quotes Garayev as saying, "I'm a true Muslim, I'm a mullah, I do as I want. Moscow protects us."

¹⁹ *Kommunizm tughi*, 25 January 1979.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Kommunizm tughi*, 13 January 1979.

Keston Film

THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE

A 25-minute sound film in full colour on the work of Keston College at its headquarters in Kent and on its outreach in Eastern Europe. This film can be hired from :

NATIONAL FILM CRUSADE

P.O. BOX 4

BRISTOL BS99 7SA