

«The Central Asian governments need to get out of a mindset that still retains the Soviet legacy of separation of state and religion understood as the prohibition of religion interfering in affairs of the state, but under which the state has the right to control all, or the majority of, religious activities» - said Sebastian Peyrouse, research professor of the Central Asian Program at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Relations in the interview with CABAR.asia.

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What is the situation with religious education in Central Asia? Are there any general trends?



Sebastian Peyrouse. Photo: personal archive

There is indeed a general approach to religious education across Central Asia, which is, however, tailored by more specific policies in each state.

Overall, governments in Central Asia have displayed caution towards the teaching of Islam, out of concern that its uncontrolled development could incur risk, as the experience of several other Muslim states - such as Afghanistan - has shown. They have therefore approached religious education through security rhetoric. For authorities in the region, government should regulate religious education in order to counter what a number of newly independent countries have encountered, namely fundamentalist groups taking advantage of any moral or political vacuum to promote themselves. For example, Uzbek authorities under former President Karimov considered that, in countries like Pakistan, religious education enabled radical groups and organizations to enter the system of religious education, and, in Afghanistan, led to the

emergence of the Taliban.

Hence, following the example of leaders in Qajar Iran, the Ottoman Empire, or Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Central Asian countries have sought to objectify and functionalize Islam and its teaching. Religious instruction is officially tasked with educating youth in a spirit of interethnic and interreligious concordance, with contributing to the creation of a shared cultural framework, and with minimizing the politicization of religion and shaping its teaching into a regime friendly discourse. The functionalizing of Islamic education has been set within a strict legislative and institutional framework.

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Central Asian political authorities generally have opposed interference by religion in state education institutions. This has distinguished it from some other states in the world, such as Russia on the one hand, in which secular schools have gradually introduced religious education, or on the other hand, from Muslim states such as Libya, in which schools, although themselves based on the western model, have integrated an Islamic component into their curriculum in order to respond to domestic critics' claims that their education is too westernized. In most Central Asian countries, the teaching of Islam in its theological dimension has been limited to state-approved secondary level religious schools - madrasas - and some higher education institutes. Central Asian governments have maintained a limited, controlled network of religious schools, which they deem sufficient to cover the country's entire geographical space. These institutions are set up as sites for disseminating authorized religious doctrine and recentering religious authority under the control of political power. Koranic schools have no choice other than to yield to government policy. Their role is limited to training an elite tasked with supporting the authorities and its discourse.



Graduates of the Ala-Too madrasah in the village of Ivanovka, Chui region of Kyrgyzstan. Students start to study in this madrasah after the 9th grade. Photo: ummamag.kg

Some countries like Kyrgyzstan have however been more open to religious education, while others like Uzbekistan under the Karimov regime, Turkmenistan since independence or Tajikistan since the banning of the Islamic Renewal Party of Tajikistan five years ago have been much more repressive, leading to serious restrictions on the possibility for believers to access religious education.

Uzbekistan for several years, after the change of power in the country, opened up to the world and began reforms in various spheres of life. Has religious education been affected by changes in the country?

In religious as in its general policies, Uzbekistan has experienced significant changes since President Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016. The new Uzbek President has significantly revised the government's approach to religion, in particular to Islam, which was perceived under his predecessor more as a threat to the security of political power than as an important component of daily life, and of the history and culture of part of the Uzbek

population. Mirziyoyev has attenuated an essentially security approach and opened more dialogue. Among several measures, he put an end to the activities of the security service's religious committee, which exercised strong and often repressive control over religious education.

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Moreover, aware that Uzbekistan is significantly lacking in well-trained theologians, President Mirziyoyev also has taken several measures to develop religious education. Among them, he opened in 2018 an academy dedicated to Islamic studies, under the auspices of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan, which offers two-year undergraduate degrees and three-year doctoral courses. The madrasah Mir-i-Arab in Bukhara has also been upgraded to a higher educational institution, and the Institute for the Study of *Hadith* in Samarkand provides five-year courses on the study of Islam, including Islamic jurisprudence, Koranic exegesis and foreign-language learning. Madrasas and the Tashkent Islamic Institute also provide short-term education by offering three- and six-month Koran and Arabic courses. These courses are open to everyone, men and women, without age restriction, and are specifically intended to provide a general understanding of Islam and the Koran.



The Mir-i-Arab madrasah in Bukhara is part of the Poi Kalyan complex. Photo: Luis Bartolomé Marcos

There is still a long way to go, on the one hand because there remain many other problematic issues related to religious freedom in Uzbekistan, and on the other hand because with only 11 Islamic educational institutions, including 10 madrasas, the possibilities for religious education remain well below the demand.

Is there an increase or decline in interest in religious education? What skills should a modern graduate of a religious institute have? Will the graduate be in demand, can he / she be realized in the labor market?

Several studies show that there is a marked increase in religiosity in Central Asia, which suggests, at the same time, an increase in interest in religious education. Beyond prayer, and the four other pillars of Islam to which all believers are supposed to subscribe, religious study is considered a duty and a mode of worship. For many, religious knowledge is something that should be learned at the earliest possible age, either in a private (family) or public (school) setting. A World Values Survey revealed that half of the Uzbekistani population (54%), and about a third of the populations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,

support religious teaching in public schools.

However, in their desire to acquire knowledge of Islam, the aspirations of believers are, in Central Asia as elsewhere, extremely diverse. These various aspirations reflect identity questions, local morals and the many political, economic, and social issues occasioned by the fall of the Soviet regime. Learning the Koran is, for example, also a key part of socialization. For many young believers, acquiring - and exhibiting - one's religious knowledge is about making a show of respect toward one's family circle; the child, and, later, the adolescent, imitates his or her parents by praying and reciting the Koran. This social act goes beyond the family circle: in Tajikistan, the scholar Manja Stephan has shown that "Islam offers an 'honorable' option for urban youth in order to enhance their social status." Knowledge and practice of Islam are tools of local integration (in the district, and in one's social circle more generally), and, for youth, provide recognition from their entourage of their adult status.

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For parts of the Muslim populations in the region, the absence of religion, or the lack of the religious elements in the curricula of public schools, as justified by the principle of separation of religion and state, gainsays official discourses, which claim that Islam is one of the country's historical and cultural bases.

Religious education certainly can be compatible with the evolution of the contemporary world, and of the global and domestic economies. However, in any religious education institute, it is essential to combine religious knowledge with the general training that future graduates will need to meet the needs of the job market. This means teaching humanities and hard sciences such as are taught in secular education institutes, including, economics, technology, etc.

What to do to those who receive / received religious education in foreign madrassas, universities? Recently, it is believed that they could be subject to unconventional, alien views of Islam. How should the state react to this?

I think that the essential point is not to focus on any dichotomy between domestic and foreign Islamic education, but rather on the content of religious education and the curriculum provided in each religious education institute, wherever it is. The teaching of Islam through its institutions (governmental or private establishments, secular or religious ones), its actors (i.e., teachers and students, believers or non-believers), and its content (the choice of subject matters taught and the integration of Islamic concepts, tawhib, in them)

have been the subject of many debates which have deepened their differences. All have been variously shaped by the political, intellectual, and social developments of the modern era. Globalization has added to the difficulty of managing religious thought, which is undergoing a phenomenon of hybridization involving a collision between global, standardized cultural aspects and local cultural aspects. In Central Asia as elsewhere, to speak of a conventional and domestic Islam, and more widely to speak of a society that would coincide with a single culture, one confined to a delimited territorial space, is meaningless. Population flows across borders have fragmented religious authority, upset social hierarchies, and profoundly challenged the traditions of knowledge and faith, as well as their practice.

Guaranteeing freedom of religion, which includes inter alia the freedom of every individual to practice his or her religion and therefore to receive instruction on this same religion, while at the same time preventing recruitment by extremist groups is a difficult question to which every state in the world is trying to respond, and no ideal solution exists to date. Today we perceive rather a default approach, which mainly consists of identifying madrasas and religious institutes, inside or outside a country, likely to spread an ideology calling for violence, fostering dialogue, and monitoring (which is different from repressing) people suspected of having received education in so-called extremist institutions or of preaching violence or being likely to perpetrate acts of violence. Although in some cases criminal charges may be justified, this should be based on clear evidence and decided through a fair legal process and in accordance with the standards of international law; it should also be combined with dialogue and rehabilitation. Almost systematic suspicion and repression against students who have received religious training abroad, particularly in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, leads to their ostracization and can be counterproductive, and even dangerous, as it may push them into situations of social and professional isolation and thereby contribute to making them more vulnerable to entering extremist movements.

What should be the level of state control in the field of religious education? How much can the state intervene in the process of canonical education? After all, the authorities of Central Asian countries approach this issue from the point of view of ideology and security.

The authoritarian management of religious and especially Islamic education in Central Asia has indeed consisted of prioritizing regime security. Religious education has the potential to be part of dissenting discourse. In some Muslim regions of the former USSR, such as Tatarstan, such teaching is viewed as a response against the declared secularism of the political authorities, as a motor of de-secularization from below; the teaching of Islam is intended to contribute to reintegrating religion into the social realm, and even to

challenging the values and validity itself of the official secular education system. In several countries in the Central Asian region, economic crisis, lack of state investment in education, and a decline in the number and level of teachers put the post-independence education system under particular pressure. Islamic instruction and its educational institutions can therefore be seen as a response to the degradation of the official governmental education system, something that has been observed in several other countries, such as Morocco.

In the name of the fight against extremism, Central Asian authorities have generally reduced the framework for religious teaching, both in its form (institutions) and in its content (place of Islam and modes of its teaching in secular and religious schools) in favor of a strictly secular education system that authorities say meets the demands of modernity. However, implementation of such a policy may actually be to the detriment of the population. Contrary to the expectations of some theoreticians of education who urge schooling as a remedy to so-called archaic mentalities, the growth of secular education in many Muslim states has actually encouraged an attachment to Islam, and the growth of an Islamic trend, more than it has dissuaded it. The reduction, and even the exclusion of religion from state sponsored education, may be interpreted by the population as an offensive against local culture and values, which, for some believers, merit traditional religious education, and instead might actually fuel protests by or recruitment of students who demand a variety of Islam more in line with their expectations.

It is therefore essential for political powers to find a balance, that is, to ensure that the education provided complies with fundamental principles of tolerance and non-violence. However, it is certainly illusory for political powers to claim to control all content and consider that Islamic education can be rooted systematically in traditional values, whereas it actually evolves under the influence of other transformative forces in the world, including religious reforms, nationalism, domestic policies, universal education, etc. The reinvigoration of Islam under government control in modern times has benefitted from new forms of governance, electronic media, universal education, which have enabled the political authorities to go beyond the ranks of the ulema and to attain the consciousness and lifestyle of ordinary Muslims. However, all efforts at monitoring Islam have been outflanked by a new pluralization of knowledge and religious authority, which has given rise to new approaches to what it means to be a Muslim, further undermining government's ambitions of systematic control.

How can the Central Asian states strike a balance between secularism and the growth of religiosity in the country? Indeed, excessive efforts to preserve secularism limit religious freedom.

Following the example of many of Muslim states after gaining independence, Central Asian governments adopted policies to modernize their countries on the basis of the principle of secularism education. However, they underestimated and sometimes even ignored the potential conflict between secularism and traditional-style Islam and thought, which has burgeoned over the last twenty-five years. Religion and state, despite their stipulated separation in the constitution, remain closely linked and intermingled, and each is fashioning the dynamics of an Islamic revival in Central Asian societies. Taking into account the experiences of other countries, strict restrictions on religious freedom raise several questions.

Despite the repression enacted against religion, nonstandard streams of religious practice and knowledge have continued to be studied and transmitted beyond the circles of ulemas. As the Turkish experience shows, an overly repressive policy risks pushing less moderate strains to join clandestine networks, and therefore to fall out of the authorities' surveillance networks. Mustafa Kemal undertook one of the most radical programs of secularization in the Muslim world. By denouncing the madrasas as "degenerated ruins, unable to be reformed," by forbidding the hajj for close to 14 years (between 1934 and 1947) as well as Sufi lodges, and by eliminating higher Islamic education, Turkish state authorities observed that these reforms had contributed to developing, a quarter of a century later, an underground education system.

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Moreover, strict authoritarianism, censorship, and repression, as was the case for example in Karimov's Uzbekistan, or as is currently the case in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, reduce the means that political authorities have to prevent the violence against which they mean to fight. Among other things, censorship and fear hinder knowledge. According to the campaign "[Prove They Are Alive](#)," over the past several years Turkmenistan has imprisoned several persons returning after religious studies abroad, as well as persons who returned and were accused of following groups deemed extremist by the authorities, such as followers of followers of the Turkish Islamic thinker Said Nursi or of the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. Many Muslim states, despite their authoritarianism, built their policies on the basis of, among other things, opinion polls and surveys. In Indonesia, studies have shown that more than 50% of high school students justify the use of violence in the name of Islam, a viewpoint shared by a fraction of teachers. There is of course no strict phenomenon of correlation between Muslim states, but the absence of data in Karimov's Uzbekistan throws a dark veil over our knowledge of the expectations, hopes, and frustrations of believers, in particular of young people, and considerably reduces the elements of reflection

required for developing a policy on religion and for understanding the potential excesses that might emanate from it.

Overall, as for religious education and students of religion, finding a balance between respecting fundamental human rights principles while at the same time reducing the risk of extremism is an often fragile balance that continues to be debated globally. However, the Central Asian governments, if they wish to guarantee their country's secularism and stability, must promote dialogue and access for the population to a sufficient number of places of worship and religious education. They need to get out of a mindset that still retains the Soviet legacy of separation of state and religion understood as the prohibition of religion interfering in affairs of the state, but under which the state has the right to control all, or the majority of, religious activities and which resulted in heavy restrictions on religious practice, and in many cases in extrajudicial pressure and measures against the believing population. Pursuing a policy of repression against religion as in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan by, for example, closing a number of mosques, by repressing Muslims considered as extremists simply because they are connected to certain mosques or Islamic circles is liable to push the population of believers deeper into clandestinity and to fuel the discourse of radical movements, according to which believers are victims of dictatorial and anti-Muslim political regimes.

This material has been prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change – from the Borderland to the Steppes Project. The opinions expressed in the interview do not reflect the position of the editorial board or donor.



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