

ISLAMIC ACTIVISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Baris Isci

PhD candidate at the Anthropology Department in Washington University, USA

Visiting Research Fellow, Social Research Center (www.src.auca.kg)

American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz people have long been considered the least “religious” of Central Asian Muslims by Soviet officials and scholars, foreign Muslims, politicians, Western researchers, local religious authorities, and even by the Kyrgyz themselves. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, however, the Kyrgyz Muslims have been displaying a growing interest in Islam, as evidenced in not only the rising number of mosques and schools and the development of religious literature, but also in their more active participation in religious activities. In the relatively liberal religious realm that followed lifting of restrictions on religious expression after seventy years of radical secularism in the former Soviet Union, various groups and individuals have made it their main project to make nominal Muslim Kyrgyz into “true” Muslims. While this project has been carried out in an organized and institutionalized manner by various claimants to religious authority, many ordinary Kyrgyz have been willing to participate in this Islamization project—even if it meant that they would continuously have to negotiate between a multitude of local customs, on the one hand, and the new understandings brought by Islamization, on the other. In my research, I ask how the main relevant institutional and individual actors in the capital, Bishkek, develop strategies to Islamize Kyrgyz, and how and why the Kyrgyz people agree to change the way they define themselves as Muslims.

Studies on the resurgence of Islam in other parts of the world have produced an extensive literature that explains ideology, organizational structure, and membership of Islamic groups. Despite the fact that they focus on different aspects, these studies explain Islamic activism as a response of Muslims’ strains and grievances developed as an outcome of the structural and cultural crises. For many, the underlying impetus for Islamic activism derives from socioeconomic and political factors. This framework suggests that rapid socioeconomic transformations and political mismanagement and corruption have contributed to housing

shortages, unemployment, decline in wages, growth of big cities lacking infrastructure. Such problems were compounded by exclusion of larger portions of the population from political power, which was dominated by the secular authoritarian regimes that failed in modernization projects and deteriorated quality of life. The result is societal strains and discontent expressed through the idiom of Islamic activism. Another framework explains the rise of Islamic activism as a reaction to the Western influence in cultural domain, expressed in the form of reclaiming Islamic values and practices as the “true” source of Muslim identity. A third explanatory model identifies two processes as fundamental to the development of Islamic activism. One is “objectification”, by which they mean a process whereby a large number of people become conscious of their religion and raise questions about its nature and significance in affecting their daily life. The other is the fragmentation of religious authority and the emergence of competing claims.

The conditions that all three major models suggest as behind Islamic activism indeed exist in Kyrgyzstan. Rapid transformation to a capitalist economic system after the collapse of Soviet Union concentrated wealth among the corrupt government officials. The majority of the population, however, experienced rising prices, declining real wages, and rising unemployment. The migration of the rural people to the cities exacerbated problems related to poverty and shortage of services. In addition, the masses lack access to political power, which is monopolized by a small group of elites. Moreover, the Kyrgyz Muslims experienced decades of Soviet campaigns of literacy and a standardized, ideological model of Communism defined in opposition to religion, which have promoted non-belief and hostility toward Islam. Then, the rise of Islamic activism in Kyrgyzstan could be explained as a response to the strains and grievances produced by socioeconomic and political conditions; and as a collective reaction carried out by those raised under decades of Soviet indoctrination to reclaim their Islamic identity and values. My research so far indeed confirms these conclusions. Yet, it points to further questions that cannot be explained within these frameworks. Why, for example, do people turn to Islam rather than other ideologies? Why do individuals with similar experiences, levels of distress, and grievances choose not to respond to Islamic initiatives while some others do? What are the micro-processes involved in transformation of religious identification? What are the implications of this change on values, expectations, social relations, and so on? My research aims to address

these issues by focusing on the mechanisms and processes that draw individuals toward Islam in Bishkek.

The findings of eight weeks of fieldwork point to two main processes with their constituent mechanisms that make up Islamic activism in Bishkek. First, post-Soviet economic and political dynamics have led to a creation of a competitive religious field with diverse Muslim agents with different goals and means by which they interact with political and social action. These agents have been able to attract individuals by utilizing resources and organizational structures at their possession. By offering material and psychological incentives and working through existing social networks, Muslim agents have been able to reach out to individuals who have been facing spiritual crises and are in search of meaning and a moral compass.

Second, Islamic message has come to offer various individuals a language and cognitive tool for making sense of events and experiences. In other words, while outreach strategies of the Muslim agents have been successful in attracting individuals initially, the personal salience of Islamic message is the main factor for the continued interest in Islam. Islamic message taps into the grievances of individuals and resonates with the life experiences and the prevailing themes in the society. Islamic discourse continuously points out challenges such as poverty, unemployment, the crisis of morality (alcoholism, prostitution, etc), breakdown of accountability, and corruption. For many people, Islam has come to represent the only means to transform the existing order with emphasis on collective adherence to a God-given moral code and collective responsibility.

In sum, the rising interest in Islam in Bishkek can be interpreted to be a manifestation of changes in religious self-identification of people who respond to post-Soviet challenges. Islamic message resonates for a variety of people because, while encompassing their specific, local, and individual problems, it presents them as particular manifestations of a general problem, enabling them to envision a common problem and collectively join a common cause. It should also be noted that such changes have been possible because particular Muslim agents have taken advantage of new opportunities created by shifting economic and political dynamics to reach out to those individuals receptive to the possibility of alternative belief systems.