

Article

Some Common Patterns of Islamic Revival in Post-Soviet Central Asia and Challenges to Develop Human Rights and Inclusive Society

Galym Zhussipbek ^{1,*}, Dilshod Achilov ² and Zhanar Nagayeva ¹

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Suleyman Demirel Atindagi Universitet, Kaskelen, Almaty 040900, Kazakhstan; zhanar.n2021@gmail.com

² Department of Political Science, University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, North Dartmouth, MA 02747, USA; dachilov@umassd.edu

* Correspondence: galym.zhussipbek@sdu.edu.kz

Received: 28 September 2020; Accepted: 20 October 2020; Published: 23 October 2020



Abstract: This paper argues that the following common patterns help explain the ongoing Islamic revival in Central Asia: (a) “de-modern” and “ethnicized” Islam as an enduring legacy of the Soviet period; (b) penetration of Salafism; (c) securitization of “non-official” Islam by state and non-state actors and (d) the rise of conservative Islam which goes hand in hand with retraditionalization. These factors, in their turn, pose serious challenges to developing inclusive society and human rights in Central Asian countries. This paper argues that the Islamic revival in Central Asian countries has come to the point when it can be analyzed under the prism, whether it impedes the development of inclusive society and human rights or not.

Keywords: Islam; Central Asia; securitization; human rights; inclusive society; conservative Islam; Jadidism

1. Introduction

Islam has long occupied a fundamental space in Central Asian societies for more than a millennium and played a central role in Islamic history. For centuries, many Muslim scholars (e.g., Bukhari, Tirmidhi, Al-Maturidi) and spiritual leaders (e.g., Ahmad Yassawi, Naqshibandi) have emerged from this region who have contributed immensely to the development of Islamic sciences, culture, and civilization. Over its long history, Islam has been a major source of unity and peace, and a cause of enmity and brutal conflict, also, at its best, it has provided the stimulus for life, a divine remedy for human suffering, and motivation for ethical and productive existence (Omelicheva 2016, p. 144). On the other hand, Islam being an integral part of Central Asian traditions and customs, became one of the cornerstones of Central Asian societies’ collective memory. As Connerton (1989, pp. 4–5) indicates, collective memory of society or social memory is organized and legitimated through rituals, bodily practices and commemorative ceremonies (however, it is argued that in Central Asia local cultures were reinvented in a Soviet mold (Kandiyoti 1996, pp. 529–30).

The resurgence of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia after the communist system’s collapse has taken strong roots, similarly to in the other parts of the former Soviet Union. Particularly, in the last two decades, the impact of a religious resurgence on the personal and social life of Central Asian people has increased significantly¹ (Rasanayagam 2011; Achilov 2012; Hanks 2015). It is telling that,

¹ For example, in June 2016, a Kyrgyz Member of Parliament proposed legislation that would extend lunch breaks from one to two hours to allow time for Muslim prayers, which led to intensive debates in Kyrgyz society (Zozulya 2016).

according to the research conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on the values of the youth in four Central Asian countries, there was almost no atheist or anti-religious person among respondents (Rakisheva 2017, p. 61). However, rising religiosity is a controversial issue for some Central Asian people. There is a small but a growing disenchantment with religious revival, which is not necessarily driven by anti-Islamic or anti-religious sentiments².

When judged by contemporary standards of human rights, it can be seen that traditional, either Sunni or Shia, or Salafi Islam has interpretations and principles which contradict these standards. Overall, traditional conservative Islam of different doctrines is characterized, at least, by an insufficient level of protection of human rights. Moreover, the main challenge to the contemporary notion of human rights is posed by relativist nonacceptance of the universal applicability of contemporary definitions of human rights, which in the case of Muslims, is driven by conservative Islamic theological justifications (Sachedina 2008, p. 118). However, we reject assuming religions, including Islam simplistically as static, monolithic, and homogenous. There are many “Islams”. For example, the heterogeneous reformist Muslim thought and one of its manifestations in our days, the so-called “Progressive Islam”, tries to reinterpret the pre-modern, patriarchal views of conservative Islamic scholarship and transform its an uncongenial attitude to the contemporary notion of human rights perspectives.³

On the other hand, invoking the symbols and lexicon of Islam has frequently been a tactic of the elites in all Central Asian states (Hanks 2015, p. 65). Islam is regarded by ruling elites, who try to distance themselves from Soviet-period atheism and legitimize their power as an integral part of their “national” heritage. Furthermore, the elites have often capitalized on Islam to use Islam’s popularity and mobilization force. In this context, in order to gain broader legitimization, the next generation of Central Asian leaders will arguably have to pay more than lip service to religious symbolism. (Matveeva 2009, p. 1119).

Central Asian Muslim communities differ considerably from other Muslim societies because of a seventy years-long transformative “Homo Sovieticus” experience. Although religion has never disappeared in Soviet society, the impact of the systematic destruction of religious institutions, educational venues by the Soviet regime through comprehensive social engineering projects was substantial in Central Asia. These social engineering projects were embodied and enacted through total state propaganda, politicized education, engineering of ethnic-based national identity-building that substantially shaped both public and private life (Rasanayagam 2011; Khalid 2007, 1999; Louw 2007).

After the fall of the USSR, the legacy of the highly repressive Soviet period continued in the form of notorious social-engineering projects, including ethnocentric identity-building (Omelicheva 2014; Polese and Horak 2015; Rasanayagam 2011), assertive secularist policies (Hanks 2015, 2016; Rasanayagam 2011) and securitization⁴ of “non-controllable” Islam⁵ (Catliff 2017; Hanks 2016; Omelicheva 2016, 2011a, 2011b; Louw 2007).

There is a wide gap between ethnographic scholarship and security-focused literature regarding Islamic revivalism (Megoran 2007, pp. 141–3; Tucker 2015, p. 44). Moreover, as Tucker (2015, p. 75) emphasizes, “religion-as-security literature frequently treats Islam in Central Asia a monolithic object and Islamic revival as a linear trend that leads to predictable social and political outcomes” In part, the prevalent security-oriented literature perceives and portrays Islamic revival in Central Asia as

² See, please, further in this paper.

³ See, please, further in this paper.

⁴ Securitization, which is one of the most important concepts developed by the scholars of Copenhagen School of International Relations, refers to the process of “threat construction,” framing an issue or phenomenon that does not necessarily belong to a security realm as an “existential threat” by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 5).

⁵ We use the concept “non-controllable” Islam in a sense of a “religious belief which contradicts with the state-endorsed interpretation of Islam” (Catliff 2017, p. 60).

a potentially dangerous phenomenon, which echoes a neo-orientalist⁶ and essentialist⁷ framing. (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014, pp. 1–2).

Nonetheless, this paper aims to highlight that the patterns under which Islamic revival is unfolding in Central Asia led to a rise of conservative Sunni traditionalism, which tended to pose a relativist challenge to human rights and impede the development of an inclusive society. In other words, this paper does not engage the trajectories of security-intensive literature painting Islamic revival as inherently “radical” and viewed as a case for the post-Soviet Muslim radicalization, which is grounded mainly in the Western and Russian scholarship about Islamic revival in Central Asia (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014, pp. 1–2). However, it aims to engage the nuanced issues, like shedding light on the potential and already existing challenges of traditionalistic conservative Islam to developing inclusive society and human rights in Central Asian countries.

The freedoms and rights of believing Muslims in Central Asian states have been systematically violated for decades. There is considerable research on this issue. Also, a substantive body of reports has been prepared by international human rights organizations. Nonetheless, Central Asian societies, as a result of Islamic revival and the concomitant rise of conservative Islam, have evolved to the direction when the “Muslim actors,” mostly at the family level, can breach individual human rights on the grounds of religious views and gender. In essence, it is an indicator of a broader problem, a seriously insufficient level of protection of human rights under the traditional conservative Islamic scholarship, when judged by contemporary principles of human rights.

To put it differently, until today, most of the research was about the violations of the rights and freedoms of Central Asian Muslims. However, our observation, formal and informal communications with the religious experts, scholars in social sciences, students, also an analysis of the posts published on social media (mainly Facebook in Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Russian) and investigative articles, indicate an emerging phenomenon of endangering of fledgling human rights and freedoms in Central Asian countries, foremost, at family level by rising conservative Sunni Islam or by traditionalist Central Asian Muslim actors. In other words, in this paper, we argue that the Islamic revival in Central Asian countries has come to the point when it can be analyzed under the prism, whether it impedes the development of inclusive society and human rights or not.

It is not easy to determine the patterns of Islamic revival, which is a complex and diverse phenomenon across the five Central Asian countries; however, some common patterns can be discerned. The first part of the article, which analyzes the common patterns of Islamic revival, builds on the communication with Central Asian religious experts, religious scholars, representatives of Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani “Muftiyat” (the semi-official body representing the “traditional” Hanafi Muslims). The second part of the article, which engages the challenges posed by the traditionalistic Central Asian Muslim actors to developing inclusive society and human rights in Central Asian countries, is based on an analysis of investigative articles of Central Asian journalists, informal communication with Central Asian scholars and the opinions expressed by the students who were enrolled in the courses of “Human Rights” and “Nationalism and Religion” taught by the first author in one of the Almaty universities in the period from Spring 2016 until Spring 2020.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, all references of information in Central Asian countries for this article are anonymous.

The first part of this paper analyzes the following common patterns which help explain the ongoing Islamic revival in Central Asia: (a) the emergence of “de-modern”⁸ and “ethnicized” Central Asian Islam; (b) the penetration of Salafism; (c) securitization of “non-official” Islam by state and non-state actors;

⁶ Neo-Orientalist framing can be defined as “monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other” (Behdad and Williams 2010).

⁷ A biased assumption holding that a particular group of people have innate, intrinsic, unchangeable characteristics.

⁸ Following the analyses of Khalid (2007, 2014), by “de-modern Islam”, we mean, foremost, the understandings of Islam which are closely tied to custom.

(d) the rise of conservative Sunni traditionalistic theology. The second part tries to indicate and discuss the challenges posed by conservative Islam to the development of an inclusive society and human rights. These challenges are divided into three sub-sections: (a) women's rights, (b) children's rights and individual human rights at the family level, (c) ethnic minorities of "traditionally" Muslim origin.

2. "De-Modern" and "Ethnicized Islam" as an Enduring Legacy of the Soviet Period

The Soviet regime, after purging almost all leading *Jadids*⁹, progressive Muslim intellectuals, nearly exterminating the local *ulema* (the Muslim scholars trained in classic Islamic educational and spiritual system) including various Sufi orders, operated a tactical rapprochement with Islam which "thus survived as an essential internal component of the whole Central Asian structure" (Peyrouse 2008, p. 154). By and large, Soviet policy in the realm of religion produced "de-modern" and "ethnicized" Central Asian Islam, which is formally denoted as "traditional Sunni Islam of Maturidite-Hanafite" branch. A majority of Central Asian Muslims, at least nominally, belong to Maturidite-Hanafite Islam. In creed (*aqeeda*), they belong to the Maturidite school, in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to the Hanafite school. However, the critical characteristics of Maturidite dialectical theology and Hanafite intellectual legacy became eroded and lost, and they are mostly unknown by the Central Asian Muslim community¹⁰.

In Central Asia, Islam became synonymous with custom (Khalid 2014, p. 115). According to Khalid (2007, pp. 138–9), the tremendous modernizing efforts of the Soviet regime de-modernized Islam, and "by the late Soviet period, Central Asian understandings of Islam were more closely tied to custom and tradition than elsewhere in the Muslim world." The notions like Islamic modernism, even their own Jadid legacy, became either forgotten or largely unknown for the vast majority of Central Asian Muslims.

In essence, the Soviet regime transformed the nature of being Muslim to be cultural (Rasanayagam 2011), a part of ethnically-defined national identity, and a secular citizen that seems quite oxymoronic and peculiar (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014, p. 5). The process of systemic indigenization (in Russian "korenizatsiya"), the recruiting of Central Asians to serve as administrators in Communist Party positions started only after the Soviet Cultural Revolution (which, inter alia, involved massive purges of local cadres in 1930) could entrench official ideology in the minds of Central Asia people, including eliminating or denigrating all alternative ideas, whether traditional, cultural, religious or political.

Therefore, the arguments that the Soviet regime left Central Asians with an intact "Homo-Islamicus" is not entirely accurate and even can be misleading. As Kandiyoti (2002, p. 289) argues, such assertions can be seen as a sign of cultural essentialism that may only be matched by Central Asian elites and intellectuals who are eager to utilize the same notions of unbroken, trans-historical ethnocultural essence in the service of the articulation of post-Soviet nationalisms. However, despite a decades-long, systematic anti-religious Soviet campaign, in the eyes of Central Asian Muslims, Islam can be regarded as "the sole real anchor of stability and source of moral succour in a volatile society that suffers endemically from serious socio-economic hardships ... " (Ro'i and Wainer 2009, p. 318).

As such, every Central Asian regime has employed Islam in the process of national identity construction (Omeliicheva 2016; Hanks 2015, p. 65). The prevalence of ethnocentric national identities in Central Asian countries complicates Islamic revival also by opening venues to the instrumentalization of Islam to produce "localized Islam". The legacy of the Soviet cultural revolution, which brought about the de-Islamization of public life and the appearance of Islam as an integral but "localized and cultural" part of modern secular Central Asian identities to a larger extent, has been adopted by the political elites of independent Central Asian states. For example, Uzbek authorities frequently

⁹ *Jadidism* was a short-lived Muslim reformist movement, emerged in the late Tsarist period. It was the first pro-liberal (in political and social terms) and rationalistic (in theological terms) reformist movement among Eurasian Muslims.

¹⁰ See, please, further in this paper.

speak of “Muslimness” when discussing Uzbek spirituality, rather than referring to Islam per se. Their preference for “Muslimness” as a religious identifier over Islam in public discourse can be seen as a central component of a strategy to deemphasize the external connections of “Uzbek Islam” with the remainder of the Islamic realm and its universal characteristics and instead portray the faith as holding specific “Uzbek” qualities (Hanks 2015, p. 68). As Rasanayagam highlights, Islam is not treated by Uzbek elites as a universal “Truth” that transcends cultural and national boundaries but is localized within the government’s conception of an authentic, indigenous culture. (Rasanayagam 2011, p. 96).

In recent years the political and intellectual elites in Kazakhstan also attempted to create so-called “Kazakh Islam” (See, for example, *Eto budet konfetka* 2017). However, in the final account, the efforts of Central Asian elites to construct Islam as an element of a Central Asian “Golden Heritage” (Rasanayagam 2011, p. 96) and restore their cultural authenticity can be evaluated through the prism of “broken tradition”, since the local cultures and traditionalisms in Central Asia were reinvented by the Soviet system in a Soviet mold (Kandiyoti 1996, p. 529–30).

3. Penetration of Salafi Teachings

Salafism¹¹ contains many different tendencies, and there is a wide variation among Salafi groups¹² from moderate and apolitical to extremist¹³ and political. Nonetheless, the introduction of Salafism¹⁴ to Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union has complicated and determined the contours of the Islamic resurgence process. Although it would be misleading to brand all followers of Salafi teachings and all Salafi groups extremist and radical, the ardent followers of Salafi ideas are more likely to experience serious difficulties in becoming well-integrated into surrounding societies in well-established democracies (for example, in Germany, see Felden 2018), not to mention the post-totalitarian and post-atheistic Central Asian countries.

Dramatic religious growth that occurred throughout the former Soviet Union in the past decades with approximately 100 million people joining religious groups for the first time (Froese 2004, p. 57), has created a massive demand for religious information. Since the late 1980s, mostly young Central Asian Muslims desperately searching for Islamic knowledge and religious identity have become vulnerable to Salafi teachings. Salafism’s penetration into the Central Asian societies can also be seen as an important sign of inefficiency of local de-modern Islamic tradition, permeated with many superstitious practices and blind acceptance of injustices in social and political life, to satiate the demands of Central Asian people. Therefore, we argue that the emergence of Salafi groups in Central Asia is a natural result of local Muslims’ eagerness to learn Islam and gain an affinity to Islamic identity and their reaction to “de-modern” Central Asian Islam. Also, a sense of frustration caused by the unfair distribution of wealth (e.g., oil-revenues) and persistence of the clan-based political system could make Salafi religious teachings attractive to some Central Asian people after the 2000s¹⁵.

The majority of Central Asian Salafists follow the quietest and apolitical branches of Salafism and often tend to form isolated and “introverted” Muslim groups¹⁶. However, their claims about the necessity of fundamental reappraisal of “traditional” Central Asian Islam, their rejection of

¹¹ There is a tendency to define Salafism as a religious school whose followers aspire to emulate the pious first generations; however, all other Islamic schools claim the same. Therefore, it seems more logical to emphasize the epistemology and methodology of Salafism, which is distinguished from both Sunni and Shia Islam by its strict literalism, staunch resistance to the use of reason in the interpretation of religious sources, and invocation of “bila kayf” (without asking why and how) principle.

¹² For example, Moussalli (2009) warns that the rise of political neo-Salafism can engender serious frictions among Muslim communities, because neo-Salafism is unlike the non-political quietist Salafism, which tends to be the set of politicized, centralist and claiming to change the outside life set of teachings.

¹³ Salafism’s radical offshoots may go as far as to condemn one who commits a grave sin to be considered an apostate who deserves execution.

¹⁴ Some Salafi teachings had already penetrated the region during Soviet times through some local Islamic scholars.

¹⁵ Personal communications with the Kazakhstani engineers working in oil-rich Aqtau and Aqtobe regions, as well marginalized Zhezkazgan region in Kazakhstan, where the number of followers of Salafism has increased considerably since late 1990s.

¹⁶ Informal personal communication with the anonymous Central Asian religious community leaders, 2015–2018.

Sufism, historically and culturally rooted in Central Asian societies, and many local traditions related to religious rituals¹⁷, significantly cherished by a majority of Central Asian people, have caused, at least, irritation and alienation of those who try to follow their “traditional Muslimness”¹⁸. At worst, their claims have caused the fear and backlash of religiously conscious people who try to revive “Central Asian Islam”¹⁹. The penetration of Salafism is seen by Central Asian authorities, local Muslim leaders, and conservative masses as a danger posing a serious challenge to the “cultural”, “traditionalist”, and somehow moralistic perception of Islam in their societies.

Apart from Uzbekistan, where the followers of Salafism have been violently persecuted since the 1990s, Salafism was banned in Tajikistan in early 2009 (although the Tajik clerics argued that the Salafism’s radical stance is similar to that of the Taliban, there was never any clear evidence the group engaged in violence (Pannier 2009)). Intensive discussions on whether or not to ban Salafism took place in Kazakhstan in 2016–18.

The penetration of Salafi teachings served as a significant pushing factor behind the securitization of “non-controllable” Islam.

4. Securitization of “Non-Controllable” Islam

At the dawn of independence, all Central Asian countries adopted a relatively liberal approach towards religion, in general. In the early 1990s, various religious associations and networks contributed significantly to the revival and regeneration of religious life and the diversification of religious groups. However, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan started to abandon this policy in the early-mid 1990s and began employing harsh repressive policies towards “suspicious” or/and “non-controllable” religious associations and citizens. The reasons for this transformation, particularly in Uzbekistan, can be discussed extensively by considering the factors ranging from “struggle” against what can be called “Early Political Islam”²⁰, to the legitimization of authoritarian regimes and clan politics.

After a decade of somewhat liberal policies, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan²¹ also began to adopt more restrictive policies at the turn of the 21st century (see, for example, Froese 2004, p. 68; Catliff 2017, pp. 65–67). This transformation can be seen as a sign of adoption by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments of the changes in regional and global discourses over the dangers of radical Islam. In other words, in particular, the Kazakh authorities embraced a position shared by Russia, China, and Uzbekistan, which equated the activities of Islamist groups with terrorism and extremism. Therefore, Kazakhstan tightened control over religious groups and imposed restrictions on their operations. All these changes were welcomed by Russian, Chinese, and Uzbek leadership. (Omeličeva 2011b, p. 126). On the other hand, it has been argued that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan moved to the direction of illiberalizing religious affairs primarily with an aim to restrict and control the penetration of Salafi teachings and groups of Salafi orientation into local Muslim communities (Mamyraimov 2013).

The concept of securitization, which refers to the process of “threat construction” or transforming some issues into “threat” (even “existential threat”), is performed through using discursive practices. (Buzan and Waever 2003, p. 491). Political elites, bureaucracies, governments are among the most

¹⁷ Followers of Salafism depict the local Central Asian traditions as “harmful innovations” (bid’ah) leading astray from “pure Islam” and may exhibit relatively rigid attitudes towards the conservative/ traditionalist folk around them.

¹⁸ It has been reported that, for example, in some villages in Kazakhstan, the cleavages between local traditional Muslims and the followers of “new” (Salafi) teachings have emerged (O Salafitah v Kazakhstane 2016), concerning the tensions caused by the followers of Salafism in Tajikistan (Saidzimova 2008).

¹⁹ See, for example, concerning Kazakh society (Smagulov 2017).

²⁰ The phenomenon called “Early Political Islam” emerged in some parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in an atmosphere of severe political, economic, and social crisis, coupled with an ideological and ideational vacuum caused by the collapse of the official ideology. It did not have solid intellectual and societal underpinnings.

²¹ Throughout the 1990s, the Kazakh authorities utilized a fairly balanced approach toward Islamist groups and toward the religious activities of those individuals whose practices, beliefs, and affiliations were not recognized by the state-controlled “Muftiyat” (Omeličeva 2011b, p. 126).

common securitizing actors (Buzan et al. 1998, pp. 40–41). In particular, the threats to “identity” are always a question of the construction of something as threatening some “we”. Moreover, threats to “identity” often lead to the construction or reproduction of “us”, which can be constructed in many different ways. However, the main factor that decides whether security conflicts will emerge is whether one or another self-definition wins out in a society in a given time (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 120).

The main reasons for the securitization of “non-controllable” Islam in Central Asia are based on the fears of (1) politicized Islam or Islamism (Islamism, or Political Islam, is often defined as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives” (Denoeux 2002, p. 61) and (2) the potential for the rise of extremism and radicalism. Concerning the political claims of Islam or Islamism, it would be premature or biased to assume that Central Asian Muslims are preoccupied with politicized Islamic or Islamist ideas (see, for example, Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014; Tucker 2015; Hanks 2015). Political Islam is marginal and geographically limited in the region. Overall, the Muslims in post-Soviet Central Asia mostly live their version of Islam, which is characterized by the desire to dissociate religious practice from the political arena (Ro’i and Wainer 2009, p. 303).

As such, the fear of the threat of Islamism or fundamentalism in Central Asia is a myth arising from unfounded comparisons with the colonial history of the Middle East. Although the researchers, such as Akiner (1993) described the impossibility of the emergence of powerful Islamism and fundamentalism in Central Asia in view of the fact that “Islam is based on a highly developed legal system; it is simply not feasible to build an Islamic state without this knowledge” (Akiner 1993, p. 56), this view “has long represented a minority opinion in the West” (Myer 2002, p. 242). Contrary to top-down social change advocated by Political Islam, a primary trend in Islamic revival in Central Asia sees politics as secondary. (Tucker 2015, p. 76). All these negate turning Islamism into the aim of a majority of Central Asian Muslims.

Concerning Islamic extremism and radicalism, it can be argued that a tendency to equate Islamization with radicalization follows a catch-all definition and a sweeping overgeneralization, even a misperception, and substitution of the concepts. In general, the relationship between social Islamization and political radicalization cannot be presented deterministically (Heathershaw and Montgomery 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, the myth of a “threat” of radical Islam across Central Asia is needed to be critically reassessed, as it resembles a chimera that masks the region’s more pressing challenges (Hanks 2016, p. 209). Islamist groups seeking radical political changes occupy only the margins of Islamic discourse in Central Asian countries (Tucker 2015, p. 76). Also, the increased interest in moderate Islam has been largely ignored by policymakers and pundits in the West, who tend to focus on the rise of radicalism and fundamentalism and associated acts of insurgency perpetrated by violent, but small and fringe groups (Hanks 2015, p. 72–73). In essence, the claims about “creeping Islamism” being embraced by significant groups of Central Asian Muslims tend to be largely speculative. Not only radical but also mainstream Islamist groups are still fringe in Central Asia—the organizations with Islamist agendas are very marginal and strictly localized.

Securitization, as a byproduct of the competition for power, can be invoked by some political and social groups or institutions possessing power (Omeliicheva 2011a, p. 250). In general, the threat of the spread of Salafi teachings has been effectively used as a legitimization tool for authoritarian politics in the region. Specifically, in Uzbekistan, the threats of religious radicalism and fundamentalism were employed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s to consolidate the power of the ruling regime. To a significant extent, in all Central Asian countries, the threat of Islamic radicalism has been used to launch social engineering projects aimed at consolidating national identities and legitimizing “state-controllable” versions of Islam with a goal to garner a sizable societal legitimacy.

On the other hand, securitization is expected to resonate with the psycho-cultural disposition of people as it requires the acceptance by audience (Balzacq 2005, pp. 172–73); consequently, the characteristics of the psychological and sociological fabric of Central Asian societies must be taken into account. Since the adherents of the so-called “non-traditional” Islamic groups, foremost Salafism,

challenge the main pillars of post-independent identity-building in Central Asian countries, namely the ethnocentric national identity and “localized”/“cultural” Central Asian Islam, these religious groups (and other “non-traditional” or “non-controllable” religious groups, such as Protestant Christian groups or Krishnaism) could become the objects of securitization. We argue that while securitization of “non-controllable” Islam is an important factor turning Islamic revival in Central Asia into a complex issue, it also provides a kind of legitimacy for ethnocentric national identity-building in Central Asian countries characterized by “ethnicization” of religion (i.e., acceptance of Islam as a part of modern secular national identity).

It is a fact that the threats of radicalism and extremism could have been employed by traditionally dominant religious groups (which tend to be displeased with the activities of smaller religious groups and foreign missionaries) to seek assistance from the government to reduce the competition by limiting the promotion of “non-traditional” religious doctrines (Froese 2004, p. 73). Therefore, there are the reasons to believe that the agents of securitization of “non-traditional” Islam can be the representatives of local traditional Muslim groups²², foremost “Muftiyats” (informal communication with the representatives of Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani “Muftiyats”; also, Salafi agymynin 2016; Omelicheva 2011a, pp. 250–51).

Nonetheless, it seems implausible to categorize all five Central Asian states in the same manner. In fact, considerable differences in the approaches of political elites and societal forces in Central Asian countries to “non-controllable” Islam and public visibility of Islam can be observed. For example, the “Tablighi-Jamaat” is regarded by Kazakhstani “Muftiyat” and the state organs as an extremist group and is officially banned, whereas Kyrgyzstani “Muftiyat” recognizes this group, and it can legally function in the country. Moreover, Kyrgyzstani “Muftiyat” maintains a cooperative relationship with the “Tablighi-Jamaat” members, for example, in fighting against radical groups and providing basic religious education (personal communication with anonymous Kyrgyz scholars and journalists).

5. Rising of Conservative Sunni Traditionalism

Securitization of “non-official” Islam by state and non-state actors resulted in the rise and consolidation of conservative Sunni Islam, which go hand in hand with retraditionalization. In other words, it was not only “de-modern” and “ethnicized” Islam, inherited from the Soviet times, that turned out to be a distinct trait of a ‘folk Islam’ in Central Asia. The conservative Hanafi Islamic teachings, to which the so-called Central Asian religious bureaucracy organized around “Muftiyats” adheres, are also steadily rising. This scholarship can be depicted as conservative Sunni traditionalism, if not dogmatic and scripturalistic. It not only contradicts in some crucial aspects the rationalistic Hanafite–Maturidite theology, to which nominally Central Asian Muslims belong, but it tends to deny the Islamic rationalism and depicts it in a wholesale manner as “heretical Mutazilism” (personal communications with an anonymous religious scholar at Nur-Mubarak University²³, the religious experts at the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies in Almaty in April 2019, two anonymous Kyrgyzstani madrasa teachers in Bishkek, June 2017, two anonymous Uzbekistani scholars in June 2017, during CESS-2017 Conference).

The rise of conservative Sunni traditionalism (tilted to the direction of anti-rationalistic scripturalism) is a part of a bigger epistemological problem²⁴ in Sunni Islam—the demise of rationalistic Maturidism

²² For example, some Islamic leaders and scholars in Kazakhstan have embarked on a deliberate process of securitization of Salafism by arguing that “there cannot be moderate Salafists”, “Salafism is like a cancer cell which must be eliminated” (see, for example, Mangystaulyk 2016).

²³ The first author in 2019 visited a scholar at Nur-Mubarak Islamic University in Almaty. He deplored that in the university located on Al-Farabi avenue, the works of Islamic philosopher Ibn-Rushd (Averroes), who commented on the views of Al-Farabi, cannot be studied because of the fear of being accused of heresy—following rationalistic Mutazilism. In his view, this dogmatic and anti-rationalistic position is held by a majority of faculty members and “Muftiyat” representatives.

²⁴ As early as the 10th century, traditionalists’ victory in the Sunni Muslim world forced the more rationalistic schools to incorporate many of the views and positions of the traditionalists, and eventually marginalized, even buried into oblivion

and the rise of traditionalistic conservative Asharism (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2019) since the 10th century. However, rationalistic Maturidite theology accepts, first, that there can be no conflict between reason and revelation if the real purport of the latter is correctly understood (Ali 1963, p. 264), second, the principle of ethical objectivism, which is crucial to developing a purposive approach to religious norms and developing human-centric religious interpretations. Rationalistic Maturidite epistemology, on some crucial points, is close to the Mutazilite school and generally stands between the Mutazilism and Asharism (Rahman 2000, p. 62). In particular, the early presentations of Maturidism had positioned themselves together with Mutazilites on one side and Asharites on the other (Deen 2016).

There is a nexus between the rise of conservative Sunni traditionalism and political developments, foremost, with the rise of dynastic monarchical powers in Islamic history²⁵. The same logic can also be applied to post-Soviet Central Asian countries, characterized by clan-based, neo-patrimonial regimes and political institutions, oligarchy-driven economies, underdevelopment of social sciences, and flawed critical thinking in the mainstream education system.

In the theological realm, the rise of conservative Sunni traditionalism in Central Asia in the post-independence period can be attributed to the penetration of Egyptian Hanafism, specifically the influence of the theological legacy of a prominent Hanafite scholar Al-Tahawi. His views were promoted especially by the Central Asian graduates of Al-Azhar University, who gained strong positions in Central Asian “Muftiyats”, as representing an inherently “Hanafite” view. However, the difference between the theological methods of Al-Maturidi and Al-Tahawi is quite evident. While Al-Maturidi was a thorough dialectician who employed rationalistic methods to discover a philosophical basis for his views, Al-Tahawi was a true traditionalist, who did not favor rational discussion or speculative thinking on the pillars of faith, accepting them without any questioning. As such, Al-Tahawi’s system may be conceptualized as dogmatic, while that of Al-Maturidi as critical. Although both scholars belong to the same Hanafi school, they considerably differ in epistemology and trends of thought (Ali 1963, pp. 245–46).

The power of rising conservative Islam, for example, in Kazakhstan, was eloquently seen during the quarantine caused by COVID-19. One of the prominent conservative poets, who is also known for defending polygamy and other conservative Islamic tenets, was awarded a certificate of honor during quarantine by the ruling party, despite describing the COVID-19 as a hoax and misleading many of his followers. The funeral of a prominent conservative scholar, who died during quarantine, was attended by thousands of followers, and police could not intervene, despite state-imposed strict quarantine measures.

The rise and consolidation of conservative Islam go hand in hand with the process of retraditionalization. It can be claimed that conservative teachings are legitimized by retraditionalization. Overall, the traditions, ceremonies, and rituals associated with Islam constitute an indispensable part of Central Asian societies’ collective memory. After the collapse of the Soviet system, the retraditionalization process has elevated the bodily practices, and commemorative ceremonies ensued from Islamic tradition to the level of “authentic” Central Asian culture. Inertia in social structures observable in all Central Asian countries can be explained by Connerton’s (1989, pp. 4–5) logic of creating societal collective memory based on ceremonies: “commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit, and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms.” However, what is seen as Central Asian traditionalism, is a “broken tradition,” since as Kandiyoti (1996, pp. 529–30) aptly observes, “in Central

Maturidite rationalistic epistemology. Hanafism became strongly influenced by conservative Asharism and the Ahl al-Hadith school. A role for reason in mainstream Sunni Islam became confined within strict limits and only in relation to secondary issues of jurisprudence (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2019, p. 356.)

²⁵ It was not coincident that even in the Hanafi-dominant territories the ruling dynasties tried to promote Asharism and marginalize Maturidism since the former (particularly the scholars of later generations) appeared lenient towards dynastic monarchical power, even a despotic one (Zhussipbek and Nagayeva 2019, p. 352). For example, the Ottomans gradually marginalized Maturidite theology, although it remained Hanafite in jurisprudence.

Asia ... what appeared to some commentators as ‘traditionalism’ was as much a response to and creation of the [Soviet] system itself as a feature of local communities”. Therefore, it is natural that retraditionalization is promoted from “above” by political elites, who are mainly the continuation of Soviet nomenclature.

Retraditionalization provides the political elites with new forms of instrumental meaning-making to create a foundation upon which they could promote tradition as a marker of “national” identity and political reconstruction (Beyer and Finke 2019, p. 311). On the other hand, retraditionalization is a grassroots phenomenon. It is perceived by many in Central Asian countries as a genuine “national ideology”, the revival of “authentic culture”, therefore, it is a legitimate and much desirable process. However, the claims about cultural authenticity, in fact, are only about the “mirage of cultural authenticity”, since seeking authenticity in one’s heritage detaches culture and religion from history and makes the heritage unfathomable (Afshari 2001, p. 8)

The rise and “normalization” of conservatism, and its adoption as a major trend in identity-building and a constituent part of “national idea”, is already a matter of fact in Central Asian countries (Mullojanov 2019, p. 136). The authorities, seeking to consolidate internal power and find the bases of legitimacy, have resorted to “conservative” discourse²⁶. The revival of traditional values and practices changed from being a way to reclaim national identity to becoming a tool of social control; moreover, this revival became intertwined with political authoritarianism (Gradskova 2020, p. 31).

To conclude, the quasi-official “Muftiyats” and traditionalistic Central Asian Islamic education centers came to embody conservative Sunni traditionalism, which is, at least, unwelcoming to rationalism, lenient to the authoritarian power, blind to social injustice, and suspicious of the contemporary notion of human rights.

6. Challenges of Islamic Revival to the Development of Human Rights

Most ethnographic and anthropological research on Central Asian countries showed that Central Asian Muslims have a tendency of “intimization” and “individualization”, having private beliefs in God (Omeliicheva 2011a, p. 244). Also, individuals in the questions related to Islam mainly engage in the debates about their identity, sources of moral authority, and fundamental questions about what it means to be a good Muslim, to live an admirable life, and what it means to be an Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, or Tajik. Islamic revival meant that many in Central Asia are interested in specifically Muslim debates about these basic questions (Tucker 2015, p. 76). However, the patterns under which Islamic revival is unfolding have led to the level when the conservative, traditionalistic Central Asian Muslim actors start posing the challenges to the construction of an inclusive society and the development of human rights. In other words, besides the phenomenon of instrumentalization of Islam in identity-building by the political regimes, there are signs that, rising in popularity and legitimized by an ongoing process of retraditionalization, conservative Islamic teachings are providing the ground for violations of human rights, at least at the family level.

The conservative groups, who could find a safe haven under the banner of “traditional Central Asian Hanafite Islam”, are gaining a stronger voice and influence at the family and society level. That inevitably contributes to the challenges for human rights, which can be analyzed under three categories: women’s rights, children’s rights, and individual human rights at the family level, and ethnic and ethnic minorities of ‘traditionally’ Muslim origin.

²⁶ For example, in early 2018, Uzbekistan authorities issued special regulations making sure Uzbek music videos adhere to conservative Uzbek culture and traditions (see, for example, Najibullah 2018). Also, tellingly, the Kazakhstan authorities in late 2017, giving in to conservative groups’ demands, sent Aizhan Baizakova to jail for three days on charges of hooliganism, a young actress and social media celebrity who, according to the conservatives’ view, violated the rules of decency (Kumenov 2018).

(a) Women's rights

The idea of relativity of human rights values derived from moral or cultural relativism (depending on the understanding of cultural relativism) does not accept that universal principles and values of human rights exist. Women's rights became the primary targets of the advocates of the relativist approach to human rights. Today it is primarily the traditional conservative Muslim appropriation of Islam that is used to disseminate the claims for a relativist approach to the human rights of women (Sachedina 2008, p. 117). Conservative Islamic discourse appears to be patriarchal and based on three main pillars, namely, traditional masculinity, gender oppositionality, and patriarchal honor (Duderija 2019, p. 97). The supporters of conservative Islamic teachings do not accept wholeheartedly the main idea of women's rights that a woman is a subject on her own and an active agent possessing equal rights. In general, the claims about cultural authenticity in the Muslim context resulted in a denial of recognition of the full spectrum of women's rights because of conservative Islamic teachings (Kandiyoti 1995).

As such, a relativist nonacceptance of women's rights by Central Asian conservative Muslim actors is based on the claims of cultural authenticity, which are compounded by patriarchal theological justifications (Sachedina 2008, p. 118). These claims underpin many informal, traditional practices (like the practice of polygamy or the low family and social status of daughters-in-law (*kelins*) in "traditionalistic" Central Asia families), which are revitalized by retraditionalization. In general, informal, traditional practices denying women their human rights became seen and accepted as "authentically" Central Asian. Moreover, these practices are enthusiastically supported by traditionalistic Muslim actors.

Central Asian conservative Muslim actors deliberately promote religious interpretations, which lead to further discrimination and denial of women's human rights (a similar situation exists concerning domestic violence and children's rights). Informal revitalization and legitimization of polygamy are the epitomai of a relativist nonacceptance of women's rights by rising conservative traditional Islam in Central Asia. According to our observation, informal communications, analysis of popular articles, and posts on social media, polygamy became an integral part of the family and social life in all Central Asian countries. Although polygamy is officially not prohibited only in Kazakhstan, in all Central Asian countries, including those where polygamy is officially penalized by law, it is a "usual" practice. For example, in the research done by journalists in Uzbekistan, more than half of the respondents admitted that know someone who practiced polygamy (Mnogozhenstvo 2019; Yarmoshyuk and Zhetigenova 2019). In Kyrgyzstan, the law banning polygamy became a dead law (Yarmoshyuk and Zhetigenova 2019).

On the whole, the two mutually supportive phenomena, the rising of conservative Islam and retraditionalization, lead to the emergence of "double life" and "double morality" in family affairs in Central Asian countries, when the religiously motivated people prefer living according to their religious convictions, to which the official organizations turn a blind eye. Although polygamy is practiced by many secular men, like state officials or businessmen (for example, in Kazakhstan, the former capital, Almaty is called the city of "baybishes" (senior wives), a new capital, Nur-sultan is a city of "tokals" (junior wives) (see, for example, Yarmoshyuk and Zhetigenova 2019), the most authoritative legitimization of polygamy came from conservative religious actors. An analysis of the publications and interviews of many so-called mainstream Islamic leaders, imams of central mosques of big cities, officially "sanctioned" Islamic preachers, who promote "traditional" Islam against Salafism, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan eloquently show their approval, even encouragement of polygamy (Mnogozhenstvo 2017; Islamtanushy 2018; Tokal 2019). Moreover, a representative of the Sharia and Fatwa department at Kazakhstani "Muftiyat" defended polygamy and recommended the adoption of a new law to authorize polygamy officially (Tokal 2020).

Some female students, especially those hailing from conservative families, who attended the course "Human Rights" taught by the first author, in their papers about women's rights, mentioned the challenges for their human rights by some conservative religious discourses strongly felt in their family or relative environment (like the patriarchal interpretations making a woman subservient

to man, the patriarchal concept of honor, acceptance of polygamy, the violations of the rights of daughters-in-law by in-laws, the harsh restrictions for freedom to marry/choose a partner).

Also, our informal communication with Central Asian colleagues revealed the gravity of the issue of polygamy in Central Asian societies.

“We are a religious family, but I was frustrated and ruined when I learned that my husband married another woman under religious justifications. He even threatened me that if I do not accept his second marriage, I will lose my faith (“iman”). But I cannot accept this injustice and believe that properly understood Islam does not allow this” (the wife of a colleague of the first author, personal communication).

“My old friend with whom I attended the same school and who embraced a religious lifestyle one day called me and crying explained that her husband wants to get the second wife because they do not have male children. She asked me for advice about what to do” (a colleague of the 3rd author, personal communication).

(b) Children’s rights and individual human rights at the family level

Similar to the women’s rights, there is a tendency among “traditional” Central Asian Muslims, ensuing from conservative Islamic interpretations, not to accept children as active agents or full bearers of rights, which are the main principles of children’s rights (observation and informal communications with religious practitioners from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan). According to the survey done by the first author in 2018 to evaluate the youth values in Kazakhstan, those who received religious education or who are the students at the religious institutions, in the issue of children’s rights and parenting styles exhibited a relatively high level of the acceptance of an authoritarian (anti-democratic) parenting model. Furthermore, a cursory analysis of the views of Kazakh youth enrolled in religious education (which is under the strict control of “Muftiyat”) shows that a majority of them are not only more favorable to the authoritarian, teacher-centric style of education but also tended to be skeptical towards the idea of rights in education and, in general, to the notion of human rights (personal communication with an anonymous expert at the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies in Almaty and Professor at the Nur-Mubarak Islamic University).

The conservative Central Asian Muslims from Almaty, Bishkek, Shymkent, Nur-Sultan, and Tashkent, with whom we could communicate concerning the children’s rights, freedom of choice, and the right to self-determination of their children, tend to express, at least, disapproval of the choices of their children, which would contradict their conservative religious views, not to mention the right to have freedom of consciousness.

Quite interestingly, some students who took the course of “Human Rights” from the first author in their papers about the freedom of choice openly expressed frustration about growing encroachment on their rights under the pretext of religious values and principles from their religious family members. These students are anxious about their choice of clothing and hairstyle, future partner or spouse (some even may consider marrying non-Muslims), diet, and way of life. Moreover, few deplored that they secretly hold agnostic or atheistic views because they are afraid of the condemnation of their religious family members.

It can be argued that the rising conservative religiosity became a controversial issue, *inter alia*, caused by the violations of individual human rights at the family level, for some Central Asian people. There is, although a small, but a growing disenchantment with religious revival. For example, in May–July 2020, Kazakhstani newspaper Central Asia Monitor initiated a discussion between the experts and readers about the future perspectives of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan, and some concerns about the negative effects at the society and family level were openly discussed (Issabayeva 2020). Moreover, a backlash of some young people who want to raise their voices can be observed. According to our observation and informal communications, there is an emerging phenomenon, the youth’s disenchantment with both “de-modern” and conservative, institutionalized forms of Islam. This phenomenon does not necessarily induce the youth to embrace the so-called non-traditional Islam

but makes them increasingly critical to Islam and religion, in general. Tellingly, according to a survey, the Kazakh youth trusts religious leaders the least, after politicians (Rakisheva 2017, p. 60).

(c) Ethnic minorities of ‘traditionally’ Muslim origin

The rise of Islam, contrary to expectations, did not prevent interethnic tensions in Central Asian countries. There is no strong religious and social solidarity among “traditionally” Muslim but ethnically different Central Asian ethnic groups. According to Hanks (2015, pp. 64–65), “almost thirty years after Alexandre Bennigsen’s famous formulation of a ‘supranational’ level of identity, there appears to be little evidence that such identity functions any more effectively among Central Asian Muslims than it does among Muslims in the Middle East or in other regions.”

On the contrary, Islam appears to be instrumentalized in the process of rising ethnic nationalism in Central Asia. Not only the lack of solidarity, but even the lack of social harmony, which may lead to inter-community distrust and serious cleavages between “traditionally” Muslim ethnic groups, can be observed in the region countries. The students of ethnic minority origin (of Uighur, Uzbek, Tajik and Meskhetian Turkish descent), who took the courses “Human Rights” and “Nationalism and Religion” taught by the first author, expressed in their papers concerns about ethnic-based discrimination and the attempts to use Islam in ethnic-based discrimination (for example, by “appointing” ethnic-Kazakh imams in Uzbek or Uighur majority neighborhoods).

Serious conflicts erupted in recent years (like the massive ethnic clashes between Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in 2010 in South Kyrgyzstan and large-scale violence against the Muslim Hui (Dungan) community²⁷ in South Kazakhstan in February 2020, sporadic clashes between Kazakhs and Uigurs, Kyrgyz and Dungans and other cases) demonstrate the prevalence of ethnic-based identities and instrumentalization of Islam to supplement these identities. Nevertheless, it would also be shortsighted to overgeneralize the threat of inter-ethnic conflicts in Central Asia; the “discourse of danger” should not blind the researchers of Central Asia.

(d) A cursory comparison between “Jadidis” and today’s traditionalistic Muslim actors

The following comparisons can be made between current-day conservative Central Asian Muslim actors (centered around “Muftiyats” and officially sanctioned Islamic education centers) and reformist “Jadids”, the progressive Muslim intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Khalid 1999), to see how distant they are, at least, in some major theological questions (however, both “Jadids” and today’s traditionalist Muslim actors aim to protect national and religious interests of Central Asian Muslims by preserving authentic Central Asian culture).

Notable “Jadids” like Musa Jarullah Bigiev can be accepted as the representatives of a broader movement called Islamic modernism. One of the main aims of Islamic modernism was to reconcile reason and Islamic tradition. Islamic modernism emerged in the 19th century in reaction to the impact of modern Europe, or modern Western civilization with its science, technical achievements, political and social values. Islamic modernism manifested itself not only in theology but also, and even more so, in legal thought and educational projects. The origins of Islamic modernism can be traced back to the scholars of the second half of the 19th-century Sayyid Akhmad Khan, al-Afghani, Abduh. In the 20th century, Musa Jarullah Bigiev, Muhammad Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, and many others contributed to this heterogeneous theological and intellectual movement. (Wielandt 2016, pp. 708–9).

While a majority of leading “Jadids” from Central Asia and the Volga region adhered to Hanafism–Maturidism and tried to revive Islamic rationalism, today’s Central Asian Hanafite Muslim actors are dogmatic, even irrational, and hostile to rationalism. It can be assumed that “Jadids”, would describe today’s religious bureaucracy in “Muftiyats” and scholars in officially sanctioned

²⁷ Some notable “traditionalistic” Kazakh Islamic leaders expressed nationalistic reaction to the violence against Muslim Hui (Dungan) minority which took place in February 2020, whereas “Muftiyat” issued only a weak statement, instead of being pro-active.

Islamic education centers as the followers of “Qadimism”²⁸. “Jadids” believed that the juristic and scholastic articulations of Islam must be open to evolution and reform, whereas conservative Central Asian Muslims are preoccupied with the premodern interpretations. Hence, for example, current-day conservative Central Asian Muslim actors defend polygamy and, in general, do not accept some of the universal principles and values of human rights, like gender equality, freedom to choose and abandon any religion, absolute prohibition of bodily harm or inhumane treatment (see, for example, [Duderija 2017](#)). On the contrary, “Jadids”, although many of them were devoted Muslims, were against polygamy and defended the legal equality between men and women (for example, the First Muslim Congress held under the leadership of Jadids in 1917 banned polygamy, declared the political equality of genders ([Daulet 1989](#), p. 25)). Last but not least, while “Jadids” defended social justice, affirmative action policies (therefore, many of them were hoaxed by the promises of Bolsheviks), wanted to develop an inclusive society, the conservative Central Asian Muslim actors are prone to ethnic nationalism, blind or tolerant to social and political injustice.

To conclude, Islamic revival in Central Asian countries, which evolved to the rise and consolidation of traditionalistic conservative Sunni traditionalism, may pose a relativist challenge to the development of fundamental human rights like the freedom of choice at the family level, children’s rights, and women’s rights, not to mention the rights of religious and sexual minorities.

7. Conclusions

The securitization of “non-official” Islam by state and non-state actors and branding Islam into “traditional or good” vs. “foreign or bad, dangerous” to counter the spread of Salafi teachings (designated as “alien” and inherently “radical” by both Central Asian regimes and social forces representing the so-called “traditional” Islam) have led to the rise and consolidation of conservative Sunni traditionalism. Our research suggests that there is an emerging phenomenon of endangering of human rights and building an inclusive society in Central Asian countries from the rise conservative Islam, which is becoming more popular with the traditionalist Central Asian Muslim actors.

The analysis of [Khalid \(2007, p. 121\)](#) holding that Central Asian Muslims perceive themselves as “traditional Muslims”, with strong ties to community and customs rather than Islamic theological tenets, in our days ought to be applied with some reservations. We argue that a relativist approach to human rights defended by conservative Islam, which plays, *inter alia*, a vital role in the slow development of women’s human rights, has also started influencing Central Asian societies. There is a threat that conservative Muslim segments of Central Asian societies in the issue of women’s rights, children/youth empowerment, and gender minorities may follow the steps of many Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim communities, where, according to [Kandiyoti \(1995\)](#), the claims about cultural authenticity challenged the universal applicability of human rights. In other words, the religious revival is heading to the direction when the Central Asian traditionalist Muslim actors, who are gaining power and influence, may impede the development of inclusive society and human rights.

Nonetheless, given the contentiousness of religious interpretations, Islam is not monolithic; there are many “Islams”. Moreover, the leading progressive Muslim thinkers of either the Sunni or Shia doctrine ([Sachedina 2008](#); [Duderija 2017](#); [An-Naim 2010](#); [Sardar 2011](#)) affirmed the conceptual compatibility between Islam and the modern human rights scheme. As [Sachedina \(2008, p. 109\)](#) explains, even though classical “fiqh” did not affirm the equal moral worth of all human beings, regardless of their secondary sources of identity (such as religious beliefs, gender), nonetheless the fundamental idea of universal moral law or natural law corresponds with or is the actual embodiment of the Divine Will itself. By and large, the advocates of reformist Muslim thought are committed to an Islamic hermeneutics, which is receptive to the contemporary notion of human rights and the values

²⁸ “Qadim” literally means old, “qadimits” were the defenders of scholastic and devoid of reason, old-style Muslim education, which “Jadids” wanted to transform fundamentally.

(such as the respect of human dignity, individual rights, gender justice, and equality) that underpins it. (Duderija 2017, pp. 278–9).

From the late 20th century, the so-called “Progressive Islam’s” manhaj (interpretational methodology) started gaining support among the reformist-minded Muslim intellectuals. “Progressive Islam” is a heuristic tool whose adherents have a commitment to realize the fundamental principles of human rights, a religiously and ethnically pluralistic society, social and gender justice (Duderija 2017, pp. 192–93; Duderija 2008, p. 90). According to the analysis of Duderija (2020, p. 164), “Progressive Islam’s” methodology is premised upon: (1) hermeneutical privileging of the underlying objectives of Islamic law and its philosophy over that of heavily textualist interpretational approaches inherent to (neo)-classical interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah; (2) recourse to comprehensive contextualization (for example, “tend to hold a more meta-textual conception of the prophetic Sunnah, more in line with how sunnah was understood in the early Islamic era, which does not conflate the concept of Sunnah with the concept of hadith as text” (Duderija 2015)); (3) employment of rationalist epistemology to Islamic theology and ethics (ethical objectivism).

Prone to ethnic and gender exclusivism, conservative Islamic interpretations, which are on the rise in Central Asia countries, are the result of a combination of particular historical, theological, social, and political processes, which this article tries to uncover. Moreover, we should not overestimate the influence of religious resurgence in Central Asian countries. For example, the research done by Friedrich Ebert Kazakhstan Foundation in 2019 found that it is misleading to argue that conservative religiosity and traditionalism are dominant notions that are filling the post-Soviet period’s value vacuum. Interestingly, this research found that the so-called “European” values model is appealing to Kazakhstani citizens and that these values are seriously influencing the societal transformation.²⁹ (Tsennosti 2020, pp. 10–11, 76).

To be able to build inclusive societies and develop human rights in Central Asia, there is a need for cultural transformation, new discourses on identity, culture, family, religion, and religiosity, which would be in tune with the principles of the contemporary notion of human rights. Specifically, it is necessary to develop the cultural capital of human rights and enlightened perceptions and interpretations of cultural and religious values and norms.

Overall, this paper tries to engage more nuanced issues related to Islamic revival in Central Asian countries, which are still under-researched. More complex research needed to explore the background (theological, psychological, social and political) and challenges posed by rising conservative Sunni Islamic discourses, embraced by traditionalist Central Asian Muslim actors, to build an inclusive society and develop human rights.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.Z., D.A. and Z.N.; methodology, G.Z., D.A. and Z.N.; writing—original draft preparation, G.Z. and D.A.; writing—review and editing, G.Z. and Z.N.; supervision, G.Z.; project administration, G.Z.; funding acquisition, G.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the research grant provided by the Committee of Science, Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Kazakhstan, grant number is AP05132998. The APC was funded by the same grant.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Achilov, Dilshod. 2012. Islamic Education in Central Asia: Evidence from Kazakhstan. *Asia Policy* 14: 79–106. [CrossRef]
- Afshari, Reza. 2001. *Human Rights in Iran. The Abuse of Cultural Relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

²⁹ In the end culture is not monolithic: the contemporary understanding of cultures as “internally contested, with shifting and porous borders, hybridity, and changing identities” decidedly weakens the case for cultural relativism and strengthens the ethical significance for human rights (Lee 2006, p. 212).

- Akiner, Shirin. 1993. *Central Asia: New Arc of Crisis?* London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies.
- Ali, Ayyub. 1963. Maturidism. In *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. Edited by Mian Mohammad Sharif. Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, pp. 259–74.
- An-Naim, Abdullahi. 2010. *Islam and Human Rights: Selected Essays of Abdullahi An-Naim*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Balzacq, Thierry. 2005. The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, audience and context. *European Journal of International Relations* 11: 171–201. [CrossRef]
- Behdad, Ali, and Juliet Williams. 2010. Neo-orientalism. In *Globalizing American Studies*. Edited by B. Edwards and G. Parameshvar. Chicago: Chicago Scholarship Online.
- Beyer, Judith, and Peter Finke. 2019. Practices of traditionalization in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey* 38: 310–28. [CrossRef]
- Buzan, Barry, and Ole Waever. 2003. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Wilde de Jaap. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Catliff, Victoria. 2017. Discrimination on the Basis of Ethnicity and Language in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In *Legacies of Division*. London: Equal Rights Trust.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daulet, Shafiga. 1989. The First All Muslim Congress of Russia Moscow 1–11 May 1917. *Central Asian Survey* 8: 21–47. [CrossRef]
- Deen, Adam. 2016. *A Response to Claims of Unorthodoxy of My Theological Claims*. London: Quilliam Foundation, Available online: <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/a-response-to-claims-of-unorthodoxy-of-my-theological-claims-within-my-reasons-for-joining-the-quilliam-foundation-piece/> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Denoeux, Guilain. 2002. The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam. *Middle East Policy* 9: 56–81. [CrossRef]
- Duderija, Adis. 2008. Construction of the Religious Self and the Other: The Progressive Muslims' Manhaj. *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 10: 89–120.
- Duderija, Adis. 2015. Traditional and Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics in Comparative Perspective. Available online: https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/2015/03/23/duderija_hermeneutics/ (accessed on 15 October 2020).
- Duderija, Adis. 2017. *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam*. New York and Routledge.
- Duderija, Adis. 2019. Using Progressive Muslim Thought Take Down Patriarchy. *Tikkun Magazine*, 34.
- Duderija, Adis. 2020. Contemporary Muslim Male Reformist Thought and Gender Equality Affirmative Interpretations of Islam. *Feminist Theology* 28: 161–81. [CrossRef]
- Eto budet konfetka. 2017. Vlasti nachali razrabotku 'kazakhstanskoy modeli' Islama. *Islamnews*. November 28. Available online: <https://islamnews.ru/news-jeto-budet-konfetka-vlasti-kazahstana> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Felden, Esther. 2018. Battling Salafism on Germany's Streets. *DW*. October 26. Available online: <https://www.dw.com/en/battling-salafism-on-germanys-streets/a-45898250> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Froese, Paul. 2004. After Atheism: An Analysis of Religious Monopolies in the Post-Communist World. *Sociology of Religion* 65: 57–75. [CrossRef]
- Gradskova, Yulia. 2020. Recovering traditions? *Baltic Worlds* XIII: 31–36.
- Hanks, Reuel. 2015. Islamization and Civil Society in Central Asia: Religion as Substrate in Conflict Management and Social Stability. In *Civil Society and Politics in Central Asia*. Edited by C. Ziegler. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hanks, Reuel. 2016. Narratives of Islam in Uzbekistan: Authoritarian myths and the Janus-state syndrome. *Central Asian Survey* 35: 501–13. [CrossRef]
- Heathershaw, John, and David Montgomery. 2014. *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics*. London: Chatham House.
- Islamtanushy: Tokal alu ushin 1-nshi ayelinen ruhsat surau minnetti emes. 2018. [Islamic Expert: To Marry Second Wife It Is not Obligatory to Get Permission from First Wife]. August 17. Available online: <https://stan.kz/islamtanushy-tokal-alu-Yshin-birinshi-ay/> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Issabayeva, Saule. 2020. Kazakhstan Stanovitsya vse Bolee Musulmanskoy Stranoy. July 29. Available online: <https://camonitor.kz/35510-kazakhstan-stanovitsya-vse-bolee-musulmanskoy-stranoy-chem-eto-chrevato.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).

- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1995. Reflections on the Politics of Gender in Muslim Societies: From Nairobi to Beijing. In *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*. Edited by M. Afkhami. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 19–32.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1996. Modernization Without the Market? The Case of the 'Soviet East'. *Economy and Society* 25: 529–42. [CrossRef]
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 2002. Post-colonialism compared: Potentials and limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34: 279–97.
- Khalid, Adeeb. 1999. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Khalid, Adeeb. 2007. Being Muslim in Soviet Central Asia, or an Alternative History of Muslim Modernity. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18: 123–43. [CrossRef]
- Khalid, Adeeb. 2014. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Los Angeles: Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kumenov, Almaz. 2018. Kazakhstan: Morality Mavens Monitoring Women. *Eurasianet*. January 25. Available online: <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-morality-mavens-monitoring-women> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Lee, Xiaorong. 2006. *Ethics, Human Rights, and Culture: Beyond Relativism and Universalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Louw, Maria. 2007. *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- Mamyraimov, Talgat. 2013. Ne vse Salafity ekstremisty i teroristy. *Zakon Agency*. November 26. Available online: <http://www.zakon.kz/4588465-talgat-mamyraimov-ne-vse-salafity.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Mangystaulyk Ziyaly Qauim Okilderi. 2016. Ult.KZ. August 25. Available online: <http://ult.kz/post/mangystaulyk-z-iyaly-kaum-okilderi-uakhabizm-salafizm-agymynyn-barlyk-tarmagyn-ekstremistik-dep-tanu-turaly-elba-sy-atyna-ashyk-khat-zholdady> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Matveeva, Anna. 2009. Legitimizing Central Asian Authoritarianism: Political Manipulation and Symbolic Power. *Europe-Asia Studies* 61: 1091–121. [CrossRef]
- Megoran, Nick. 2007. Author-Critic Forum: 'Radical Islam in Central Asia'. *Central Asian Survey* 26: 141–54. [CrossRef]
- Mnogozhenstvo i mnogomuzhestvo v Kyrgyzstane. 2017. Kaktus Media. November 28. Available online: https://kaktus.media/doc/358779_mnogojenstvo_vs_mnogomyjestvo_v_kyrgyzstane_epicheskaia_bitva.html (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Mnogozhenstvo v Uzbekistane: Spaseniye dlya Zhenshin ili Narusheniye Ih Prav. 2019. Stan Radar Agency, December 13. Available online: <https://stanradar.com/news/full/37491-mnogozhenstvo-v-uzbekistane-spasenie-dlja-zhenschin-ili-narushenie-ih-prav.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Moussalli, Ahmad. 2009. *Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who Is the Enemy?* Beirut and London: Conflicts Forum.
- Mullojanov, Parviz. 2019. In Search of 'National Purpose': In Theory and Practice. Formation and Main Features of National Ideologies in Post-Soviet Central. In *Theorizing Central Asian Politics*. Edited by Rico Isaacs and Alessandro Frigerio. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Myer, Will. 2002. *Islam and Colonialism*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Najibullah, Farangis. 2018. Uzbek Singers Are Told: No Tattoos, No Earrings, And No Singing in Bedrooms in Videos. *Radio Free Europe*. February 15. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-musicians-rules-tatoos-earrings-drug-alcohol/29042373.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- O Salafitah v Kazakhstane. 2016. *Rambler News*. August 17. Available online: <https://news.rambler.ru/world/34476194-o-salafitah-v-kazahstane-esche-neskolko-teraktov-i-vozmozhny-pogromy/> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Omeliheva, Mariya. 2011a. Islam in Kazakhstan: A survey of contemporary trends and sources of securitization. *Central Asian Survey* 30: 243–56. [CrossRef]
- Omeliheva, Mariya. 2011b. *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- Omeliheva, Mariya. 2014. Introduction. In *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia*. Edited by Mariya Omeliheva. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Omeliheva, Mariya. 2016. Islam and power legitimization: Instrumentalisation of Religion in Central Asian States. *Contemporary Politics* 22: 144–63. [CrossRef]

- Pannier, Bruce. 2009. Ten Years After Terror's Arrival in Central Asia. *Radio Free Europe*. February 16. Available online: https://www.rferl.org/a/Ten_Years_After_Terrors_Arrival_In_Central_Asia/1494081.html (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Peyrouse, Sebastien. 2008. Christian Movements in Central Asia: Managing a Religious Minority in Soviet Times. *Acta Slavica Iaponica Tomus* 25: 135–61.
- Polese, Abel, and Slavomir Horak. 2015. A tale of two presidents: Personality cult and symbolic nation-building in Turkmenistan. *Nationalities Papers* 43: 457–78. [CrossRef]
- Rahman, Fazlur. 2000. *Revival and Reform in Islam*. Oxford: One World.
- Rakisheva, Botagoz. 2017. *Molodezh Tsentralnoy Azii. Sravnitel'nyy Obzor*. Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan.
- Rasanayagam, Johan. 2011. *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ro'i, Yaacov, and Alon Wainer. 2009. Muslim identity and Islamic practice in post-Soviet Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey* 28: 303–22.
- Sachedina, Abdulaziz. 2008. *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saidazimova, Gulnoza. 2008. Tajik Government Concerned by Increasing Growth of Salafism. *Radio Free Europe*. July 27. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1186548.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Salafi agymynin baysaldy turin ustanatindardy qalay azhirituga boladi? 2016. *Nur News Agency*. June 17. Available online: <https://kaz.nur.kz/1162951-salafizm-aghyminynh-baysaldy-turin-ust.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Sardar, Ziauddin. 2011. *Reading the Qur'an The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smagulov, Marat. 2017. Ugrozy salafizma i Kazakhskiy Tasawwuf. *Islam v SNG*. May 11. Available online: <http://www.islamsng.com/authors/smagulov/12492> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Tokal aludin Islamdagi ukimi [The Islamic Rules of Marrying Second wife]. 2019. *Alash Ainasy*. May 19. Available online: https://alashainasy.kz/din_islam/tokal-aludyin-islam-dnndeg-ukm-123954/ (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Tokal eto prihot ili otvestvennost? 2020. *KazIslam*. March 30. Available online: <https://kazislam.kz/tokal-eto-prihot-ili-otvestvennost/> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Tsenosti Kazakhstanskovo Obshestva v Sotsiologicheskoy Izmerenii. 2020. *Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan*. Almaty: Deluxe Printery.
- Tucker, Noah. 2015. Domestic Shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures. In *Islam in Eurasia*. Edited by Thomas W. Simons. Harvard: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies.
- Wielandt, Rotraud. 2016. Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*. Edited by Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yarmoshyuk, Tatyana, and Alina Zhetigenova. 2019. Haram i Halal Zatchem Muzhchiny v Tsentralnoy Azii zavodyat vtoruyu semyu. *Current Time Agency*, April 4. Available online: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/central-asia-polygamy-women-rights/29859496.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020).
- Zhussipbek, Galym, and Zhanar Nagayeva. 2019. Epistemological Reform and Embrace of Human Rights. What Can be Inferred from Islamic Rationalistic Maturidite Theology? *Open Theology* 5: 347–65. [CrossRef]
- Zozulya, Mariya. 2016. Kyrgyzstan: Islam and Secularism Clash Again. *IWPR*. June 21. Available online: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-islam-and-secularism-clash-again> (accessed on 28 September 2020).

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).