

Secularist Concerns Regarding Changes in the Islamic Field

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Starting in the late 1980s and flourishing in the late 1990s, Islamic revival has been increasingly more visible in the public in Kyrgyzstan. Just as Muslim leaders are in the process of consolidating their economic power, they have also been active in gaining symbolic power in the society. All these religious endeavors, however, have been taking place in a still powerful secular context. The religious leaders have not only been busy with consolidating a Muslim identity based on their understandings of a proper Islam, but also been concerned with this larger secular context. That is, they cannot and do not function in isolation, but have been adjusting their practices and framework to the constraints of being religious in a dominantly secular society. While the religious side has developed particular mechanisms to deal with the secular challenges, the secular side has responded to the changes in the religious field with various ways. In this report, I will focus on the secularist elite discourse: In what ways do the secularist elites respond to the religious changes? What is the nature of the criteria (prejudices and stereotypes) that elites use to define and criticize the religious? How do they understand the role of religion in society? What are the cultural and historical resources the secularist elites borrow to draw the boundary between themselves and the religious? How do these secular responses relate to the questions of national identity? By secular elites, I refer to those social groups, such as intellectuals and academicians which, through secular modern education in the Soviet period, have acquired cultural, economic, and political capital. By secular, I do not mean that these elites are non-

¹ This paper is part of a one-year project about shifting contemporary alignments of Islam and the secularism in Bishkek; and it is based on preliminary findings of six-month research. It should not be treated as a scholarly article or cited for any purpose without my prior permission.

Muslims. Rather, the majority of them claim to be Muslim, the definition of which substantially differs from the way the Islamists understand it.

Environment:

The debate between the secularist and Islamist elites has been taking place in various contexts. One such context is the political environment where both sides have been debating on the laws concerning religion and religious organizations, and state's control of the public sphere. Media is another context where the encounters between the Islamist and the secularist emerge. Television shows, books, Internet, newspapers, and magazines make up this environment. The secular and religious encounters also occur on the personal level; that is, in encounters with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

Secularist Criticisms:

Even though the secularist elites have experienced a powerful Soviet atheist ideology, their criticism of the post-Soviet changes in the religious field is not directed against the religion per se. In fact, most of them acknowledge the need for religion as one way to overcome the various problems in the society. Some of them even have shown interest in learning more about religion, which they claim had never been an issue for them before. If these people approve the existence of religion within the society, then what makes them uncomfortable with the emergent religious identities in the post-Soviet era? How do they visualize the place of religion in the society and how is this visualization different from that of the Islamists?

The analysis of the secularist discourse demonstrates that the seculars are particularly uneasy with the Islamist critique of specific Kyrgyz traditions, among which are mazar worship, funeral practices and rituals, and consulting clairvoyants. They regard the Islamist insistence that the dead should be buried on the same day as contradictory to the Kyrgyz funeral traditions. They highlight these traditions as the bastion of the Kyrgyz lifestyle and claim that there is no need to change them now. Another source of the secularist resentment against the Islamist discourse and practices is the fact that some religious-minded people are attempting to change the dress code to make it more "Islamic". The secularists are very much critical of young boys having long beards, wearing long

dresses, and girls and women veiling. They interpret such bodily changes as the signs of confusion and disrespect for the Kyrgyz culture. Here are two excerpts that demonstrate these points:

[...] Why do I have to accept the Arabs' Muslimness? They are coming and making us do all sorts of things. For instance, they are telling us to bury our dead in one day. Why do we have to do that? Only because it is appropriate for them? Their countries are hot, the dead body will go bad until noon in that climate. In Kyrgyzstan, however, the weather is pleasant, nature is mountainous, and windy. We have plants that protect the body for days. Traditions of centuries tell us to say farewell to our dead. We erect a *boz uy*, and cry after our dead. The Arabs however keep quiet. There are many such things that we don't understand about the Arabs.

[...] By wearing long dresses and long beards, they are bringing in the Arab culture and damaging the Kyrgyz culture. The Kyrgyz boys do not wear beard because having a beard means to "own" and they can have beard only when their fathers die. Even this is appropriate only for the oldest son of the family. As for the girls, the Kyrgyz women have never covered their faces. In Saudi Arabia, women are supposed to veil, and the Kyrgyz have tradition of covering certain parts of the body. They did this by traditional Kyrgyz costumes. Traditionally, Kyrgyz women have dressed properly without veiling. Now it is obvious whose interest it is to make the naïve Kyrgyz girls and boys wear in this way [...]

The first paragraph demonstrates that the opposition to bury the dead on the same day is not that it is an Islamic rule, but because it is associated with a foreign culture. It also highlights the concern to protect and preserve the Kyrgyz ways of doing things. The critique of dress code is also not that this way of dressing is Islamic, but foreign and not Kyrgyz. It is hinted that there would be no problem to cover the body-only if done in the Kyrgyz way. In addition, these quotations demonstrate a widespread association of the post-Soviet expressions of Muslimness with the Arab culture. That is, the secularist elites are convinced that the way Islam is being represented today is an outcome of the Arab nationalist politics and that the Kyrgyz are falling into this trap. Here is a quotation that demonstrates this point:

The agents of Islamization today are making many mistakes. Because they are copying every rule in Saudi Arabia without thinking and questioning. They are imitating everything, including the melody of Koran recitation, dress code, etc. You see how the girls are getting dressed today. What happens if we accept the traditions of the Arabs? We lose our own traditions! It is possible to accept this as Arabization. Religion is just an excuse; the real concern is Arabization of the Kyrgyz society.

Yet, a lot of Kyrgyz do not realize this and think “We are Muslims. But we have not been good Muslims. We see that the real Islam was like this. What we knew was wrong”. By thinking like this, they are losing their own traditions. This is what we are against.

Here is another one:

We are not against Islam, but Arabization. We don't want Islam to disappear. We just take the elements of Islam that are appropriate to our lifestyle. So many things in Islam are common to the humankind. We take those. We are against those who insist that “you have to recite Koran in Arabic. This is Allah's language. Worship in Arabic”. The Arabs are trying to propagate the Arab traditions with the excuse of spreading Islam. Those traditions belong to the desert way of life. We are against Arabization through Islam. That is all”.

These passages make it clear that the secularist critique is not against Islam. That is, the secular elites already accept Islam as the religion of the Kyrgyz people. The source of uneasiness with Islam is the way it is being framed and practiced by the Muslims today. Such framing and practices, the seculars believe, ignore the Kyrgyz way of life, culture, and worldview. Then, what is the source of this prevailing concern with “foreignness”? Part of the answer to this question is that seculars are not entirely wrong about the existence of Arab understandings of Islam among the Kyrgyz Islamists. There are major Muslim leaders who have been educated in the Arab countries, though not necessarily Saudi Arabia. They, intentionally or not, take a more reformist stance and promote an understanding of Islam that rejects the integration of religion with local customs, that emphasizes the Arabic language, and certain way of dress code. In addition, various Islamic centers and organizations are funded by Arab countries, another source of resentment and sign of “foreignness” of religious expressions. However, as indicated above, the majority of these leaders are tuned to the concerns of the larger society and careful to consider secularist sensitivities.

Secondly, I argue that the secularists are borrowing the “foreignness” discourse from a broader discourse on religion: discourse that had been promoted by the Soviet rule. The secularist understanding of a religious person is a not pious person. That is, religious knowledge and the strict following of rituals are not required to be Muslims. What matters more for the secularist is that the religious expression is not contradictory to the Kyrgyz culture, which is assumed to distinguish the Kyrgyz from the others. This subordination of

the Muslim identity under a larger Kyrgyz national identity reflects the Soviet understanding of religion and national identity. Despite the atheist policy that has destroyed religious institutions and public expression of the religion, the Soviet rule overlooked the exercise of religion in private sphere and in forms of life-cycle rituals. As others have noted (Khalid 2007, McBrien and Pelkmans 2008), these forms of religious expressions have been acceptable under the Soviet rule, because they were accepted to be part of the local culture that assumedly distinguished an ethnic group from the other. Islam as a marker of national identity is still the dominant meaning of Islam for the Kyrgyz secularists today. The fact that some Kyrgyz are attempting to change this understanding and trying to make Islam be about religion is the reason why the secularists have been critical and concerned about the changes in the definition of Muslim identity in Kyrgyzstan today.

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