

The Contemporary Debate between Islamism and Secularism: Secular and Islamist Elites in Bishkek

Baris Isci

PhD Candidate, Washington University, Dept of Anthropology, St. Louis, USA

**Visiting Research Fellow, Social Research Center
American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**

This paper is not for citation.¹

Introduction

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, interest in religion has soared throughout all the successor states. Interest in Islam has been equally spectacular on the part of Muslims living in Central Asia. Even though experience of the Islamic revival has particularities to each country, the common characteristics include emergence of Islam onto the public space; proliferation of mosques; opportunity of religious education both abroad and at madrasas and Islamic institutions at home; the emergence of new sects and religious groups; great interest in the Arabic script; and the upsurge in the Islamic publications. Despite these common changes in the religious field, Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan carries distinctive features due to exceptional transformations in social, political, and economic realms; and unique national and cultural legacies. I argue that as much as transformation of the religious field has been impressive, the reaction to these changes in the secular realm has been equally noteworthy. In my research, I look at shifting contemporary alignments of Islam and secularism in Bishkek, which has been the main stage of debates between these two realms. I particularly concentrate on the increasing divide between Islamist and secular elites, arguing that they introduce this debate to the ordinary people.

¹ This paper is part of a one-year project about shifting contemporary alignments of Islam and the secularism in Bishkek; and this report is based on preliminary findings of four-month research. Further research is needed for these findings to be conclusive.

Background

Among the most spectacular signs of re-Islamization in Kyrgyzstan has been the creation of a competitive religious field with diverse Muslim agents with different goals and means by which they interact with political and social action.² Even though it can be argued that the Islamic revival started in the late 1980s when the Gorbachev regime curtailed its surveillance of the religious activity, the major transformation of the religious field took place during the late 1990s and early 2000s. During the early years of independence, Kyrgyzstan witnessed the entrance of missionaries from the Muslim countries. These missionaries have made it their project to educate the Kyrgyz Muslims in Islam. At the same time, the Kyrgyz Muslims went abroad in great numbers to study at madrasas and Islamic universities in other parts of the Muslim world. It was during the late 1990s and early 2000s when Muslims abroad returned and those educated by the foreign missionaries were ready to take the positions of religious authority in Kyrgyzstan. These authorities have established Islamic learning centers, charity organizations, Islamic publications and played an active role at the religious institutions of the country. All these have been possible due to the opening of new opportunity spaces at the macro-level. The Kyrgyz state has followed a relatively liberal policy towards religion and most importantly opened the borders for the inflow of foreign money. Just as numerous secular NGOs have been receiving foreign funding, the Muslim leaders have grabbed this opportunity to construct a religious establishment. In sum, a new class of Islamic leaders with different goals and means has emerged in the last decade. 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. This attempt, however, has received a hostile reaction from the secular elites who have been the possessors of this power until now.

Who are these opposing voices? What and why are they against? What feeds the emerging and growing tensions at the border of religion and the secular? What is the nature of the criteria that elite groups use to define and criticize the other? In this report, I attempt to address these questions. First, I explain the methods and framework of the research. Then, I analyze the discourses of each opposing group in detail. I conclude by arguing that the conflicting

² Analysis of Islam in Central Asia has been mainly dominated by a concern about Islamic extremism. (See Rasanayagam (2006) for a critique of studies of Islam in post-Soviet period). In contrast, this study aims to point out the non-radical side of religious activity, which is much more prevalent among the Muslims.

understandings of what it means to be Kyrgyz constitute the major source of tension between two groups today.

Framework and methods

This research is an attempt to understand the shifting contemporary alignments of Islam and the secularism in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan through an analysis of the debate between secular elites and Islamist elites. I concentrate on elites, because in contrast to other countries, such as Turkey, where the boundaries are already established and ordinary people play an effective role in the debate; the elites in Kyrgyzstan, who are still in the stage of creating the secular-Islamist divide, are introducing this debate to ordinary people. By elites, I refer to groups of individuals who are socially defined as showing a certain symbolic cohesion and as having at their disposal similar categorization systems to differentiate between insiders and outsiders as well as common vocabularies and symbols through which they create a shared 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-Muslims. Rather, the majority of them claim to be Muslim, the definition of which substantially differs from the way the Islamists understand it. By Islamist elites, I mean those actors active in the reappropriation of a Muslim identity and values as a basis for an alternative social agenda. These Muslim actors are not “political” in the narrow sense of the term. That is, they do not necessarily advocate a particular political agenda or take a part in the competition for political power. Instead, they see themselves as educating fellow Muslims in Islam and forging new kinds of communal solidarity based on Islamic principles of charity and self-help. I argue that the Kyrgyz experience allows for an in-depth analysis of the conflict between secularists and Islamists.³ The reason is that Bishkek has had a very long tradition of ruling elites, which have been engaged in reforming, modernizing, and secularizing society. Since independence, however, the Islamists have increasingly challenged this essentially Western model of change.

To understand the increasingly contentious divide between the established secular and the emerging Islamist elites, I focus on the criteria that both sides use to define and evaluate the self

³ I had not started my research with the decision that I would concentrate only on the ethnic Kyrgyz. Later I realized that the religious field in Bishkek is disproportionately dominated by the Kyrgyz. It became clearer that the involvement of the Kyrgyz, not the Uzbeks or Dungans, as the major players is normal when the debate between the Islamists and the seculars centers on Kyrgyz identity.

and the other. To identify these criteria, I scrutinize symbolic boundaries—the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people (Lamont 1992, 1995). In addition, I analyze the content and the salience of symbolic boundaries as determined by available cultural resources that individuals have access to and by the structural conditions in which they are placed (Bourdieu 1991). Within this framework, I explore what boundary types are used, how they are defined by these two elite groups; the environment where the debate is taking place; and the cultural and global narratives that elites borrow for boundary work.⁴ I draw on in-depth interviews with both secular and Muslim elites to identify the most salient principles of classification and identification. The analysis is also based on participant observation in the lessons, study circles, and gatherings set up by the Islamist organizations.

Islamist Discourse:

A micro-level focus on Muslim actors and their perceptions of Islam demonstrates that they understand the role of religion as a potential agent of social change. According to them, Islam is not only about praying five times a day and wearing according to the Islamic dress code, but also about changing and improving yourself and your society. Islamist leaders address alcoholism, corruption, deterioration of morality and social conduct as the major problems in Kyrgyz society today. According to them, the solution of these problems necessitates the transformation of customary practices and gender roles according to Islamic principles. The rhetoric of redefining women's place in society highlights the private sphere as where the women should function. Women are insistently encouraged to retract to home and conduct their “properly Islamic” roles as mothers and wives. Raising good kids at home, rather than taking active roles in the public space, the argument goes, will help to raise future generations skilled to govern the country properly and with honesty. An excerpt from one of the Islamic lessons demonstrates this:

One of the attendees asks: as you know there will be elections soon. We hear that there will be some female candidates for the parliament too. It would so nice if we could vote for women like you, who are young, learned, and devout Muslims. What do you think about this?

Answer: You are saying that the women should be deputies. However, our main goal has to be to prepare men who will be deputies. Even if I have good intentions, when it comes to the politics, it is the men, who are strong and more skilled. If I go to the parliament, they may deceive me without my knowing. Therefore, men with good morals should work there. Moreover, the women came to this world to do family related jobs, not outside jobs

⁴ Space limitations prevent me from discussing how cultural repertoires and structural factors combine to affect the boundary work. I will take up this issue in the next report.

like politics. Allah made us talented in the politics at home, not outside. We should use this talent to raise decent men who will be politicians in the future.

The Islamist leaders also target particular traditions and customs practiced by Muslims, which, they claim, have no legitimacy in scriptural sources and demonstrate the low level of Islamic knowledge among the Kyrgyz. They claim that it is this lack of Islamic knowledge that is preventing people to live a proper and moral life. One such tradition of local Islamic practice is visiting of *mazars* (the graves of holy men or natural sites regarded sacred). The Islamists interpret this practice as the veneration of the place itself, which they claim is one of the greatest sins in Islam, and as a survival of the pre-Islamic past. They argue that particularly women are involved in such practices and they become bad examples for their children, who should be instead taught about the “true” Islamic beliefs and rituals. The *to’y*, the feast given to mark important life cycles, constitutes another tradition that occupies a central position in the Islamist critique of local customs. Although not all of Islamist leaders are against hosting a *to’y*, they all agree that alcohol has to be eliminated at these events. They are particularly sensitive on the issue of alcohol consumption and they see this as a consequence of secular practices like New Year, birthday, and wedding parties. In sum, Islamists attempt to “modernize Islamic knowledge” (Khalid 2007), which will assumingly bring about a societal order.

Secularist Discourse

Interviews with academicians, writers, and journalists and an analysis of the public statements about Islam by this group of people reveal that the secularist objection to the Islamist discourse centers on issues that constitute the main Islamist critique. For instance, while the Islamists see the lack of Islamic knowledge as a characteristic of the Kyrgyz that must be corrected, the seculars generally tend to regard this as something what defines a Kyrgyz. That is, the seculars interpret the low level of Islamic knowledge as an outcome of a conscious effort by the Kyrgyz because traditions have always been more important than any “foreign” ideologies like Islam. The position of Kyrgyz women is also seen as a positive characteristic of the Kyrgyz culture. Here is an excerpt from one of the interviews:

Now, why we the Kyrgyz cannot be real Muslims? That is because our lifestyle and traditions are not compatible with Islam. That is why the men and women sit together, women wear pants, and the women enter politics despite the fact that we regard ourselves Muslims. We do not put limitations or borders as Islam does.

The “foreignness” of Islam is particularly an issue that is being highlighted by the seculars. They claim that Islam is a tool for the Arab nationalism and by imitating a foreign ideology, the Kyrgyz are forgetting their own past and losing traditions. In reality, however, they claim, the Kyrgyz culture goes much earlier in time than the Arab culture and at the time Islam was introduced to the Arabs, the Kyrgyz life was more civilized and developed. The seculars are particularly agitated by the fact that the Islamists are “glorifying” the Arabic language and scripture. Here are two excerpts that demonstrate this point:

Muslims put too many limitations. That is why they cannot propagate Islam, which could be the most widespread religion on the earth. One example is the requirement to worship in Arabic. The requirement of worship in Arabic is a strategy of the Arab nationalists to disseminate Arabic language and culture. This is just politics, not religion.

The Islamists in Kyrgyzstan are falling into trap of the Arab nationalist politics, which aim to eliminate other people’s language, customs, and traditions through the propagation of Islam. They are eliminating our customs. In the desert, both men and women have to be covered because it is too hot there. They also work at night because of high temperature, and that is why they have accepted the moon as the symbol. In contrast, our lifestyle and history are based on a life-style in mountainous and cold regions. That is why we like the sun. We eat the horse meat-that is how we could survive when we stayed in the tents during the winter. In the desert, however, the Arabs don’t eat horsemeat because it may be harmful at high temperature. That is why the Arabs prohibit horsemeat. Like these, too many things in Islam are not compatible with the Kyrgyz lifestyle. Our constitution used to be our proverbs. That is through proverbs that the Kyrgyz have organized their lives.

In addition, the seculars regard the practices deemed un-Islamic by the Islamists as part of the Kyrgyz tradition and identity. Visiting of shrines, for instance, is assumed to distinguish the Kyrgyz from the others. As one interviewee points out:

Traditions are everything for the Kyrgyz. Let’s take the example of worshipping at the *mazars*. We were not used to construct mosques. Rather, the Kyrgyz people have preferred sacred places to worship. They go to these places and worship the God. In these days, the Islamists say that “the Kyrgyz worship the *mazar*”. This is not true. We go there to worship *Koko Tenir*, that is Allah. What is good about the *mazar* is that the person and the nature join there. When people enter a mosque, they lose contact with the nature and worship only in God. However, they forget what is around them. But, we, the Kyrgyz, live with nature in harmony. We have always been in very good terms with the nature. That is why the Kyrgyz give so much importance to the *mazars*, not the mosques.

Inductive analysis reveals that the secular and Islamist elites I talked to draw boundaries articulated around being a good Kyrgyz. Most interviewees draw this type of boundary, but secular and Islamist respondents define them differently. In sum, the secular discourse highlights the traditions as the bastion of the Kyrgyz lifestyle. They further insist that the way the Kyrgyz practice Islam as entwined with traditions is the marker of a Kyrgyz identity. In contrast, these very same issues constitute the main critique of the Islamist discourse. According to the Islamists, “Kyrgyz” traditions have to be transformed and Islamic knowledge should be purged from traditions so that the Kyrgyz can be “real” Muslims. According to the seculars, on the other hand, the Kyrgyz should have to be “Kyrgyz” first and protect their traditions and values against “foreign” ideologies. This debate derives from different understandings of what it means to be Kyrgyz today. What it means to be Kyrgyz today is inextricably articulated around notions of culture, religion, and history, the notions that feed the emerging tensions at the border of religion and the secular today.⁵

⁵ Secular emphasis on Kyrgyz language and religiousness entwined with traditions as markers of Kyrgyz identity is an example of how available cultural repertoires shape boundary work. Soviet discourse of national identity that promoted Muslimness as a marker of national identity, devoid of religious knowledge and observance but integrated with customs, is what feeds the contemporary secular discourse in Kyrgyzstan today. As I indicated earlier, I will take up this issue in detail in the next report.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, Pierre

1991 Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field. *Comparative Social Research* 13:1-44.

Khalid, Adeeb

2007 *Islam after communism: religion and politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lamont, Michele

1992 *Money, morals, and manners: the culture of the French and American upper-middle class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

1995 National Identity and National Boundary Patterns in France and the United States. *French Historical Studies* 19(2):349-365.

Rasanayagam, Johan

2006 Introduction to the special issue of *Central Asian Survey* on Islam in post-Soviet societies *Central Asian Survey* 25(3):219-233.