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Radicalization of Religious Thought and Problems of Religious Freedoms in Muslim Societies of CIS countries

First of all I would stress that while pursuing religious politics of no particular importance for the governments of post-soviet Muslim countries is religious allegiance of this or other communities. The matter of concern for them is how not to let the religious practices get any political content or outlines so these practices will be staying under the control of governments. From this point follow measures that toughen laws on religious belief, legitimization of religious situation control steps including creating problems with formal registration issues and so on, the thing that speaks for the lack of correspondence with commonly accepted European standards about religious freedom practices. What puts the ruling political powers in these countries on their guard is also the fact that religious thoughts in some dimensions are tending to be radicalized, which contains elements of political opposition to existing political regimes.

No doubt that religious radicalization at contemporary stage initially started from attempts to restore religious values banned at soviet times. These are attempts of religionization of population which to say conditionally are believed to be fed on internal and external factors both in the past and at present. In the early 90s an external factor was the first to appear to be the reason for radicalization of religious thought in post-soviet Muslim countries as a result of influx of religious missions from Arab countries, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan ect. The main purpose of these missions was to recruit young Muslim believers to the network of Wahabi sect (now the followers of this Islamic branch are accepted to be called Salafis) and other Islamic branches non-traditional for these countries. There were religious missions coming from Western countries to convert local believers to various Christian sects as well. Opportunities were provided for young believers to get religious education at foreign religious centers. The fact is that majority of those who after having gotten their education at foreign Islamic centers upon their return join the radical religious trends. It in some cases results in the religious situation being kind of battleground for clash of different religious views or interpretations of some religious postulates accompanied by mutual accusations of infidelity and so on, the thing that certainly may threaten stability in religious situation particularly in the context of many problems of civil society building tasks that still remain unsolved.

The repressive regimes keeping political powers in post-soviet Muslim states also play negative role in strengthening of religious radical tendencies. I believe that spread of religious radicalism in Central Asia in many respects is caused by repressive policies pursued by Islam Karimov who has suppressed the secular political opposition and driven their followers out of country since the very beginning of national independence. Thus it seems very logical that secular opposition must have been replaced by politicized Islamic

organizations such as Hizbut-tahrir, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan etc. However Karimov's regime tried to fight them it could not solve the problem with religious extremism. Politicized Islam is still remaining the very force that opposes to ruling political regime which in its turn acts as an ardent opponent to any kind of religious freedoms so ordinary Muslim believers who are not linked to any radical organizations are becoming more and more subject to hardships, persecutions and suppressions. Andijan events when hundreds of innocent people were shot down became the tragic result of policies pursued by Uzbek authorities. By the way not only Muslims suffer from these policies. Protestant community, Jehova witnesses live hard religious life darkened by repressive administrative controlling measures as they occasionally face beatings, arrests. This is also related to Tajikistan where ordinary believers not involved in any religious extremist organizations fall preys as well to these repressive measures, being accused nevertheless under criminal cases of "encroachment on constitutional order", "establishing illegal public associations or religious organizations" ect. In Turkmenistan some government officials come out in public with negative stances against conversions of ethnic Turkmens into other faiths.

Development of religious radicalism tendencies in post-Soviet Muslim societies that has been taking place over the past 15 years is also challenging religious tolerance towards religious minorities. For example, there are facts telling that in Kirgizia conversion of local Muslims into other faiths is considered as a national treason even by those not practicing Islam at all, who do not visit mosques, do not perform prayers, consume alcoholic drinks. The other reason for the radicalization of religious thought is that it is getting stirred up by inflammatory statements or events like well-known cartoon scandal or insulting quotation about prophet Muhammed cited by The Pope Benedict, or a phrase like "Islamic fascism" uttered by George Bush, US President when the latte was talking about global war on terror.

Religious situation looks relatively better in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan than those of mentioned above although in these post-soviet countries as well as others laws on religious belief meant to guarantee religious freedoms of people have a tendency to develop into toughening state control measures related to religious situation.

In daily use of ideological agenda of radicals is Samuel Huntington's notions on "a clash of civilizations" that portrays the non-Muslim countries as invariably hostile to the world of Islam and thus keep other Muslims from speaking out against the radicals. I totally agree with those who can not conceive of such harmful theory as to be the main generator of world politics towards the Muslim countries and regard that the world is not divided between a civilized Christian West and an uncivilized Muslim countries but rather between civilized and uncivilized people in each of those religions. And I believe there is no use of fighting radicals by administrative and restrictive measures as the authorities in post-soviet Muslim states often do. What is useful is to fight them first of all on the theological ground.

I would like to share some examples from my own practice at this point. In 2000 I offered Muslim believers in my articles from the series of Friday talks which were published in

local media (Azadliq newspaper) to consider the necessity of using native Azeri language instead of Arabic in every rituals concerning practicing Islam, including performance of prayers. I was referring to Koranic logic and the content of Koranic verses which seem quite open to such an interpretation. Nevertheless, these articles caused a rising tide of both public and non-public debates that covered all religious and non-religious circles of the country. Passions were stirred up to the point that members of pro-Iranian Islamic Party appeared to be so aggressive that they even through local media threatened to make short work of me. Some people from among the clergies accused the author of the articles in question of connivance for zionizm, “pseudo-prophecy” and so on. It was totally out of the blue for all how an idea submitted in a rather academic way but opposed to traditional religiosity could become so hotly debated matter in the whole society. The dangerous threat I got was in the last year as the imam of one the Baku mosques in his Friday sermons he performed in the presence of believers said that they should commit so called jihad against Nariman Gasimoglu. What means jihad in their interpretation is fighting against infidels, which often ends up with bloodshed. This sermon was followed by verbal threat that two young guys from the religious community “Ahki-Beyt” expressed when they came up to me at the radio-station “Space” after I finished my talk on radio and stated that the members of their community are very concerned about my views and ready to punish me if I do not backtrack on my views about headscarf issue in public. This threat was doubled by death threat on the phone the next day and continued till the Baku police intervened following the international pressure put on the authorities to find those fundamentalists. I want also to take note of the fact that these scholarly debated theological arguments although are met with great deal of aggressiveness by fundamentalists who prefer at best accusations or at worst death threats rather than involvement in normal theological discussions, nevertheless get support and understanding by the majority of people whom we should target in Muslim societies of post-soviet countries.

I have also worked out a concept on how define the role and place of Islam in Azerbaijan society. The main theological novelty of this document is about offering Azeri Muslim believers to give preference to Koran and to gradually get away from Sunna literature, in other words, they are offered to develop their religiosity exclusively in light of Koranic logic. Given the universality of the logic that the holy text of Koran contains this idea is put forward to reconsider Sharia norms of which the historized origin often causes certain doubts. For example, there is no death penalty in Koran for those committing apostasy unlike sharia law which provides for this as one of the Koranic verses reads that there is no compulsion in religion. The other example is about women who committing adultery are to be subject to death penalty by stoning while Koran clearly is against this kind of penalty to be applied. As for headscarf that sharia law considers one of the requirements for women to wear, the thing that could be literally interpreted in a related Koranic verse that “women should put covering on their breast” and est. All these and many other Koranic items are liberal and democratic than traditional sharia-based Islamic literature... As regard the Koranic verses which one can interpret as calling for violence thus often quoted by critics of Islam I have to stress at this point that the Holy Koran apply the violence as inevitable exclusively to times of war when the believers and their

motherland are attacked by invaders from abroad thus the believers are supposed to defend their country.

This concept provides for spread of such version or notion of Islam that will be focusing on its moral, ethic and cultural eminence, the thing which opposes legal provisions of sharia that were established over centuries past. From my own practice I got convinced that the religious justifications of liberal and democratic values which should be viewed by believers as religiously generated ones thus not imported from abroad could have a good effect if put in deliberately working programs supported by democratic institutions at both local and international levels. God bless you all. Amen!