Religious Education in Soviet Central Asia: A Secular Based Approach

It is imperative to identify and analyze the educational policies, in order to understand

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Abstract

the direction upon which an education ladder is embarked. Central Asia since time imemorial was under subjugation of foreign rule. This paper investigates the seven decades Communist rule of Soviets in the Muslim oriented Central Asia with special focus on religious education. The dominant Communist party served as a seedbed of power not only in economics and politics but also in the realm of ideology and education. Religious policies of the Soviet Union were full of unpropitious stellar influences and this evaluation is more or less correct. The subsequent persecution of religious education, its carriers and scholars, Ulamas and believers clearly depicts the atheistic religious policy of Soviets. Atheistic propaganda was intensified in the early 1920s and 1930s, arbitrary arrests and execution was used to eliminate Muslim leaders who refused to co-operate with the authorities. All Islamic schools

KeyWords: Islam, Soviet, Religion, Secular, Education, Hujra, Maktabas and Madrassas.

(Maktabas and Madrassas) were closed and religious literature was confiscated. Inspite of

the approach of "drying them out" Islamic education survived in hujra (monastic cell) system

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Introduction

Transoxiana, known in the Arabic and Persian sources as *Mawara- al- Nahr*, is the ancient name used for the portion of Central Asia corresponding approximately modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, South Kyrgyzstan, and southwest Kazakhstan. The area had been known to the Greeks as Transoxiana (land beyond the river Oxus) and to the Iranians as Turan, (the land of the Tur), a term used in the Persian national epic *Shah-nama*. Geographically, it is the area between the Anu Darya and Syr Darya. Central Asia in the modern geographical designation covering an area of considerable political, ethnic and linguistic diversity, marked by a distinctive cultural synthesis rooted in the meeting of the civilization of inner Asia, with that of Middle Asia and the Islamic World.

Since time immemorial, central Asia had close ties with different ethnic groups. The Sakas, the Parathares, the Huns, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Mongols had laid tremendous impact on the world history in general and Central Asian history, culture, language, education etc in particular.

The call of Islam reached Central Asia during the mid of 7th century, through three distinctive ways- via the Arab armies (led by Qutayba Ibn Muslim), scholaristic way and traders' way. The Islamization of the region was accomplished quite rapidly. Within some 50 years, Transoxiana had been incorporated politically, culturally and economically into the Islamic Caliphate. The roots of Islamic faith were strengthened during the Karakhanid and Seljuk empires. Islam developed deeper historical roots in the non-nomadic Tajik and Uzbek populations than among the nomadic Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Kazakh tribes.⁴ Islam had its dramatic influence on every aspect of human life. Islam gave fillip to the knowledge and widened its scope and disseminated knowledge to the outside world. Education, science and technology got a new orientation in the region. During the Muslim era research in the field of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, pharmacology and geography reached its culmination. Great legendaries and great cities like Abu Musa al Khawazimi, Al –Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Al – Buruni and cities like Bukhara, Marv, Samarqand and Farghana were great centres of Islamic learning. It is worth mentioning here that Ibn –Sina's *Al Qanun fi Tibb* was taught as textbook

¹ For more details see Erkin Alptekin, "Relations between Eastern and Western Turkistan." Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 51, December 21, 1988.

² The term Central Asia is a Soviet invention and includes only the four former Soviet Asian Republics. Arab definition of the area is the land on the other side of the River (Mawara- al- Nahr).

³ Elizabeth. E. Bacon. "Central *Asia under Russian Rule; A study in Cultural Change*". Cornell University Press, 1996. P.5

⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "The New Struggle in Central Asia: A Primer for the Baffled," *World Policy Journal* 17, no.4 (2000/2001): 33.

in the western universities for a long time during the Muslim rule, scholarship made great strides and there was host of scholars in every branch of knowledge, some great works ever produced by the soil on Central Asia are *Tarikh-i-Bukhara*, *Mujumul-Buldan* (Marvels of the Land), *Shah-nama*, *Garshasp-nama* (Epic of Garshasp), *Hudud al Alam*. In mathematics, Ahmad Abd Allah Al- Marwazi (popularly known as Al Habash al –Khasib, d.870), Abu Mashar Balkhi(d.886) and Abu Ahmad al Fergana, an astronomer and mathematician wrote *Usul ilm al Nujum* (Principles of Astronomy). The period produced two great polymaths Ibn – Sina and Abu Rahman al Buruni from Khawazam. The scholarship of Central Asia during the Muslim had left an indelible mark on the world. The period from 7th century to the end of the fifteenth century is marked as the age of achievement in the annals of world history.⁵

In the eighteenth century Tsarist penetration started in the region. The main regional entities in the southern tier were the Khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand; in the north, there were three Kazak tribal confederations or Hordes (known respectively as the Big, the Little and the Middle Horde). The Tsarist annexation of Central Asia took place with relatively little local resistance. The Kazaks were the first to come under Russian rule. This was a creeping process which took over a century to complete, lasting from the mideighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The conquest of the Khanates began with the fall of Tashkent in 1865. Bukhara and Khiva became protectorates in 1868 and 1873 respectively; Kokand was fully integrated into the Russian Empire in 1876. Transcaspia (modern Turkmenistan) was conquered in the 1880s.

What Is Religious Education?

Under normal circumstance, religious education may be defined as a lesson, instruction or coaching of a specific religion. In contemporary and secular society, religious education involves a particular kind of teaching which is not much associated with the academic world and usually considers religious faith as the basic ideology and working modality, as well as a required condition of attendance. We can also say that religious education is a phrase given to education concerned with the study of religion. It can be referred to the teachings achieved through religious association for information with regards to doctrinal beliefs and faith, or for learning in various areas of religion. The expression frequently has common characteristics with religious studies. Religious education makes a

⁵ Asimov M.S. (1997). *History of Civilization of Central Asia. Vol. IV.* Part. IV. UNECO. London, p.39

distinctive contribution to a balanced and broad based school curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society; and prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

Russian Revolution and Jadidism in Central Asia

The beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution had introduced a new era in the Central Asian region across all sectors of society. On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, three major and distinct formal educational authorities were functioning in Central Asia. These were the traditional Islamic education system, the Russian education system, and the education system advocated by the *Jadidists* Persons who advocated new (*Jadid*) ways of doing things. Soviet education did not completely replace Islamic education system until late in the 1920s.

Jadidism was developed by the national-progressive intellectuals of the region. The term in Arabic means "New". The term came into existence from the concept of "*Usual –i-jadid (a new method)*. The distinct flavour of Jadidism is captured in the following exhortation penned by Munawwar Qari in 1906:

"O Co-religionists, O Compatriots! Let's be just and compare our situation with that of other advanced nations. Let's secure the future of our coming generations and save them from becoming slaves and servants of others. The Europeans, taking advantage of our negligence and ignorance, took our government from our hands and are an effect to reform our affairs in order to safeguard ourselves, our nation and our children, our future will be extremely difficult. Reform begins with a rapid start in cultivating sciences conforming to our times, becoming acquainted with the reform of our schools and our methods of teaching".

Abd Akkah Avlani (1970-1934), had convinced that the traditional Islamic schools neither by their character nor by their programmes could meet the demands of modern education.⁷

The proponents of the reform movements are Mahmudhodzha Behbudi (1875-1919), Munavrar Abdulrashidhanov (1878-1931), Abdullah Avlovi (1878-1934) and Miryakubn Dawlat (1885-1935) more actively participated in the socio-political and cultural life of the region. The foremost aim was to reform the Muslim religious schools, creating new methodological schools. They normally referred to themselves by the term

⁷ Michal kamper, "Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its successor states" London and New York P.228

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Munawwar Qari Abdurrashid Khan Oghli, ÔIslah ne demakdadur, Khurshid (Tashkent), 28 September 1906.

"taraqqipararvarlar (progressive)". Their principle aim was to introduce the *Usual-i-jadid* or new methods of teaching in the Maktabs and Madrassas. They argued that their approach would bring rigours to the religious educational institutions by introducing new methods and mastery of materials and on systematic Arabic language instruction. These techniques, they maintained, would also bring broad range of courses including secular subjects in a new kind of Madrassas to be called *Muhandasalik madrassalar or technical Madrassas*. Accordingly, a number of new method schools(Jadidi Schools) in Tashkent reached 24 in the year 1917, 5 schools in the Samarqand oblast, 39 in the Syr-Darya oblast(including the environs of Tashkent) and 30 schools in the Fergana oblast. Thus, the total number of new method Maktabs in Uzbekistan came to 90 schools approximately.9

Soviets initially used the jaddidler reformers with two fold aims- one, to transform the education system into wholly secular, second to use them for their own purpose. Because the main attempt of the jadidhs was to develop an educational model that would merge religious and secular education to a new educational institution. But quickly the movement was suppressed. Soviets were perceiving great threat that it would emerge Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism in the Soviet occupied Central Asia.

However, during the Second World War a kind of *Jadidi* concept re-emerged. When Soviets themselves began to establish their own Islamic Educational institutions under a new Spiritual Directorate (SADUM)

Islamic Education under Soviet Surveillance

The majority of researchers find the religious policies of the Soviet states were repressive, and this evaluation is more or less correct. The constant pressure on religion and its carriers (Ulama and believers) was the main constituent constant in the totally anti-religious policy during the period of the Soviet regime. On the eve of Russian revolution in

⁸ Martha Bill Olcot, "Islam in Uzbekistan, Religious education and state ideology". P.4

⁹ Michal kamper, "Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states." London and New York .P.228

¹⁰ Ibid, p.223

Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

1917, the native population of Central Asia could choose between three types of schools viz. Islamic schools (Maktabas and Madrassas), Jadidi schools (based on the new teaching methods that combined the religious and secular elements) and Secular-Russian Native Schools. Soviets had identified several other educational policies upon which their system was built and through which the system operates like a) free education at all levels. b) Instruction in the native language. c) co-education at all levels and in all types of schools. d) and a uniform course of study. According to the data provided by Ostroumov on 1 January 1913, there were 7,290 Maktabas (with 70,864 students) and 376 madrasas (with 9,637 students). Soviet mounted sporadic attacks against the Islamic educational institutions. Soviets had changed the religious thinking of the people through communism. Millennium old psychological substratum had remained like marriage, burials and customs like circumcision¹². The Soviet government planned to establish only one type of schools, namely the Secular Soviet Schools. It intended not only to reform but to destroy the system of traditional Islamic education. Soviet educational policies were based on the policy of Socialism and Communism established on the Marxist-Leninist approach. Lenin wrote, "Our object in the field of schools is the same struggle for the bourgeoisie, we openly declared that a school outside life, outside politics is a lie and hypocrisy." The purpose of education is the training of educated, thoroughly developed, active builders of a Communist society. 14

In the mid 1920s the Soviet government ran only 1/3 of all primary schools in Uzbekistan, 2/3 were still related to the religious school system. The number of Islamic Maktabas even increased which can be best understood through the following table.

Islamic schools in Uzbekistan in 1920s

Okrug(Administrative	Number	of	old-method	Number of pupils
districts)	schools			
Tashkent	55			858
Samarqand	342			4,406
Fergana	79			1,693
Andizhan	427			8,692
Bukhara	148			1972

¹² Svat Soucek, A History of inner Asia, Cambridge 2000,P.26

¹³ V.I.Lenin collected works, Moscow, 1929. Vol.37 P.77

¹⁴ How Russia Does it(London), times educational supplement, November 29,1957.P.1520

Zeravshan	105	1,189
Khodzhent	38	693
Surkhandaria	49	490
Kashkadaria	119	1,190

Source; Statistical Information of the Uzbek Commissariat of Education

Islamic schooling became the most important factor of continuity in education during the years of anti-Islamic propaganda (1921-928) and of the massive persecution of Ulama (which occurred in the three waves of repression in 1927, 1937-938 and 1949) In 1927 there were 199 Maktabas in the Kokand Okrug, in the Nur-Ata region and the Samarkand Okrug the number of Maktabas steadily increased year by year. Also in the city of Andizhan there were still slightly more religious than Soviets' schools in the academic year 1926/1927. ¹⁵

On May 14, 1914 the government with the directives and decrees ¹⁶ announced the foundation of Soviet schools; this makes the intervention of Soviet in the field of education. Soviet repression against Islamic education was more from 1920 to 1985, the situation and status of Islamic religious institutions deteriorated markedly. The period had a disastrous impact on the system of Islamic education. The majority of religious schools were shut down and many important Islamic scholars were persecuted. To eliminate the Islamic schools, Soviets deprived them from financial foundation. Islamic schools were maintained by means of Waqf ¹⁷ incomes and voluntary donations from private persons (*Ihsan, Kharat, Sadqaat*, and *Nazr*). Waqf property was legal in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic from 1923 to 1926. Educational institutions that opposed reforms were deprived of their Waqf properties and often were simply closed. In 1918, *Waqf* properties were formally managed by the Commissariat for Education and in early February 1919 they were transferred to the Narkomnats, headed by Grigorii Andreev (Dzhurabaev).

¹⁵ Michal Kamper, "Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states" London and New York P.238

¹⁶ Order No.145 of the Council of the People's Commissars(i.e. government)

Waqf (an Arabic word) means "Pious foundation". It also means property set aside for religious purposes". *Waqf* revenues provided salaries for imams, *mudarris* and mullahs, and so made existence possible for primary and secondary schools (*Maktabas* and *Madrassas*), mosques, shrines and Sufi convents, thus serving to reinforce Islamic religious authority. Moreover, charitable endowments funded important welfare institutes such as orphanages.

The sixth plenum of the Uzbekistan Communist Party (13-15 June 1927) adopted a resolution which called for various measures to weaken the Spiritual Directorate, to stop the reform process in Islamic schools, to eliminate Islamic schools in general by depriving them of their financial foundation, and finally to ban Islamic schools and mullahs from teaching. In accordance with the decision, the government took up a general course towards the complete destruction of Islamic schools. In 1918, a decree was announced "on the separation of Church and State and of schools and Church". In November 1928, the sixth session of the USSR adopted the decree "On the liquidation of old method schools and Madrassas". By the end of 1920,s practically all Maktabas had been shut down. The Soviet policy of "drying them out" was not without success. In 1920s all old method Maktabas and Madrassas were fading away after they had lost their official financial support: only 20 Maktabas and 75 students of the madrasas had remained in Tashkent¹⁸. The era of Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), brought a new wave of persecution and his approach supposedly pushed the country on its way towards Communism. In 1961, the new programme of the Communist Party promulgated that the country had entered a new and extensive stage of building communism. The Baraq-khan madrasa was closed in 1961.

Hujra system of Education

The term Hujra (also *doira*) means circle and often refers to the institution in which religious education has taken and continue to take place. The hujra were direct response to the atheistic policies of the Soviets and the mass persecution of Ulamas and shut down of Islamic schools. Nevertheless after the liquidation of confessional education in 1920s, and 1930,s religious education managed to survive and underground system of education development called Hujra. ¹⁹ The form and content of education in the hujra system remained traditional and

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¹⁸ Michal Kamper, "Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states". London and New York .P.231

The dictionary definition of hujra is "cell" or "chamber". This network was the continuation of traditional forms for Islamic education(Maktabas, Madrassas and Qarikhan)in the Soviet period it could only survive on the territory of the former Turkestan Governor General ship and especially in the Farghana valley, due to its ability to accommodated Russian forms of government and control

had a conservative character. 20 They trained experts in the religious (Ulama) education of a relatively high level in comparison with official educational institutions of S.A.D.UM.(1943-992) In fact the normal education of Ulama took place in the hujra network and was legalized through the awarding of a diploma by official schools. The Stalin years were the grimmest for religious education, and virtually none of the surviving clerics was willing to take on pupils. Conditions eased somewhat after World War II. The religious education that continued was carried out in families in what was termed *qori pochcho hujralari or hujra qori-pochcho*. ²¹ In 1956, Abdurahmonjon established his own hujra, in which students were offered the studies of the rituals in silent Zigr-Khafi: psycho-physical concentration-tarweed prayers as well as studies of mystical poetry, including works of Jalaldin Rumi and Bedilva (17th century poet). Rahmatulla-alloma, established a hujra in 1978, where students were taught Arabic, the Quran, Hadith and the basics of figh (Islamic jurisprudence). The curriculum also included essays of Taymiya, Maullana Maududi and Tafsir (commentary of Quran) of Syeed Qutb (FI Zalali Quran). The most famous of these hujras are Nordirhon-domla from Tashkent, established an important hujra (existence from 1962 to mid 1970's), Hazrat Baba Muhammad ran an important hujra in Surkhandaria, Qozi -Domulla (Abdurasid-domulla) ran an influential hujra in Dushanbe, Salim-Hojji Khujandi (b.1890, d.1983) ran an important hujra in Bekabad.

During the persecution of Soviet rule, the hujra system of education allowed the Muslims of the central Asia to maintain their religious educational identity and to meet their obligation by the laws of Shariah to transmit their knowledge of Islam and its laws and to be engaged in Islamic missionary work. It represented the sufficient theological vitality to keep Muslim identity alive in the region. Despite the illegal status of many theologians, Islamic learning centres continued to have a special status in society and the respect of their communities.

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²⁰ B.M.Babadzhanov, A.K.Muminov and M.B.Olcott, "Mukhamadzhan Khindustani (1892-1989) Religiznaia sreda ego epokhi. (2004) PP.43-59

A *qori pochcho* is a relative who is able to read the Quran. This instruction was generally restricted to learning some basic prayers and some *ayyat* from the Quran, normally the first *sura*, the last *ayyat* from *ayyat-ul-kursi*(Quran 2;251),and some prayers of personal supplication(Dua)

Islamic Education from Brezhnev to Gorbachev

During the World War II (1939-1945), the legalization of Islamic educational institutions took place in Oder to gain the loyalty of Muslims. Between 1943 and 1944, Muslim conferences held in Baku, Tashkent and Buinaksk elected their spiritual directorate in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Dagestan.²² The period from 1960 to the mid 1980s, when Brezhnev was at the top of the Communist apparatus, is referred to as a period of stagnation. Islamic education continued to be shaped by waves of relaxation. "Perestroika" (restructuring) and "Glasnost" (openness) were Mikhail Gorbachev's watchwords for the renovation of the Soviet body politic and society that he pursued as general secretary of the Communist Party from 1985 until 1991.Perestroika and Glasnost marked the beginning of liberalization of relationship between religious communities and the Soviet state. On 14 June 1991, the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan passed the Religious Act on the freedom of conscience and religious organization. The Uzbek Religious Act provided the following innovations-"citizens may receive religious education and can choose the language of their religious instruction. Religious organisations have the right to establish educational institutions and leaning groups for adults and children in accordance with the organisation's standing rules...." According to the same Act, "religious organizations are allowed to send citizens abroad to foreign institutions of religious learning in order to embark upon advanced studies or to exchange experiences....vice versa."

Consequences of Soviet religious educational policies

Islamic educational institutions were deeply rooted in local religious practice, social traditions and family ties and this embeddedness guaranteed their vitality. In contrast, the Soviet educational system was pushed backward by numerous administrative decrees and orders. The Soviets were not interested in the reform of Islamic Maktabas, and Madrassas rather they wanted all schools to be not only secular, but also strictly atheist. The costs and benefits of soviet educational policy varied over time. From the 1920s to the World War I the period was more disastrous, during which Islamic schools were completely shut down. Immediately after the war, SADUM was established. The Autonomous Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was founded on 31 July 1943 in Tashkent. Two Madrassas were opened under the guidance of SADUM. Early in the

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²² Y. Ro'i, Islam in the Soviet Union: From the second World war to Gorbachev, London, 2000.

establishment of Soviet power, it was decided to separate the school from the church. This educational policy decision meant that any religious influence would formally cease and that scientific-atheistic thoughts would supplant religion. The anti-religious indoctrination expressed in militant atheistic teaching and harassment of believers. Islamic educational institutions in the central Asia under the rule of Soviets faced a great disaster, the persecution of Soviets against the Islamic educational institutions (Maktabas and Madrassas). Clerics, scholars and religious literature were publically banned. Islamic education proved its ability to survive. Furthermore, the true supply and demand of religious education, knowledge could not be regulated by state structure. The perestroika or reform policy of Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, eased the religious policy of the former Soviet Union. Gorbachev's reform policy mainly concentrated on economic restructuring for which he sought the help of the West. Obviously, to deal with the outside world, Gorbachev had to improve the freedom of conscience of the citizens of his country. Thus the believers became less persecuted and demanded more freedom.

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