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**Balancing Freedom of Religion or Belief with Human Rights and Public Order:  
The Example of the CORE Dialogue Project  
on the Promotion of Co-operation and Co-existence  
between Cultures and Civilizations  
in the OSCE Area  
by  
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## **1) Introduction**

When we talk about the political goal of balancing freedom of religion or belief with human rights on the one hand, and public order on the other hand today in this place, we are thinking of religious freedom for Islam in Central Asian states. In this context I would start with a few preliminary remarks.

- First, I would like to emphasize the diversity and broad range of political Islam in Central Asia.
- Second, my aim is to interpret the question of public order in the context of transformation, state- and nation-building of new states that are slightly more than ten years old.
- Third, the discussion concerning the problems of freedom of religion for political Islam has - in this region already for some years - but especially since September 2001, taken place in terms of conflict prevention with regard to terrorism, which means violence as a political means in a power struggle legitimised by religion.

All of the above-mentioned three reasons tend to complicate the basic question of balancing freedom of religion and belief with human rights and public order.

## **2) Structure**

Before I go into more detail, I will give you a brief outline of my presentation. Alongside the background of the problems just mentioned, I would like to introduce to you the preliminary results of an ongoing dialogue project carried out together with my colleague, Dr. Arne Seifert, by the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) in Hamburg. The project is funded by the German Foreign Office. Together with a colleague I am studying the possibilities for a peaceful secular-islamist compromise process, based on the example of Tajikistan and in particular focussing on co-operation and co-existence in the common Euro-Asian political space.

The project can be seen as a practical contribution to the effort of balancing freedom of religion or belief with human rights and public order because the results make clear two things: First, a similar dialogue might also be of relevance for secular-islamic conflict constellations in other Central Asian states. Second, the analysis of this dialogue process shows the first lines of orientation for the further formation of a dialogue of cultures and civilizations in the common Euro-Asian political area.

## **3. The Project**

### **3.1. Development**

During three research trips, my colleague, Dr. Arne C. Seifert and I held many meetings with twelve secular and islamist Tajik partners. We proceeded in three stages: In stage one and two we held separate meetings with each of them and discussed their written contributions on various aspects of their personal experience in the Tajik process of national reconciliation. In stage three all participants came together at a round table discussion based on a résumé of all contributions. The continuous dialogue in a constant group made reflection and confidence-building possible and was highly appreciated by all participants. I brought with me some Russian copies of this résumé. All the contributions will be published in a volume this year.

The secular-islamist dialogue project is also part of a broader discussion on "OSCE and Islam. The Case of Central Asia". Under this title, a workshop, also funded by the German Foreign Office, took place in September 2001 at the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) in Hamburg. Here experts from the Central Asian region, as well as representatives from the OSCE, ODIHR, the German Foreign Office and well-known Western researchers of this field discussed the problems concerned, and will continue this work in 2002.

## **3.2 Results - Lessons Learned**

### **3.2.1 General structure of the project**

Let me first summarize the character and structure of the project in general terms. The overall aim of it is conflict prevention through balancing of freedom of religion with the public order. So in its core it is a stabilisation strategy. Three levels of actors are involved:

- secular regional elites,
- actors oriented toward Islam,
- the secular West.

Thus the project has an internal as well as an external dimension. Through the instrument of dialogue between conflicting parties the structure of the process shows similarities to the CSCE negotiation process. While on the national level two antagonistic forces confront each other in different concepts of statehood, the Western organizer of the dialogue also is confronted with some challenges. First, to help starting a national process of co-existence and co-operation, second to begin the dialogue of cultures in the whole OSCE area. It will depend on the efforts all three actors concerned, whether in the long run such a dialogue will end up in an institutionalisation like it was the case for the OSCE.

### **3.2.2 The place of islam in the OSCE area**

Defence against terrorism is necessary but it cannot be separated from a normalisation of the relationship towards the islamic factor in the Asian OSCE region, which is a part of a common political area. Be it religion, politics or a part of human relations, Islam, its leaders and politicians hold a naturally strong place in the societies of Central Asia. The Islamic factor in Central Asia is a permanent strategic factor. It is better that Europe reaches out its hand towards "its Islamists" than they would be forced to utilize the hand of extra-European, extremist, Islamic consortia, allowing for radical Islam to permanently establish itself as a factor of unrest in the Euro-Asian area.

It is in the interest of Western Europe, as well as of the political forces in Central Asian states, that these processes take place in a stable and peaceful manner. While the national dimension, including the religious one, is important, the peaceful process of state-building is the underlying common interest. Therefore, the common goal is co-operation in order to reach stability beyond ideological and political differences. On the European side this means studying and understanding Central Asian society, religion and tradition and opening up for the support of peaceful state and nation building processes. On both sides this issue triggers new questions, while old repercussions and negative fixations, such as "cultural imperialism" and "Islamic extremism", have not yet been overcome. We must talk about these old repercussions and negative fixations.

### **3.2.3 Principles of a secular-Islamic dialogue on the national level**

The conflicting sides need to be aware that cultural and religious values differ. Dialogue can be no escape from such differences, be they socio-cultural, religious or political. The determination of common goals does not mean that separating ones must be ignored. However, tolerance is required in order to search for specific ways to reach the common goal: a stable frame for the national development process.

The priority must lie in the self-obligation of both sides to strive, separately or together, towards solutions that guarantee security and stability in the common political space. We are therefore talking about stabilisation strategies that have to stand the test of specific socio-cultural and religious conditions in the Euro-Asian orient. Hence, strategies themselves have to be specifically tailored for each case.

The participants in the dialogue should be guided by the spirit of the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations, especially by the principle of the "belief in the basic rights of man, the dignity of the human being, the equality between man and woman, as well as between all nations, to show patience and to live together in peace as good neighbours, to unite our force, to beware world peace and international security". The participants in the dialogue should deal with each other as equals and respect each other.

### **3.2.4 Key issue in a secular-Islamic compromise process: the triangle of nation, state and religion**

While all around the globe national, transnational and international levels can no longer be separated, in the young states of Central Asia the national level remains the core of the growing statehood. The following questions frequently arise:

- The modern national democracy - how should it be built?
- Which models of development are suitable for it, which are not?

First of all the states in Central Asia need peace and stability to resolve basic economic, social, regional and political questions in their transformation processes. However, in a Central Asian state, where the majority of the population is traditionally muslim, the muslim culture is closely connected to nation-building. Not every muslim is an islamist, but from an islamic point of view, belief, the individual and the community are seen as a unity. The spiritual and the secular levels are not separated from each other. So originating from their belief, Islamists face the question of an Islamist concept of state and nation.

With regard to the concepts of democracy, human rights and rule of law on the secular side, it soon becomes obvious that different concepts of statehood oppose each other. At this stage of nation- and state-building, political actors have to understand the necessity of searching for a compromise through dialogue. Such a compromise process is not so much a question of winning or losing, but a common challenge in which the only winner can be the people. While such an insight often only grows in a crisis or even war, this must not necessarily be the case.

### **3.2.5 The compromise: moderate political islam in a secular state**

In the process of creating national statehood, principal contradictions between the actors involved cannot exist. What is necessary is a quality of the state and the political system with which both sides can live. While different models of national compromise, depending on national dialogue processes, seem possible, in the OSCE area the combination of moderate islam and a secular state seems to be a good stabilisation strategy. It demands flexibility on the islamist as well as on the secular side.

### **3.2.6 Moderation of political Islam**

Currently, Central Asian muslims who want to take part in their state- and nation-building processes face the challenge of developing modernized concepts of political islam. Accepting democracy as a political system requires a process of religious moderation. This means the necessity of placing the idea of national unity in the first place, whereas the creation of an islamic state takes second place. Islamists should recognize the character of the secular state and work on the basis of the constitution in force, also orientating towards democratic instruments of a civil society. Moderate islam includes co-operation of religion and state, as well as a synthesis of religious and secular principles. The following questions require an answer in this context:

- Does Islam necessarily have to be expanded by all means?
- Does sharia law offer the possibility to live in different ideological surroundings?

- Is it possible to find a compromise between sharia law and a rule of law state?
- Is it possible for islamist organisations to develop a programmatic basis that allows for peaceful decisions with other parties as well as with the secular state?
- Is it possible to redefine the role of women in the society with regard to both traditional and religious values and the human rights catalogue of the OSCE human dimension?
- Etc.

Thus the question of both national islam and the modernization of islam are on the agenda. When islamists must confront their ideology with concrete facts of societal relations and moods among the population, they will have to discuss these issues also on the ideological level, which will probably require developing new point of views. Hence moderate or even national islam inevitably fosters inner-islamic differentiation.

### **3.2.7 Secular openness towards political islam**

The secular side must itself stick to democratic principles and decide to share power. Secularist politicians should recognize that moderate Islamists can no longer be regarded as the principle hostile opposition to the state. On the contrary, they have to respect the principle of separation of state and religion, not interfering in religious affairs, and thus guaranteeing the legally binding liberty of religiously oriented parties and movements. It is better to give parties with a religious character a place in the constitution than to close the arena, thus opening up a space for violent means and destabilisation.

Secularists should persuade islamist politicians that secularism does not necessarily threaten religion, and that a competition of political parties only concerns the question of power on the state level. Last but not least, a compromise has to find a practical expression. Political responsibility must be shared on various concrete levels of state activity.



### **3.2.8 The place of islamic unions and parties in the political system**

The admission of religious parties into a secular state can be seen as a prerequisite for the functioning of islamic political organisations on a constitutional and legal basis. Islamists, however, should understand the secular fears that islamist political parties could use democratisation to pursue an Islamic state. The reason for this basic mistrust is that, from their point of view, religious parties find their support in the population not as a political actor, but as a religion. As a democratic party, a moderate islamic party should persuade the secular forces that in the case that it wins power through democratic means, it will not annul the constitution. On such a basis, it might be possible to foster democracy, the economy, Islamic values, unity and independence, as well as good neighbourly relations using political means of a civilized strategy.

### **3.2.9 The Role of regional and islamic leaders**

The political relationship of secularists to regional and religious leaders in society in general, as well as in the political process and in the creation of national statehood, is of major importance. It is in the leading secular forces' interest to constructively shape the relationship towards muslim elites and islamist politicians. For example, measures to improve the social situation of mullahs and priests, or preventive anti-discrimination efforts should be made. Negative treatment of the religion in general, or single religious leaders in particular, might have grave consequences. To the extent that the secular side understands the compromise process as a success, it becomes possible to present co-existence and co-operation to the nation and international public as a win-win game.

### **3.2.10 Dangers of islamic extremism and international terrorism**

In a dialogue it is necessary that all political forces distance themselves from terrorism, i.e. from the violation of human rights as a political and religious means. In cases of violent conflicts former islamic military-political movements have to be

dissolved and integrated in the common nation state on a legal basis. From the side of the current secular governments, an anti-democratic and repressive position might be the most important reserve for the agitation of islamic radicals in the region. The key mistake of these regimes seems to be the non-admission of religious parties into, and the discrimination of muslim leaders and islamist politicians in political life.

#### **4. Perspectives for a dialogue of cultures in the Euro-Asian OSCE-area**

It seems to be possible to maintain a peaceful relationship between moderate islamists and secularists if there are regular frameworks for co-existence, dialogue and cooperation. Peaceful co-existence has a chance to stabilize, when social, economic and other societal questions can be taken up in circumstances of silence and order. The external actor, in our case the OSCE, can be most helpful in this process, however it has to integrate the islamic factor in its stabilization strategy. The dialogue project shows ways how to play a constructive role. A possible course of direction in the search for a stability-promoting role consists in the OSCE reflecting on its original philosophy of building bridges as the “common child” of the European political East and West. In the case of its Euro-Asian region, this would mean taking on the role of an “honest political broker” in order to help bridge those contradictions that could drive the islamists and secularists into violent conflicts, which would then also endanger European security on the whole. The proof that compromise is possible would be a great success for stability, and would be of exemplary character. It would also be an example that would show that the co-existence of cultures in the Euro-Asian region of the OSCE-area is possible.

#### **5) Recommendations**

Shortterm

- Strengthening the political dimension in the fight against terrorism;
- Signals in the political language that moderate islam and its representatives have a place in the euro-asian civilization;

- Confidence building and co-operative measures towards moderate islamists;
- Détente in the relationship toward moderate muslim leaders;
- Beginning of a dialogue of cultures on OSCE level.

#### Longterm

- Support for the rebuilding of education systems with moderate islamic lessons;
- Conflict prevention in religious and minority conflicts;
- Development of an inter-confessional dialogue with muslim leaders;
- Measures to improve the social situation of moderate mullahs and clerics;
- Support for moderate islamists in their efforts to protect the national islam against strange fundamentalists from abroad.