

RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND PRACTICES IN UZBEKISTAN

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled "**RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND PRACTICES IN UZBEKISTAN**" which is being submitted by **Mr. MOHSIN AZAM** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of degree of **Master of Philosophy**, carried out by him under my guidance and supervision, is his original work and to the best of my knowledge this dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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PREFACE

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and subsequent independence of Uzbekistan have created an entirely new situation in Uzbekistan as well. The Uzbek people began to rediscover their religious and cultural identities, that had been suppressed during the communist regime. The revival of Islamic rituals and practices and a strong inclination to adopt Islamic way of life by the Uzbeks, clearly show the people's desire to re-assert the Islamic identity. The reemergence of Islam and revival of its rituals and practices have acquired great significance in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan, as it is strongly linked with the socio-political and economic life of the country. Broadly speaking, this precisely comprises the main theme of our study.

Here, we have tried to present a systematic account of Islam and its rituals and practices in Uzbekistan, during the Soviet period with main focus on post-Soviet Uzbekistan. We have attempted to analyse the dynamics of revival of religious rituals and practices and the role of internal and external forces in the restoration of true Islamic rituals and practices. I have also tried to deal with the effects of Islamic revivalism on the social, political and economic life of contemporary Uzbekistan.

Our study is based on published primary and secondary sources available in English.

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CHAPTER - ONE

SOVIET LEGACY - ISLAM IN THE SOVIET UNION INCLUDING UZBEKISTAN

The October 1917 Russian Revolution led to the victory of the Bolsheviks and subsequent establishment of their hold on the central power of the Russian empire. Subsequently, the Soviet Union was created, which also incorporated the central Asian Muslim regions including present day Uzbekistan. The main ambition of the Bolsheviks was the establishment of socialism in the Soviet Union. Whereas Russia was looking towards socialism as the ideology of future, Central Asia was still emerging a tribal and nomadic society that was trying to get to grips with the first rumblings of nationalism and capitalism.

One of the policy in the process of achieving socialism was the policy of religious and cultural suppressions. Islam became the prime target of this suppressive policy in the central Asia including Uzbekistan through out the communist regime.

Islam in the pre-Soviet Central Asia

When Islam was introduced in the social landscape in the 8th century A.D., it was redefined to suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities, that had shaped the life of the people for centuries. The various nomadic groups as well as the new comers to this religious ideology adhered more or less faithfully to their own customary laws (Adat) and their religion was often little more curious mixture of Islam and ancient animist beliefs. But, undoubtedly Islam for the first time provided the people of Central Asia a distinct identity and was most important unifying factor for the Central Asian people.

The conquest of the Central Asia by the Tzarist regime posed a first major challenge for Islam. The campaign against the Muslim religion and the cultural assimilation of the masses were the main ruling principals of the policy. The central Asian Muslims^{were} forcefully converted to Christianity. Mosques were destroyed and Quranic schools closed, while special schools were opened under the direction of Russian missionaries for the children of the converts. "In order to make the anti-Muslim measures more

effective, the *waqf* properties were secularised and taken over by the state. This put an end to the power of Muslim clergy, who thus became impoverished and ready to constitute a revolutionarily element. Converts to Christianity were exempted from taxes and from military service, these burdens devolving upon those of their brethren who remained Muslim."¹ The Tsar's Muslim subjects, although discriminated against and harassed, were nevertheless capable of maintaining and practising their faith, Islam.

The anti-Islamic policies of the Tsarist regime created severe discontentment among the Muslims, and by the late nineteenth century the Muslims of the empire began to express serious dissatisfaction with Russian colonial control. "Numerous revolts erupted in the 1880s and 1890s in the predominantly Uzbek cities of Samarkand and Tashkent, motivated by religious zeal and desire to reestablish the Khanate of Kokand. Such religious fanaticism reached its peak in the Andhizhan revolt in 1898 as a 'prepared holy

1. Bennigsen, Alexander & Quelqueljay, C.L., Islam in the Soviet Union, (Pall Mall Press, London, 1967), p.12

war', rather than just a spontaneous uprising".² But all the revolts were suppressed by the mighty armies of the Tsars. Having no military or political force to counter the Russians, the Muslim started to concentrate their energy in providing for a continuity of their religious and cultural heritage through education.

The impact of Russian colonialism in Central Asia was to arouse a dormant elite to political ferment. The *jadid* reformers and intellectuals in Bukhara and Samarkand were the first to raise the issue of how to adopt Islam to modernism so the Muslims could compete with Russians. The *jadids* also, however, faced the traditional Islam of the mullahs, who saw the crisis as an opportunity to rid themselves of Russian domination and impose the *Sharia* or Islamic law.

Islam under communism

The situation changed dramatically for the Muslims after the consolidation of the Bolshevik regime and the

2. Khan, Mahammed M.A, "Islam under the Tsars and the October 1917 revolution," Journal Institute of Muslim Monority Affairs, Vol. XII(1), Jan 1991, p.32.

reintegration of the tsarist colonies by Bolshevik government into what became the Soviet Union.

The Soviet period introduced an era during which the very fabric of Islamic Central Asian culture was controlled, manipulated and repressed and eradicated through official anti-religious policy, Russification programmes including the language reform, resettlement of Russian and other European Population in Central Asia, educational reform, elimination of the Islamic institutions and the Muslim clerical class and the creation of socialist republics based on macro ethnic identity.

The creed of scientific materialism with an atheistic character preached by Russia's new masters posed an existential threat not only to Islam, but to all religions. The mission of new Russia was nothing short of creating a socialist utopia and a Socialist man. In order to be able to achieve this goal, however, first old structures and beliefs which impeded the creations of such an ideal society, had to be eliminated.

The Marxists viewed Islam, as a communal religion and hence has strong social roots and structures, as a

particularly difficult barrier on the road to achieving socialist utopian progress, and as a strong reactionary force. Thus, while the early communists looked to the Muslim East as promising area for the expansion of communism they never thought that Islam... can be harnessed as a force in any way sympathetic to the ideals of communism.³ On the contrary they believed that the creation of a "socialist man" and socialist society in the East would not be possible until and unless the hold of Islam over the hearts and minds of the Muslims were eliminated.

In the process of strengthening their position after the October revolution and during the period of civil war, the communists adopted a soft attitude towards Muslims. The central government, conscious of the importance of national factor, set out to gain the sympathy of the Muslims. "A special appeal addressed to all the Muslim workers of Russia and the East, which solemnly promised them that their beliefs and customs would be respected, and invited them to

3. Cited in Hunter, Shireen, "Islam in Post-Independence *Central*
Asia: Internal and External Dimensions," Journal of Islamic
studies, 7:2, 1996, p.290.

order their national life in their own fashion freely and without hindrance."⁴

The appeal which carried signatures of Lenin and Stalin were powerfully worded :

Muslim of Russia, Tatars of Volga and the Crimea, Kirgiz and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Trans Caucasian; Chechens and Mountain peoples of the Caucasus, and all of you whose mosques and prayer houses have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the Tsars and oppressors of Russia: Your beliefs and usages, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, are under the mighty protection of the Revolution and its organs, the Soviet workers, soldiers and peasants.⁵

Then the council of the people's commissars transferred that most venerated relic of Islam, the Quran of Osman from the petroguard National Library to the Muslim congress.⁶

4. Bennigsen, Alexander, Op.cit, p.82.

5. Ibid, P.82.

6. Ibid, p.82.

The Bolshevik leaders did their utmost to come to an understanding with the Muslim bourgeoisie organisations and entrust them with the task of winning over the mass of the their following to the revolution.

On Jan. 19, 1918, a decree of the council of people's commissars created the 'Central Commissariat for Muslim Affairs' whose task for the next several years was to bolshevise the Muslim masses.⁷ The commissariats had from its inception, been endowed with wide powers. It's jurisdiction as may be gathered from its component departments, covered all facets of Muslim life : industry, agriculture, education, press, justice, propaganda.

This liberty, of course, was tactical and temporary. Instant, the civil war was over the struggle for ideological dominance between the Islam and the Bolshevism started. It is believed that Islam, is a collectivist religion, authoritarian : one whose doctrine is binding on the mass of believers and which tends to deploy its direction and its judgments over the whole field of life, corporate and individual alike. In Islam no distinction is drawn between

7. Ibid, p.83.

the temporal and the spiritual; there is a traditional fusion of the two which endows life, public and private, and in all its manifestations, with a sacred character. Moreover, the deep penetration of life by the Muslim ideology engenders a sentiment of religious solidarity : the sentiments of the 'community of Believers, the *Umma*, which stands in the way of class-consciousness.

The Bolshevik leaders considered themselves committed to socialism and for the true Marxist the only valid fight was with the class society. That had to be demolished to begin with, and then its survival could be dealt a knock-out blow. The government's anti- Islamic policy would, on this argument, be pliant and cautious and alive to the reciprocal involvement of religion and nationality among the Muslim peoples.

After the civil war, Moscow was determined to destroy the religion, but it was now convinced of the impossibility of doing so overnight.

The revised policy, then, was to wear down Islam by a long-term process, on the lines indicated by a Muslim communist leader, Sultan Galiyev. For Sultan Galiyev, the

need to combat Islam was undoubted because, like any other religion, it was an obstacle in the way to the building of socialism.⁸

Now, the first task of the Soviet government was to bring Islam down and they did this by undermining the basic institutions on which it (Islam) rested : the properties in *Waqfs* guaranteed the clergy's economic power; the courts both of the 'adat and of the *shari'at*, which enabled Islam to keep its hold on the private life of the believers; and the confessional instruction. The attack on these was simultaneous.

In 1925 the government liquidated the *waqfs*. "By decree of the Uzbek SSR dated December 19,1925, all *waqfs* situated outside towns, with the exception of orchards and Vineyards, were expropriated by the people's Commissariats for Agriculture. Soon afterwards the urban *waqfs* and those of mosques were in their turn requisitioned. The liquidation of this ancient Muslim institution has been accomplished in a few short years, without arousing

8. Ibid, p.141

resistance, by dexterous advertisement of the intention to distribute the confiscated lands to the peasants. Thenceforward the clergy, the mosques and their schools were bereft of their material subsistence."⁹

Alongwith this economic onslaught, the attack was mounted against the law of custom ('adat) and the Quranic law (Shari'at). The power of the traditional courts were reduced gradually and their financing by the government were stopped. *Kalym* (bride price) and polygamy, amongst other ingredients of *adat* was made punishable by imprisonment. Finally, the sharia courts were abolished in 1924.

Without a doubt Islam was an unifying factor for the central Asian people. It provided them a sense of Unity and integrity. In the process of its anti - religious campaign the communist regime firstly tried to break this Islamic Unity. In January 1924 Turkestan SSR, was broken up and over a short period five separate republics came into existence the Uzbek, Turkoman, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik Soviet Socialist republics. After a long illness Lenin died in January 1924, warning Stalin that he was exceeding his

9. Ibid, p.145.

authority against the smaller Nationalities. Lenin Wrote
in his last testament :

A distinction must be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation. In respect to the second kind of nationalism, We, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence."¹⁰

The integral cultural and social unity of central Asia and hopes of pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic movements were shattered, which is exactly what stalin wanted. The loss of Turkestan deprived the people of a common homeland, a common language and a common destiny. Stalin's policies were to pit one republic and one ethnic group against another.

To their dismay the ethnic symbols were severely crushed under Stalin's resolution, even the use of Arabic Script, which was the only means of common communication in

10. Ahmed, Rashid, The resurgence of central Asia : Islam or Nationalism? (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1994), p.32.

central Asia before 1917 was forcibly ended in favour of Latin script in 1929 and then to cyrillic in 1940.¹¹

These provisions ensured that future generations would grow up knowing little of their past history, Literature and poetry because only those works were translated into cyrillic that the communists thought appropriate. Islam was forcibly uprooted beginning with the whole sale destruction of mosques and madrasahs, the end of Arabic as a link language and the cutting off all ties to the Muslim world. Anti-Islamic propaganda increased dramatically as the communist leadership took measures to create a new 'Soviet Man' which enhanced Russification. The communists also interfered in other religious spheres. The Islamic Sharia courts were abolished in 1924, and this had been followed in 1928 by the closure of some 15000 madrasahs across central Asia. In the same year the veil was abolished. In 1930, Stalin requisite all waqf lands, those lands held by the local mosques and religious endowments which were the only source of livelihood for local mullahs.

11. Ahmad, Rashid, op.cit., p.90.

In 1934, a government ban was placed on people performing Haj and printing presses were forbidden to publish the Koran. There was a seeming unrest at the personal or level of ethnicity. People in order to safeguard their cultural and various ethnic identities from being massively repressed under communist rule would thus perform their various kinship or cultural obligations 'under cover'. All the rites ranging from solemn marriage ceremonies to circumcision and to dowry obligations were still performed. Girls adhered to their conservative ideologies, thus maintaining their dignity. The areas of inter-caste marriages was still not looked upon as a 'consenting ideology', although, the male sect often indulged with a Russian woman. Thus, the stability of the Muslim family, as well as local traditions, were the main reasons for the population explosion in Muslim central Asia.

But, while an Uzbek might fail to observe many of the formal rituals like prayer, Islam was still his religion and the defining circle of his cultural world. He knew that Islam gave him a distinct identity, thus the basic quest

was to retain his culture, under the constant threat of communist regime.

The Central Asian people in the private confines of their homes turned to Islam and the sufi orders for spiritual sustenance.

There is no doubt that the Madrasah system, the clerical class, the use and availability of doctrinal texts and the public display of religious beliefs were all deeply limited. The religious education although altered dramatically was not completely eliminated. Religious elites, although not officially recognized were present in local communities and religious rites were practiced. The Muslim family household as well as in the neighbourhood, mullah remained a basic component of Muslim Central Asian Society. Local Islam, in other words, was a part of daily life and continued to be practiced in variety of forms.

"Official" and "un-official" Islam

One of the most pervasive concepts defining Islam during Soviet period was the dualistic concept of 'official' and 'unofficial' or 'parallel Islam'

This dual concept, however, provided a framework for understanding the contrast between the officially sponsored Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) and the seemingly stubborn persistence of Islam of an underground "unofficial" level. "Organised by the Soviets to create an effective method to provide a state sanctioned, legal status to Islam, SADUM sponsored the two main Institutions of learning in Central Asia, the Madrasah in Bukhara and the Islamic Institute at Tashkent."¹²

All other evidence of religious leadership, education, dissemination of knowledge or organized activity, therefore was labelled 'unofficial'. Moreover, this was proof not only of the existence of an underground religious network, although it was not clear just how extensive this network was, but its very essence provided the political rationale necessary to control such religious activity.

But the attempt to restrict Islamic education and knowledge through the "official network" was not entirely

12. Gross, Jo-Ann, "Cultural and Religious identities in Central Asia," The Iranian Journal of International Affairs, (6), 3-4, Fall/winter 1994-95, p.435.

successful, since 'unofficial' mullahs and *ishans* did exist, particularly in rural areas. Pilgrimages to shrines, although risky, continued. Sufis continued to consider themselves sufis, although there is scant evidence that *Tariqa* organization in the form recognized prior to the Soviet period was found outside of Dagestan and North Caucasus region. Besides, sufism is perceived as being the main representative of unofficial Islam.

The Soviet Socialist totalitarian government justified a stronger grip over public and private affairs of every Soviet Nation. The members of the Russian communism was therefore to make more and more Muslims members of the communist party and thus establish an organic relationship between the communist ideals and ideological convictions of the Russian Muslims.

For a Soviet Muslim the Chief pre-condition for receiving a membership and of the CPSU was his open rejection of religious beliefs and acceptance of atheism. According to this criteria a Muslim communist no more remained a believer and could not be regarded a Muslim. By and large Muslim Nationalities contrived to nurture their

religious feelings and customs through their national festivals, dress, food, marriage etc. Religious sentiments were expressed under the guise of harmless national distinctiveness. The Russian recognized this and their answer was increased russification, i.e. not only ideologically but also culturally transforming Central Asia Muslim population. The above performed or existing aspects seemed an inherent feature of the part and parcel of Muslim culture, which was deemed as - 'unofficial religious activities' by the Soviet Union.

It is noteworthy that the existing state of affairs amongst the Muslims were such that even the younger generation could not be left untouched and participated though informally in the holy *Ramadan* with a view to being or identifying with their strong religious sentiments.

Basically the term 'unofficial Islam' designates those activities of Soviet Muslim that take place outside the purview or control of the four spiritual directorates. Most of the activities that are considered unofficial Islam seem just basic Islamic ceremonies such as prayers, fasts,

Zakat, circumcision rites, funerals, reading the Quran (*Khatm-i-Quran*), wedding celebrations and so forth.

These were not only delimited in aspect but further aggravated in the form of recording religious broadcasts from an Iranian Radio-station on cassettes and thus mobilizing immense religious consciousness. It further found went in other forms of un-official Islamic activities consists of copying and circulating anonymous religious letters among Muslims in the Soviet Union.

The authorities were disturbed not only about the holy places that are connected with Muslim saints of the past, but also about the popularity of several living persons who are reported to be revered as saints by large number of believers. Soviet publications on the subject demeaned the very existence of religious subjects and the "unofficial propaganda", began.

The Sufi religious order have deep roots in the history of Muslims in the Soviet Union. Alexander Bennigsen have perceived sufism as being the main representative of "unofficial Islam". It appears that these sufi brotherhoods flourished and were capable of continuing their operations

despite periodic campaigns against them by the Soviet authorities. Self appointed mullahs and *Ishans* have established themselves in various holy places.

The strength of 'unofficial Islam' throughout the Soviet period demonstrated the resilience and staying power of Islam, largely because it forms such an important component of Muslims self-identify and is closely intertwined with elements of their cultural heritage, even those which predate Islam. It also demonstrates the sense of the muslims alienation from Soviet systems, as well as their desire to assert their identity, their cultural autonomy and implicitly even their political autonomy. It is because of the latter factor that among the accusations levelled against the sufi brotherhoods by Soviet authorities in the North Caucasus was the charge that they engaged in 'religious propaganda' which sometimes acquire a purely nationalistic colour.

However, when the Islamic revolutions anti-westernism was not translated into pro-Soviet sentiments, and especially with Islamic Iran's opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet assessment of

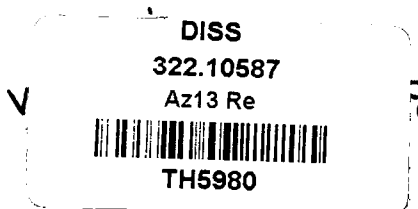
revolutionary Islam changed. Progressively, the Soviets came to see this new brand of militant and highly politicized Islam as an even more serious rival and threat to socialism than traditional Islam.

Islam in the Period of 'Glasnost' and 'Perestroika'

The emergence of Gorbachev as the president of the Soviet Union saw the relaxation towards people's freedom of religious and ethnic identities. He introduced the policy of 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost' in the mid 1980's. Glasnost which means 'openness' - provided people an opportunity to express their feelings, which had been suppressed earlier. Through the policy of glasnost and perestroika the people of Uzbekistan were provided an officially sanctioned vehicle to re-assert their ethnic and religious identity.

In the process of 'glasnost', Gorbachev encouraged the formation of what came to be known as 'informal groups'.¹³ Many of these groups did concern themselves with issues such as economic management, environmental degradation and the like. But much to the dismay of Gorbachev, even greater

13. Hunter, Shireen, Op.cit., p.295.



number focussed on how to revive their cultural heritage and to assert their national and religious identities. Many groups with an Islamic flavour emerged on the scene, even though they did not have official sanction. But even more important as a result of 'glasnost' there was an upsurge in religious activity and an increased level of religious concerns over the lack of public prayer accommodations and Islamic education began to be heard frequently in many parts of Uzbekistan.

One aspect of change regarding the revival of Islam in Central Asia during the period of this policy was the reformulation of the "official/unofficial" dichotomy. Beginning in the perestroika era of the Gorbachev period, liberalization policies introduced the still on-going process of reinstitutionalization of Islam, through the building and rebuilding of mosques and more open display of religious profession. Although still suspect, 'unofficial' Islam began a process whereby it became an anachronism as it was understood during the Soviet period. Some unofficial religious leaders began to gain legitimacy. Mosque building as well as attendance became acceptable. Studying the Quran

and reading Islamic literature was no longer illegal. So, the religious and ethnic identities which had been suppressed during pre-Gorbachev period emerged in the wake of new existential policies.

While reassessing the whole situation, it can be analyzed that the Soviet regime was fully determined to crush the all religious activities, deeply embedded in the Muslim ethnic identity. As, Islam always provided a sense of Security, identity and oneness among various ethnic groups of Central Asia, the communist regime's first target was to weaken the influence of Islamic Unity by their policies of religious suppression.

But, the people of Central Asia adjusted with the Soviet linguistic, cultural and religious policies without deluting or changing their religious allegiance. At the popular grassroots level there had been an observance of Islamic rites and rituals and Islam preserved in the minds and hearts of the people of Central Asia.

CHAPTER - TWO

IMPACT OF DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION ON UZBEK ISLAM

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 led to the emergence of five sovereign Central Asian States of Kazakhstan, Kirghistan, Tajikistan, Turkeministan and Uzbekistan - all having - a predominantly Muslim population. The sudden demise of the communist rule has created an ideological vacuum in the region, providing Islam an opportunity to play a very effective role .

Uzbekistan has a population of about 22 million (about one third of the total Central Asian population) and is the most populous Central Asian republic. About 90% of its population consists of Muslims. The Uzbek Muslims are predominantly *Sunni* Muslims of the *Hanafi* school, noted for its theological emphasis on both moderation in action and orthodox interpretation of *Sunnah*, the tradition of Prophet Mohammad. There are also a small *shi'ite* community of the *Isma'ili* order and a small but growing wahabi community in the Ferghana Valley.

Undoubtedly, Islam has always been an integral part of the Uzbek ethnic-cultural identity. But when it was introduced into the social landscape of Central Asia in the 8th century, it was redefined to suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities that had shaped the life of the people for centuries. As such, Islam made its lasting imprint, not only as a creed with organized political objectives, but also as a way of life.

The situation changed dramatically for the Muslims after the Russian conquest of Central Asia, especially, after the establishment of Communist regime in 1917. During the communist rule the very fabric of the Islamic Central Asian culture was controlled, manipulated, and eradicated through official anti-religious policy. But the anti-religious campaign of the Soviet authorities could not eliminate the Islam from the minds and souls of the Central Asian people.

The Islamic revival restarted during the Gorbachev's policy of 'prestroika' and 'glasnost' in the mid 1980's. The people of Uzbekistan were provided, an officially sanctioned vehicle to reassert their ethnic and religious identity

after a long suppression. Several religious organisations and groups emerged on the scene and actively contributed in the revival of religious rituals and practices. The number of mosques increased considerably, and there has been a rise in the observance of Islamic rites, religious marriages, performance of daily prayers and greater attendance at mosques.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Uzbekistan in 1991, gave a further impetus to Islamic revival and the re-assertion of Islamic identity in the Uzbek society. Since then, Islam as a religious tradition, and as a form of cultural and national identity has acquired new meanings. The mullahs who went underground during the Soviet period, now playing an active role in the restoration of Islamic rituals and practices in the country.

Islam from the very beginning has been playing an important role in the Uzbek social life. Now, in the Post-Soviet Uzbekistan it is poised to play a much influential role in the society. It is clear from the fact, that after the independence there has been a considerable increase in the number of mosques and greater attendance at mosques to

perform the daily prayers. Everyday a new mosque is being inaugurated either by the official Mufti or by the mullahs. The rise in the observance of Islamic rites, adoption of the Islamic form of greetings *Asslamwalaikum*, marriages according to strict Islamic rules and the increasing numbers of *Hajj* pilgrims, show the dynamics of religious revivalism.

The revival of Sufism is evident but in a form more popular than spiritual and institutional. Everywhere mausoleums are being restored and frequented especially by women. One of the best example is Baha-ud-Din Naqshband's sanctuary in Bukhara, officially opened as a mosque in 1989, which was in September 1993, the focus of international conference for the celebration of the 675th birthday of the leader of Naqshbandiya¹.

The sudden emergence of Islam as a factor to influence the every aspects of Uzbek life is not the cause of worry for the Uzbek government, but the form of Islamic revivalism and the forces behind it. At present there has been a continuous tussle between 'official Islam' promoted by the

1. Warikoo K. (ed.), "Central Asia: Emerging New Order", (Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1995), p72.

government and 'unofficial' or 'parallel Islam' led by the mullahs, various religious groups and political parties, to manipulate Islamic revival in their own favour.

The Uzbek president Islam Karimov has been opposed to the state adopting any ideology, secular or religious. But, he has been stressing the importance of Islam in domestic and external spheres. 'Consideration for religion and Islam plays an important part within our internal and international politics and conduct', he stated. Speaking on Islam, he stated, 'Islam manifests itself in the way of life of the people, their psychology and in the building of spiritual and moral values, and in enabling us to feel rapport with those who practice the same religion.'² He reaffirmed the policy of closer ties with other Muslim countries, especially Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

To improve his anti-religious image, as propagated by the Islamic militants, Islam Karimov has sponsored the revival of moderate form of Islam. He has been showing his interest in Islamic rituals and practices on personal level,

2. Cited in, Hiro, Dilip, Between Marx and Muhammed: The changing face of Central Asia, (Harper Collins publishers, London, 1994), P.182.

also. During the visit of Saudi-Arabia in May 1992, he performed an *Umra* a short pilgrimage to Mecca. Following this he had begun prefacing his public speeches with '*Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*' (In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate). He had then allowed a weekly programme on Islam to be transmitted on television, supervised by Mufti Mohammed Yousuf. Earlier he had taken his oath on the *Quran*. In other words, Karimov and his party were prepared to treat Islam as a crucial part of Uzbek culture, but were determined to maintain the secular basis of the state by maintaining a strict division between religion and government.

In the post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the most important role has been played by the agents of 'Unofficial' or 'parallel Islam', led by the mullahs. Though they were active even during the Soviet regime, but quite secretly, and their activities were mainly confined to rural areas. Now, after the independence they have started their activities openly, without any fear and their area of influence has widened and covered the whole of Uzbekistan.

The severe restrictions put by the Communist authorities on religious practices could not eliminate Islam from the minds and hearts of the Uzbek people. The people in the private confines of their homes turned to Islam and Sufi orders for spiritual sustenance. Even the young Muslims who joined the Communist party, remained the firm believers and practice their religion privately. The role of mullah was reduced, but not eliminated. Marriages were registered at the local Communist party office, but the mullah would also solemnized the marriage by a formal *nikah* or betrothal ceremony. The dowry and the bride price *Kalym* officially banned under communist regime were still paid, though in goods such as jewellery and furniture as well as sheep and goats rather than in cash. Most people were still buried according to Islamic rites and every male child was circumcised in the traditional way by a mullah, after which a feast would be given by the boy's parents.³

3. Cited in Ahmed, Rasid, The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?, (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1994), p. 41.

Now, after the independence of Uzbekistan people can freely perform all the Islamic rituals and practices. They feel that Islam has provided them with a distinct identity and are greatly inclined to adopt the Islamic way of life. The prestige and position of mullahs have enhanced considerably. They are now believed as the Custodians of Islam. These Custodians of religion have prepared themselves to take full benefit of the new situation. They are now well prepared to play the fundamentalist card to further strengthen their hold on the Uzbek society. They want to create their influence not only on the Uzbek society but also on the political life of the country. According to fundamentalists, Islam is a socio-political ideology; and in Islam there can be no separation of the state and mosque.

Since the independence of Uzbekistan, the pace of Islamic revivalism has gathered momentum, which was initiated during the Gorbachev's period of Perestroika. During 1992 the number of mosques in Namangan province of Uzbekistan (situated in the Ferghana Valley) was 130, nearly as many as in all the Central Asia before Perestroika, with another 470 in the rest of Uzbekistan. Until 1989 only four

Muslims from Namangan province were allowed to undertake the Hajj. In 1992 the figure was 1500, accounting for nearly two fifths of the country's total of 4000 pilgrims⁴.

The increasing number of mosques and madrasahs in Uzbekistan indicates the growing intensity of Islamic revivalism. "Hundreds of boys and girls had already started their study in Islamic law and the Koran in 1992. Education is free and so is their simple lunch, and the children are given free Islamic literature to distribute to their families. On weekend they join mullahs to propagate their message in local village mosques."⁵

The message of mullahs is deceptively simple: that the government of Uzbek president Islam Karimov is still communist and anti-Islamic and must be overthrown by an Islamic revolution, which will quickly engulf the whole of Central Asia. 'Wahabism' the militant and conservative brand of Islam has been establishing its hold in the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere. "A huge sum of money has been coming from the Ahle Sunnah movement in Saudi Arabia, which is an

4. Cited in Hiro, Dilip, op. cit., p.179.

5. Ahmad, Rashid, op. cit, p. 78.

organization for the propagation of Wahabism. Saudi believers, who have spent hundreds of millions of dollars supporting Pro-Wahabi movements in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Middle East, have moved into Central Asia at lightning speed."⁶

This enormous money has been used by Wahabis for the construction of mosques and madrasahs throughout the Uzbekistan, especially in the Ferghana Valley. The Islamic militants are demanding prime lands in the city centre to build mosques, resulting into a conflict with the official authorities. The money is also used for the propagation of Wahabism among the Uzbek youths, who readily join Islamic militants as a result of frustration, due to severe unemployment. The Islamists promise them to give jobs after the establishment of their hold on the political power of Uzbekistan.

Uzbek official claim that the militants are creating a secret army, that students are undergoing weapons and martial arts training, and that in each city hit squads have

6. Ibid, p. 78

been built upto strike at officials and create disturbances at an appropriate time. The crisis in Ferghana is compounded by the fact that local officials have no clear strategy to deal with the economic crisis and no idea how to curb the Islamic militants. The ruling government is an empty shell in the valley, unable to mobilize support against the militants. Officials themselves describe the government as rudderless either without clear political goals or an ideology. The vacuum has forced many bureaucrats either to turn to Islam or to make contacts with the militants to ensure their own safety. However, the militants have little influence in the capital Tashkent or in the vast southern regions of Uzbekistan, where Sufism and Uzbek nationalism are much stronger forces.

Islamic fundamentalists condemn the popular Sufi tradition in Central Asia claiming quite wrongly, that it is 'nothing but a Zionist' and Turkish conspiracy to undermine Islam.' They condemn Shias and other minority sects in Islam; meanwhile groups such as wahabis and the IRP are bitterly pitted against each other. In short, the militants maintain a narrow and highly sectarian view of Islam, which

will bring them up against not only the government but other Islamic groups in the future. Much of this sectarianism has been imported from Asia and Middle East as Arabs, Pakistani and Afghan religious groups try to create new areas of influence.

Uzbekistan's intense religious and political polarization is perhaps affecting women the most. Some are being forced to conform to fundamentalist social mores, while others confront fundamentalists by taking up women's rights issues. Women who follow the Wahabis have abandoned their traditional colourful Uzbek costumes for white veils that cover the body from head to toe.

The process of Islamization of Uzbek politics is also underway as many political and socio-religious groups have emerged on the scene and have been actively contributing in the revival of Islam in the country. Most notably among them are the 'Birlik', Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and 'Adalat'.

Birlik is a nationalist, broad-front organization, which was demanding a complete break from Moscow, democracy, the resignation of Islam Karimov and a pan-Turkic alliance

of the people of Central Asia. It also supports an Islamic cultural agenda and the use of the Arabic script for the written Uzbek language. Birlik is led by intellectuals, but also included environmentalists, ultra Uzbek nationalist and Pan-Turkic and Islamic activists. However its core is Uzbek nationalism, which means that it adopts diverse and often contradictory political positions. The movement is confused and divided but it commands respect among Uzbek people.

The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) which is a inter-republican party enjoys a relatively larger following. Founded in mid- 1990 in the city of Astrakhan, the IRP's objective is 'the revival of the ideals of Islam'⁷. It is believed that the IRP is a part of an extensive Islamic network stretching from the north Caucasus to Central Asia. So far the IRP has been conducting its activities in conjunction with the democratic parties. This alliance has proven to be mutually beneficial to both parties. It is also demanding higher wages and lower food prices for the Uzbek people and has been organising demonstration against the

7. Haghayeghi, Mehrdad, "Islamic revival in the Central Asian republics," Central Asian Survey, 13(2), 1994, p. 254

government to consider their demands. Their goal is simple of creating an Islamic republic, which has placed the party on an inevitable collision course with the government. Although militant tendencies exist among some IRP factions, the party as a whole doesnot seem to favour a militant approach to achieving its objectives. Rather, the electoral route to power or power sharing has been declared the preferred methods by the leadership.

The IRP has been also criticizing the official version of Islam propogated by the government. The party has been opposing the authority of the Muslim religious Board of Uzbekistan and has pressed for the dissolution of the Board and its replacement there by a new decentralized religious structure with more power vested in the regional and district organizations.⁸

'Adalat', which is a socio-religious organisation has its headquarters in Namangan, a bastion of Islam. It has started to impinge on the everyday life of the Muslims in the Ferghana Valley. Even in Namangan the 'Adalat' formed

8. Ibid, p. 254.

vigilance groups to impose the veil on women and a ban on the sale of alcohol and made citizen's arrests of suspected criminals. The accused were tried by Islamic judges, who often restricted themselves to sentencing the guilty to forced labour on the construction or repairs of mosques.

The significant growing influence of Islamic forces on the Uzbek society has alerted the government. Karimov and his 'People's Democratic Party' (PDP), argue that Islam is concerned only with a person's moral and spiritual well-being. They are determined to keep religion and politics apart, a principal enshrined in the constitution. To make their point, they refer to the problems that Afghanistan is currently encountering, blaming them on the intrusion of religion into politics.

The Uzbek government is now all set to counter the growing influence of Islamists. All the activities of fundamentalist parties are banned under a provision of the new Uzbek constitution. Article 54 of the constitution of Uzbekistan forbids political parties based on nationalistic or religious principals.

Aware of the popularity of Islamic revival, the regime of president Islam Karimov has gone along with it. The Karimov government appointed a mullah as the head of the 'Religious Affairs directorate' and declared *Idul-Fitr* and *Idal-Adha* public holidays. The government has paid serious attention towards building new mosques and madrasahs and rehabilitating the old ones. It has also decided to open Islamic institutions for the deep study and knowledge of Islamic teachings and philosophy. Primary schools have begun to teach Arabic, the Koran and Islamic customs. Such schools open mainly in rural areas, but all Children have the right to go to Muslim school after classes in state controlled schools.

Role of Islamic countries in the religious revivalism

During the Soviet period the contacts between Central Asia and the Islamic world was almost negligible due to the severe restrictions of the communist regime. Now, in the post-Soviet Uzbekistan, there is substantial development in the relations between Uzbekistan and the countries of the Muslim World. As a long isolation of the region from the main centres and cultural processes of the Muslim world and

shortage of religious literatures, the level of religious education declined dramatically. Now the Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan etc. have been playing an effective role in the restoration of true shape of Islam. Saudi Arabia has been providing religious services in the form of, promotion of Arabic language, pilgrimage, and renovation of historic mosques in the country. Plans have been made to send Saudi teachers to Uzbekistan as part of an effort to enhance the understanding of the tenets of Islam and Koran. "A million copies of the holy Koran have been sent to the central Asian religious board as a gesture of goodwill by the Saudi King."⁹ "Furthermore, the Saudi government has extended two-year invitation to those Uzbek people who wish to participate in the Hajj ceremony, to be paid for by the Saudi Ministry of Awqaf and Haj."¹⁰ Funding for religious education has also been promised by the Saudi government.

9. Haghayeghi, Mehrdad, op.cit., p.262.

10. Ibid, p.262.

Iran, a fundamentalist Islamic country has also been developing close relations with Uzbekistan on the basis of old cultural and ethnic relations. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been pumping large sums of money for the construction of mosques and madrasahs. In other words the Islamic countries have been making vigorous efforts to create their influence in the country. But the Uzbek government seems to be very cautious in its foreign policies, especially with the Islamic countries. Although direct ties have been established with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and agreements have been signed with them on economic cooperation and financial credits accepted, ideologically they are kept at a distance.

Islam revivalism and fear of Islamic fundamentalism

There is a schizophrenic attitude towards Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. On the one hand, there is general agreement among the indigenous population that Islam is an integral part of the national culture; on the other, there is widespread fear of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This dichotomy is born from a lack of genuine familiarity with the religion. Since the late 1980s there has been

increasing interest in Islamic culture and belief, but for the great majority of the adult population it remains something external to their existence, almost an exotic affectation. This will certainly change : thousand of mosques and hundreds of part-time and full-time Muslim schools and colleges have been opened since 1991, and religious literature is now widely available.

It is true that Islamic revivalism and Islamic fundamentalism are two different things and cannot be compared, but it cannot be ruled out completely that intense Islamic revivalism may take the form of Islamic fundamentalism.

However, in Uzbekistan not all the areas are vulnerable to fall into the grip of Islamic fundamentalism. The Ferghana valley particularly in the vicinity of Namangan, a bastion of Islamic asceticism, these forces seem to be strong. This region is the heartland of the Islamic Revival party (IRP) and smaller fundamentalist groups such as 'Adalat' (Justice). 'Adalat' groups brought together young people at the grassroots level. Well-disciplined and skilled in martial arts, they were part of the Muslim self-

government structure. The groups included numerous Afghan war Veterans.¹¹

'Adalat' has been actively interfering in the daily life of the Uzbek people, to make it fully and purely a Islamic way of life. Their functions included the struggle against offenders, the settlement of household conflicts, and material assistance to community members. Even in Namangan the 'Adalat' formed vigilance groups to impose the veil on women and a ban on the sale of alcohol and made citizen's arrests of suspected criminals. The accused are tried by Islamic judges, who often restrict themselves to sentencing the guilty to forced labour on the construction or repairs of mosques.

It is not inconceivable that Islam might in time become politicized, a vehicle for expressing the anguish and frustration of those who have lost faith in the ability of the system to provide social justice. Yet it is unlikely, it will affect the whole of Uzbekistan and its people with

11. Yuriy Kulchik, Andrey Fadin & Victor Sergeev Central Asia After the Empire, (Pluto press, London, 1996), P.35.

equal force. The growth of Islamic fundamentalism will greatly depend on the Socio-economic development of the country as during economic distress people are more inclined to join the fundamentalist forces.

It is a well known fact that the sudden demise of the Soviet Union has influenced almost all the spheres of Uzbek life. But its impact on the religion is most remarkable. After the disintegration the Uzbek people seem to be strongly inclined to re-assert their Islamic identity. They consider that, Islam has provided them a distinct identity and has also promoted a sense of unity and integrity in the Uzbek society. The eagerness of the people to adopt Islamic way of life and the roles played by the various forces in the restoration of Islam in Uzbekistan clearly indicates that in the Post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Islam has emerged as a major force to influence the Uzbek social, political and economic life.

CHAPTER - THREE

RE-ASSERTION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY -- RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND PRACTICES

Like all religions, Islam lays emphasis on the observance of certain well defined rituals and practice. These rituals and practices have added significance in the eyes of the believers because the essentials of these are laid down in the holy *Quran*. As it is well known, Islam thus gives importance to five essential practices namely *Salat* - the private prayer pronounced five times a day, *Zakat* - obligatory alms designed to aid poor, *Hajj* - the pilgrimage to Mecca once in the life time, *Sawm* - fasting during the month of Ramadan, and *Shahada* - profession of belief in one God and in Muhammed His Prophet. Besides, there are some important principals and practices of moralities and duties in almost all spheres of life.

It is precisely the observance of these rituals and practices that Islam appears to have distinguished itself. And therefore, it is precisely these observance that were discouraged during the Soviet period. On the other hand the

very re-assertion of Islamic identity in contemporary Uzbekistan is linked with the observation of these religious rites and practices. Thus, in many ways their observance may be regarded as an integral element of the process of re-assertion of Islamic identity in Uzbekistan, as well as, with various socio-political problems connected with it. We shall now take up these points in the following pages.

During the Soviet period the observance of religious rituals and practices were restricted, but the people secretly performed them, and were able to preserve their Islamic identity to some extent. But due to inadequate knowledge of Islam, they practiced and professed a crude version of Islam, basically an amalgam of clan heritage and Quranic teachings. In the post-soviet Uzbekistan the main emphasis of the people is on rediscovering the true form of Islamic rituals and practices. In this new situation, the local mullahs seem to play a major role in the revival of true Islam.

In the Post-Soviet Uzbekistan the Uzbeks are strongly inclined to adopt Islam as their way of life. The rising influence of Islam in Uzbek society can be seen from the

substantial increase in the performance of religious rituals and practices by the people. The *Namaz (Salat)* or daily prayer which is the most important practice of Islam, is being performed by majority of Uzbek Muslims. The Friday prayers draw large congregation despite the difficulties in their accommodation, due to a relatively small number of mosques. To accommodate the ever increasing number of performers, hundreds of mosques have been built throughout the country since 1991. It is clear from the fact, that the province of Namangan accounted for 130 mosques with another 470 the rest of Uzbekistan, more than the total in all central Asia before perestroika.¹ *Zakat*, obligatory alms designed to aid the poor has also been practiced by majority of people in accordance with the strict Islamic rules. The *Hajj* pilgrimage to holy city of Mecca, which was dream of every believer during the soviet period, is no longer a dream. The number of *Hajj* pilgrims has also been increasing continuously since the independence of Uzbekistan. It is clear from the fact that until 1989 only four Muslims from Namangan province were allowed to

1. Hiro, Dilip, *op.cit.*, P.179.

undertake the *Hajj*, which increased to 1500 in 1992, accounting for nearly two fifths of the Uzbekistan's total of 4000 pilgrims.² *Sawm* or fasting during the holy month of Ramadan has been widely practiced by the people. During the soviet period the government allowed only three days of fasting, i.e. the first, fifteenth and the last days of Ramadan. Now the people follow the true Islamic rules and fast for the whole month. The fifth "pillar of the Islam" the *Shahada* -profession of belief in one God and in Muhammad his prophet - is made by the believer in his heart and strong belief in it makes the believer a true Muslim. Other than these five practices the Uzbek people have also been practicing several Islamic customs and rituals. The people follow the strict Islamic rules in burial. The circumcision of every male child is done in the Islamic traditional way by a mullah, after which a feast is arranged by the boys parents. Marriages are being performed in Islamic way as mullah also solemnize it by a formal *nikah*. The people have also adopted the Islamic form of greetings *Assalamwalaikum*. The importance of religious places and festivals have

2. Ibid,. P.179.

increased considerably since independence. The Islamic festivals like *Kurban bairam* ('id al-qurban) and *Uruza bairam* ('id al-fitr) are widely celebrated by the people. All these changes clearly show the growing influence of Islam on the Uzbek society. The revival of the religious rituals and practices are nothing but the Uzbek's eagerness to reassert their Islamic identity.

But, there are various socio-political problems associated with the Islamic revivalism in Uzbekistan. Since its independence in 1991, various external and internal forces have emerged on the scene and have actively been contributing in the revival of true Islam in the country. Many of them are prepared to take full benefit out of this new situation and are busy in creating their area of influence by depicting them as the real protectors of Islam in Uzbekistan.

In the present day Uzbekistan the local clergy (mullahs) are poised to play a major role in the revival of Islamic rituals and practices in Uzbekistan. Their position and prestige have substantially enhanced in the society. To further strengthen their position, they have been

sponsoring the rapid revival of Islam. The sermons delivered by them in the mosques deal with the return to religious practices, to the Arabic alphabet, but equally to good conduct while deploring the deleterious influence of Russian customs, especially of women. They have been demanding religious teachings in schools, *halla* meet, the official observance of Muslim holidays and the shift from Sunday to Friday for the weekly holiday. They inveigh against traditions deemed as non-Islamic, e.g. extra-vagant spending on celebrating the rites of passage, mixing among men and women, the consumption of alcohol etc.

The increasing number of madrasahs and the rise in the level of Islamic education also indicate the growing influence of mullahs. Hundred of boys and girls have started their study in Islamic law and the *Quran* Since 1991. The children are given free Islamic literature to distribute to their families. On weekend they join mullahs to propagate their message in local village mosques.

The mullahs consider that the government of Islam Karimov is still communist and anti-Islamic and must be overthrown by an Islamic revolution. The significant growing influence of Islamic forces on the Uzbek society has alerted

the Uzbek government. The government has now taken a soft stand towards religion, and has been sponsoring the revival of a mild variety of Islam. The Uzbek president Karimov and his party members argue that Islam is concerned only with a person's moral and spiritual well-being. They are determined to keep religion and politics apart, a principal enshrined in the Uzbek constitution. But, the government has been stressing the importance of Islam in domestic and external affairs. It is also paying serious attention towards the building of new mosques and other Islamic institutions for the deep study of Islamic teachings and philosophy. A very special attention has been given towards the religious education. Primary schools have begun to teach Arabic, the *Quran* and other Islamic customs. Realizing the importance of Islam in the Uzbek culture the government has paid careful attention to symbols of Islam. The Karimov government has been very active in sponsoring and administrating religious celebrations. Soon after his election, president Karimov incorporated , *id al-fitr* and

'id al-qurban in the article 77 of the Uzbek labour code as national holidays.³

For the first time in the modern Uzbek history a member of the Islamic clergy has been introduced into the government. Mullah Gandhzhan Abdullaev was appointed head of the Committee for Religious affairs attached to the cabinet of Ministers in April 1992.⁴ President Karimov has been tactfully dealing with the revival of Islam in the country, and has managed to retain a degree of mutual respect with the Islamic clergy.

The process of Islamization of Uzbek politics has also caused a serious problem for the government. Various political Parties and groups based on religion have emerged in the country since independence. The Islamic Renaissance party (IRP) has a simple goal of creating an Islamic state, which has placed the party on an inevitable collision course with the government. The IRP has also been criticizing the official version of Islam propagated by the government.

3. Akbarzadeh, Shahram, "nation -building in Uzbekistan," Central Asian Survey, 15(1), 1996. P.27.

4. Ibid. P.28.

Adalat (Justice), which is a Socio-religious organisation has started to impinge on the everyday life of the Muslims in the Ferghana valley. They are forcing the people to follow strict Islamic rules. The vigilance groups formed by 'Adalat' have been imposing veils on women and putting a ban on the sale of alcohol.

There are also many negative aspects associated with the Islamic revivalism in Uzbekistan. The rise of the militant brand of Islam, Wahabism is evident, especially in the Ferghana valley. They may pose a danger for the secular fabric of the country, if their influence continues to grow in the Uzbek society.

The most important effect of the revival of Islamic ideals seem to be on social life of the country. The women who had been enjoying almost equal status with men during the Soviet period, are now being forced to conform to the fundamentalist social mores. Those who follow wahabis have abandoned their colourful Uzbek costumes for white veils that cover the body from head to toe. Some girls have voluntarily taken to wearing *hajib* (headscarf). The fundamentalists have also been demanding the withdrawal of

young girls from the schools. This will considerably affect the status of the women in the Uzbek society, if the government fails to protect their interests.

The Islamic revival may also lead to increase in the child marriage ratio and polygamy as they were prevalent in the pre-Soviet Uzbek society. The negative attitude of Muslims towards the family planning will definitely lead to a rapid population growth creating a lots of problems in the society.

But undoubtedly, the revival of Islamic rituals and practices in Uzbekistan can be seen as the people's willingness to re-assert the Islamic identity. Islam has also provided them an spiritual and moral guidance, which in turn is substantially affecting the way of life of the people. The growing influence of Islam may also play a major role in controlling the rising corruption in the society, which has arosen as a result of deteriorating economic condition.

By and large, the Uzbeks are now determined to preserve Islam, which has been a part of their national and cultural identities. The Islamic revival in the country can be seen as an attempt to restore it, which had been suppressed during the Soviet period.

CHAPTER - FOUR

EMERGING UZBEK DEMOCRACY AND RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM -- POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

The sudden collapse of the authoritative communist regime at the end of 1991, led to the emergence of five sovereign central Asian States of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkeministan, Kirghistan and Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan is the most populous republic in the region comprising a population of 21 million, in which about 90% are Muslims.

The democratic process in Uzbekistan started with the introduction of Gorbachev's policy of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' in mid 1980's, which greatly affected the socio-religious and political conditions of the country. The term 'glasnost', which means 'openness' and was intended to remedy an entirely different set of political ills in the country, provided Uzbeks with an officially sanctioned vehicle for expression of cultural, linguistic and religious grievances that had been suppressed earlier.

In the process of 'glasnost', Gorbachev encouraged the formation of what came to be known as 'informal groups'.¹ Many of these groups did concern themselves with issues such as economic mismanagement, environmental degradation, and the like. But much to the dismay of Gorbachev, even greater number focussed on how to revive their cultural heritage and to assert their national and religious identities. Many groups with an Islamic flavour emerged on the scene, even though they didn't have official sanction. But even more important as a result of 'glasnost' there was an upsurge in religious activity and an increased level of religious concerns over the lack of public prayer accommodations and Islamic education began to be heard frequently in many parts of Uzbeikstan.

In the course of Islamic revivalism, an another major development occurred in 1989, when Muslims of Uzebkistan launched a campaign to depose Shamsdin Babakhanov Zeyudin, the head Mufti of the Muslim Religious Board of Central

1. Hunter, Shireen, "Islam in Post-independence Central Asia : Internal and external dimensions," Journal of Islamic Studies, 7:2, (1996), p.295.

Asia. The campaign was apparently masterminded by an organisation named 'Islam and Democracy' whose declared objective was to 'cleanse Islam in the Soviet Union. Accused of violating Islamic codes of behaviour and Conduct, Babakhanov was forced to resign.²

With the pace of political liberalisation accelerating in the late 1980's, during the later phase of 'perestroika', demonstrations for specific demands were coming into vogue. In October 1988, a group was formed which initiated the creation of a national democratic movement called 'Birlik' (Unity). Birlik grew rapidly during 1989 and 1990 when it held meetings, which attracted thousands of supporters. Birlik advocated greater attention to the Uzbek cultural heritage and Uzbek language as the state language of Uzbekistan.

The Birlik leaders sought to achieve democratic aims by stimulating the Uzbek people's awareness of their national identity. The movement's slogan, which called for national renaissance, met with a broad-based response in society,

2. Haghayeghi, Mehrdad, "Islamic revival in the central Asian republics," Central Asian Survey, 13(2), 1994, P.250.

particularly among student and peasants in the countryside. As an umbrella organisation, which had by now appropriated such causes as a confederation of all central Asian republics, propagation of Islam, and a wider use of the Arabic alphabet for Uzbek, Birlik had attracted not only Uzbek nationalists and pan-Turkists but also Islamists.

By the end of 1990, Birlik had 300,000 activists and had evolved' into a mass opposition force.³ According to some estimates, had Birlik been legalised in 1990, it could have won upto 70 percent of all votes in the Uzbek countryside elections to the local councils and the republic's parliament, simply on the strength of its protest against the communist party and local authorities.⁴ But at the time, the system of power wielded by the communist party of Uzbekistan was so mighty that the Birlik leaders did not even propose that they should take over.

3. Yurey Kulchik, Andrey Fadin & Victor Sergeev, Central Asia after the empire, (Pluto Press, London, 1996), p.29.

4. Ibid, p.29.

The Communist Party of Uzbekistan (CPU) was the only political party to participate in the March 1990, parliamentary elections. Since Birlik's status as a public movement had not been changed to that of a political body and recognised by the government as such, it couldn't contest these elections. The CPU in its manifesto for the election stated the party's stance on religion thus : The republican party organization is actively in favour of freedom of religion and the legal rights of believers and for co-operation with religious organizations. Believers are entitled to all opportunities for participation in the public, political and cultural life of the republic.⁵

In April 1990, barely a year after the founding of Birlik, Mohammed Salih (an Uzbek poet and Secretary of the Writer's Union) and two other leaders left to establish the Democratic party of 'Erk' (Freedom). For Salih, working for Uzbekistan's independence was the foremost priority, leaving democracy for later. Salih was also at the forefront of the campaign for the official instatement of Uzbek language.

5. Hiro, Dilip, Between Marx and Muhammed : The Changing Face of Central Asia, (Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1994), p.169.

For Salih and his nationalist colleagues the official status of the Uzbek Language was closely related to the sense of pride in their Uzbekness.

However, history wrong-footed the national movement. The hardliner's coup in Moscow in August 1991 led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. On 31 August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan declared the republic, independent. Uzbekistan immediately joined the Commonwealth of Independent States, after its formation in December 1991, without any visible role played by the national democrats. The aim of the national movement automatically lost its meaning.

The leadership of the communist party of Uzbekistan, in comparison, acted resolutely under the new conditions of suddenly acquired independence. On 17 September 1991, President Karimov issued a decree banning party activities in government organs. The communist party of Uzbekistan then renamed as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) of

Uzbekistan on 1 November 1991, with virtually no change in its structure or personnel.⁶

The leaders of the PDP of Uzbekistan quickly shed the outworn communist ideology. The new power of elite was based on the national revival of Uzbek nation and the culture and religion was considered the most important aspects of the Uzbek national identity.

The new constitution of Uzbekistan was adopted on 8 December 1992. Article 4 of this constitution confirms to instate Uzbek as the official medium of the state. Article 54 of the constitution forbids political parties based on 'nationalism or religions principals'.⁷ Under this constitution, the president is recognised as the head of state and of the executive, as the chairman of the cabinet of ministers.

Islam Karimov held presidential elections on 29 December 1991, allowing another candidate Muhammed Salih 'Leader of Erk' (which was prepared to co-operate with the

6. Akberzadeh, Shahram, "Nation - bulding in Uzbekistan," Central Asian Survey, 15(1), 1994, p.26.

7. Ibid, p.26.

regime). Birlik and Islamic opposition remained banned parties and couldn't put up candidates. Karimov received 87.15 per cent of the votes and was elected the first president of independent Uzbekistan.⁸ Later in 1993 both 'Erk' and 'Birlik' were banned for charges of conspiracy to overthrow the elected government. Many opposition activists are imprisoned for defaming the honour of president karimov.⁹

Islam without a doubt, is an integral part of the Uzbek cultural identity. It has been playing an important role in the life of the Uzbek people as early as from its inception. Even the Soviet policy of religious suppression and imposition of the severe restriction on religious practices, couldn't eliminate Islam from the minds and souls of the Uzbek people.

One of the most pervasive concepts defining Islam during the Soviet period was the dualistic concept of "official" and "unofficial" or "parallel Islam". "Official

8. Yuriy, Kulchik, op.cit, P.32.

9. Akberzadeh, Shahram, op.cit, p.25.

Islam" was used by the Soviet authorities as a vehicle to control central Asia. But attempt to restrict Islamic activities, education and knowledge through the 'official' network was not entirely successful, since 'unofficial' mullahs and ishans did exist and were very active, particularly in rural areas. Pilgrimage to shrines, although risky continued particularly in rural areas and sufis continued to consider themselves sufis. Alexander Bennigsen, has perceived sufism as being the main representative of "unofficial Islam".

The Islamic revival in Uzbekistan got an impetus in the wake of Gorbachev's policy of 'Glasnost' and 'Perestroika' in the mid 1980's. It provided people an opportunity to re-assert their national and religious identities, and openly air their feeling that had remained suppressed for long. The number of mosques increased considerably and there have been a rise in the observance of daily prayers and greater attendance at mosques. Many organisations and groups based on religion emerged on the scene and actively contributed in the revival of Islam. Underground groups and private prayer circles emerged into the open and began to build mosques and

criticize the established Muslim hierarchy. Groups printed previously banned Islamic literature and simple pamphlets that described how to pray. There was a boom in Koran publishing as the holy book was translated into local languages. The rise of nationalism in Uzbekistan coincided with this religious revival.

After the independence of Uzbekistan in December 1991, Islam as a religious tradition and as a form of cultural and national identity has acquired new meanings. The unofficial clergy (Mullahs) who went underground during the Soviet period are now playing an active role in the restoration of Islamic values, rituals and practices in the country. Many religious groups and political parties have emerged on the scene, who have been advocating the revival of Islam in Uzbekistan. Prominent among them are, the Islamic Revival or Renaissance party (IRP), Islamic party of Turkestan, and the Adalat (Justice) Party. However, because of tight control exercised by the Uzbek President Islam Karimov, none of these parties are capable of operating openly, and they have been suppressed by the government.

It is believed that the IRP is a part of an extensive Islamic network stretching from the north Caucasus to central Asia. According to some sources, the IRP was established in June 1990 at a founding congress in Astrakhan. Another Islamic party 'Adalat', a Socio-religious body has been becoming more active, especially in the Ferghana Valley, the traditional stronghold of Islam, where a quarter of the republic population lived.

The Islamic opposition to the government has made dramatic strides since 1989. The official Islamic hierarchy sponsored by the government faced a crisis in July 1991, when the Mufti of Uzbekistan, Muhammed Yousuf Mohammed Sadik, was voted out of office and replaced by another mullah. Mufti Sadik was accused of corruption, of selling off free Korans from Saudi Arabia for a profit and of being too close to the government. He was reinstated two days later after the government intervened, but the affair demonstrated that proximity to the regime was viewed as treachery by many Uzbek Muslims.¹⁰ Subsequently the pro-

10. Ahmed, Rashid, The resurgence of central Asia : Islam or Nationalism?, (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1994), P.99.

government Islamic hierarchy or official Islam, faced severe challenges from Wahabi movement in Ferghana Valley, the Islamic Renaissance party (IRP) and the aftershock of the civil war in Tajikistan.

The IRP, 'Adalat' and other Socio-religious and political groups based on religion and nationalism are banned in Uzbekistan. In the meantime Uzbek intellectuals set up a rival Muslim party to the IRP. The Islamic Democratic party led by Dadakhan Hassanov a renowned composer and performer of traditional Uzbek music, also demands the imposition of *Sharia* or Islamic law through a non-violent Islamic revolution in Uzbekistan, but it is willing to work with rather than against the regime.¹¹

It is the Wahabi movement in the Ferghana Valley, that is the most determined and best organized to all the fundamentalist movements seeking the overthrow of the government. "Ferghana can explode any time. People are just waiting for it to happen and nobody can do anything to

11. Ibid, p.100.

stop it, admitted a senior official of the Uzbek interior ministry in 1993."¹²

'Adalat' has its headquarters in Namangan a bastion of Islam. It has started to impinge on' the everyday life of Muslims in the Ferghana Valley. Even, under communist rule many local Muslims, including communist party members, in Namangan used to have Islamic ceremonies for marriages (*nikah*) and birthdays - but in secret. Since the advent of prestroika in the mid 1980's and especially after Uzbekistan's independence, there was a rapid revival of Islam in the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere. The number of mosques in namangan Valley rose from two to twenty six. The province of Namangan accounted for 130 mosques with another 470 in the rest of Uzbekistan. Until 1989 only four Muslims from the Namangan province were allowed to undertake 'hajj', the pilgrimage to Mecca. Three years later the figure was 1500, accounting for nearly two fifths of republic's total of 4000.¹³ Even in Namangan the Adalat formed vigilance

12. Ibid, p.100.

13. Hiro, Dilip, op.cit., p.179.

groups to impose the veil on women and a ban on the sale of alcohol and made citizen's arrests of suspected criminals. The accused were tried by Islamic judges, who often restricted themselves to sentencing the guilty to forced labour on the construction or repairs of mosques.

Since 1991, Islamists have looked for confrontations with city authorities in order to seize prime ground in the city centres to build mosques and madrasahs. A massive propaganda operation is underway in outlying villages in order to reconvert the population. "First Ferghna, then Uzbekistan and then the whole of central Asia will become an Islamic state', said an unofficial local Imam, Abdul Ahed in Namangan."¹⁴ The islamists aim is to overthrow the government of Karimov and spearhead an Islamic revolution throughout central Asia.

Uzbek official claim that the Islamic militants are creating a secret army, that students are undergoing weapons and martial arts training, and that in each city hit squads have been built up to strike at officials and create disturbances at an appropriate time. The crisis in Ferghana

14. Ahmed, Rashid, op.cit. p.100.

is compounded by the fact that local officials have no clear strategy to deal with the economic crisis and no idea how to curb the Islamic militants. However the militant have little influence in the capital Tashkent or in the vast southern regions of Uzbekistan, where sufism and Uzbek nationalists are much stronger forces.

Islamic fundamentalists condemn the popular sufi tradition in central Asia claiming, quite wrongly, that it is 'nothing but a Zionist and Turkish conspiracy to undermine Islam. They condemn Shias and other minority sects in Islam; meanwhile groups such as wahabis and the IRP are bitterly pitted against each other. In short, the militants maintain a narrow and highly sectarian view of Islam, which will bring them up against not only the government but also with the other Islamic groups in the future.

The unofficial clergy (mullah) which worked secretly during the Soviet period, now playing an effective role in the re-assertion of Islam as the way of life of Uzbek people. On an average one mosque is being built every day in Uzbekistan. The construction of the madrasahs is on rise

for the study of Islamic law and Koran. Thousands of boys and girls have begun their studies in the Islamic faith. Education is free and so is their simple lunch, and the children are given free Islamic literature to distribute to their families. On weekends they join mullahs to propagate their message in local village mosques.¹⁵ The mullahs condemn that the government of Uzbek president Islam Karmov is still communist and anti-Islamic, must be overthrown by an Islamic revolution, which will quickly engulf the whole of central Asia.

There is also a growing tussle between the 'official' and 'un official Islam' on the future role of Islam in the Uzbek political and social arena. A huge amount of money has been pumped into Uzbekistan from various Islamic countries mainly Saudi Arabia and Iran for the construction of mosques and madrashas. The 'Ahle Sunna' movement based in Saudi Arabia has been working hard to propagate Wahabism in Uzbekistan. But people are not favouring the idea of Islamic revolution, demanded by the wababis. They are

15. Ibid, p.78.

pleased only with the freedom granted by the government to perform all the Islamic rituals and practices.

The rising tide of Islamic militancy is the most serious challenge to the government. The Uzbek government can no longer ignore the importance of Islam in Uzbek society. Now, the government has taken a soft stand on religious and cultural issues. President Karimov has sponsored the revival of Uzbek cultural landmarks to improve his public image as a defender of Uzbek nationality. One such landmark is Islam. The growing number of mosques and rising attendance have met with official approval especially since independence. He is aware of the importance of Islam in Uzbek culture and because of his desire to present himself as unblemished Uzbek nationalist, had paid careful attention to symbols of Islam.

Karimov has continued his policy of co-opting official Islam as personified by the Mufti of Uzbekistan, who had taken to projecting a high profile life, giving interviews to the media on current problems, interpreting and analysing them from an Islamic angle. With each week marking the opening of new mosques or the recommission of old ones, the

influence of Islam was rising, and with it the power and prestige of the Mufti. Both he and Karimov had a common aim of marginalizing the militant Islamic tendency, be it in the form of Sufi brotherhood, Wahabis or the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP).

On the eve of the first direct presidential elections in December 1991, president Karimov spoke respectfully about the importance of Islam to the Uzbek way of life. He attributed the failure of the Soviet anti-religious Campaigns to the centrality of Islam in regulating Uzbek's familial and social life. He told the Uzbek language daily (Khalq Sozi, 18 December 1991) : "Islam survived because it is the conscience, the essence of life, the very life of many of our countrymen."¹⁶ The government has been very active in sponsoring and administrating religious celebration. Soon after his election, President Karimov incorporated *Kurban bairam* ('idal-qurban) and *Uruza bairam* ('idal-Fitr) in the article 77 of the Uzbek labour code as

16. Cited in Akberzadeh, Shahram, "Nation-building in Uzbekistan," op.cit. p.27.

national holidays.¹⁷ Every year since then president karimov calls on hakims (Local administrators appointed by the President) and local government apparatus to organize and actively participate in these Islamic feasts.

A significant process of rehabilitation of Islamic mentors is also underway with the government's approval. In his parliamentary speech in 1994, President Karimov personally identified such great thinkers as Imam Bukhari, Al-Termeji and Khoja Bahouddin naqshband, as the great ancestors of uzbeks.¹⁸ A seminar on Imam Muhammed bukhari's theological writings was organised in Tashkent in the same year.

For the first time in the modern Uzbek history, a member of the Islamic clergy was introduced into the government. President Karimov also decreed the establishment of a Centre for International Islamic Studies in Tashkant. According to the presidential decree the centre will study the teachings and philosophy of Islam and

17. Ibid, p.27.

18. Ibid, p.27.

explore the religious, historic and cultural heritage of the people of Uzbekistan.¹⁹

President Karimov wants Islam to play a role only in the Uzbek social arena. He stated that "Islam manifest itself in the way of life of the people, their psychology and in enabling us to feel rapport with those who practice the same religion."²⁰ He reaffirmed the policy of closer ties with other Muslim countries, especially Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia - a Country he had visited in May when among other things he had performed *Umra*, a short pilgrimage to Mecca. Following this he had begun prefacing his public speeches with *Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim* (In the name of God, the merciful and the Compassionate). He had then allowed a weekly programme on Islam to be transmitted on television, supervised by Mufti Muhammed Yusuf. Earlier he had taken the Oath of his presidential office on the Koran.²¹ In other words Karimov and his party were prepared

19. Ibid, p.28

20. Hiro, Dilip, op.cit. p.182.

21. Ibid, p.183.

to treat Islam as a crucial part of the Uzbek culture, but were determined to maintain the secular basis of the state by maintaining a strict division between religion and government.

The deteriorating economic condition in Uzbekistan since independence has caused a severe problem for the government, and provided an opportunity to religious groups to delegitimize the government of Islam Karimov. For instance, higher wages and lower food prices have been demanded by the Muslim demonstrators in the highly religious Ferghana valley and its centre of fundamental activities, the city of Namangan. Large scale unemployment has led Uzbek youths to join Islamic groups who promise job for them after the fall of the present government.

The rising influence of Islam and emergence of Islamic militant groups like wahabis in Uzbekistan has also caused fear in the ethnic Russian population. As a result a large number of Russian (who are mainly skilled workers and professionals) have started migrating from Uzbekistan. This migration has created a vacuum in many key sectors of the economy. That is especially true in such important areas as

industry, science, education and medicine. In Uzbekistan many industrial enterprises couldnot sell their product and the level of production during the first five months of 1992 was only 85 per cent as compared with the same period in 1991. As a consequence, as many as 65,000 people were made redundant during the first six months of 1992. By the beginning of 1992, the employment exchanges in the Uzbek republic registered 222,000 people looking for jobs and in next three months another 70,000 were registered.²²

The rising trends of unemployment and economic deterioration has given an opportunity to the fundamentalist groups to delegitimize the Uzbek government. The Uzbek youths are being convinced to join the fundamentalists, who in turn promise to provide them with employments after the establishment of their hold on the politics of the country. In the meantime the Islamists have been trying to create a fear among non-Muslim Russian population, resulting into the mass out-migration of the Russian skilled workers. According to them the Russians has captured the topmost jobs

22. Patnaik, Ajay, Central Asia : Between Modernity and Tradition, (Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1996), p.189.

in all the key sectors of the economy, while the Uzbeks are mainly the labourers. They hold the former communist regime responsible for this economic situation. The remarkable differences in the standard of living of the Russians and the Uzbeks has also caused hatred and jealousy in uzbeks, leading them to join any anti- Russian movement. The fundamentalists also hold Russians responsible for the cultural deterioration in the country. They believe that the Russians have promoted an anti-Islamic culture in Uzbekistan which is responsible for the low moral values in the people, and they must leave the country.

On the other hand the uzbek government has been making vigorous efforts to prevent the out-migration of Russians by ensuring them safety and security. The government is seriously concerned with the economic deterioration, caused in the wake of out-migration of Russian Skilled' workers, causing closure of several basic industries.

Though, the democratic process has begun in the post-Soviet uzbekistan, but it will take a long time to achieve full democracy. The Uzbek government has provided people with a limited democracy to prevent any opposition to the

secular fabric of the country. On the other hand the religious forces have branded the government of Islam Karimov as anti-Islamic and undemocratic. But the people are pleased with the religious freedom granted by the government and the revival of Islamic rituals and practices are on the way.

CHAPTER - FIVE

AN OVERVIEW - ISLAM

IN CONTEMPORARY (1996) UZBEK SOCIETY

The sudden demise of the Soviet Union has created an ideological vacuum in the Central Asian states including Uzbekistan. The entire framework within which contemporary Central Asian society had functioned in the past thus suddenly became discredited. Yet the Soviet framework has been internalized to such a degree that it is impossible to ignore it or abandon it. Moreover, there are no ready alternatives : the socio-economic bases of the 'tribal states' of the pre-Tsarist era have been so thoroughly destroyed that there can be no return to that world. Supranational bonds, whether pan-Turkic or pan-Iranian, also have little emotional significance for the great majority of the people. At this point of time, Islam can emerge as a viable ideological option for Uzbekistan.

Islam emerged in Central Asia including Uzbekistan as an important unifying factor for different ethnic and tribal groups. Its practices and rituals gradually were shaped to

suit the ethnic and tribal peculiarities, that had imbedded in the life of the people for centuries. As such Islam made its lasting imprint not only as a creed with organised political objectives, but also as a way of life. It also provided central Asians including the Uzbeks, a distinct identity.

The imperial expansion of Russia under the Tsarist regime posed the first major threat for Islam in the Central Asia. The Tsarist Muslim subjects were discriminated and harassed, but were capable of maintaining and practising their faith. Yet another severe blow on Islam came after the victory of Bolsheviks in the October 1917 revolution and its consolidation in Central Asia. Various anti-religious measures were taken up to suppress Islam in the Central Asia like language reforms, educational reforms, elimination of the Islamic institutions and the Muslim clerical groups and the creation of socialist republics based on macro-ethnic identities.

One of the most pervasive concepts defining Islam during Soviet Period was the dualistic concept of 'official' and 'unofficial' or 'parallel Islam.' The term 'official

Islam' was used to designate those limited activities which were controlled by four Spiritual Directorates, founded in 1941 for the Muslims of the Soviet Union. It was an attempt to Control Islam and its importance, in the region. Similarly, the term 'unofficial Islam' designated those activities of Soviet Muslims that took place outside the control of the four spiritual Directorates. Most of the activities that were considered unofficial Islam, seem to be just basic Islamic practices and rituals such as prayers, fasting, the *Zakat*, circumcision rites, funerals, reading of *Quran* from beginning to end (*Khatm - i - Qur'an*), wedding celebrations and so forth. These activities were performed with the help of local mullahs, the main agents of 'unofficial Islam.' This clearly shows that Soviet anti-religious propaganda was not entirely successful in the region and people remain attached to Islam and performed all religious rituals and practices secretly. The Soviet Muslims did thus manage to preserve their Islamic identity as Muslims. However, their knowledge of true Islam diminished considerably because of the paucity of mullahs and mosques, and because of the absence of a religious education.

In Gorbachev period, the policy of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' provided people some freedom to express their feelings openly. People for the first time got an opportunity to re-assert their cultural and religious identities.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and subsequent declaration of independence by Uzbekistan, a new and dynamic situation has arisen for Islam. Since then, Islam as a religious tradition and a form of national and cultural identity have acquired new meanings.

Uzbekistan has a population about 22 millions and it is strongly inclined towards asserting its Islamic character. The Uzbeks consider themselves as the sole inheritors of the old Central Asian Empire. Attempts are being made to restore Bukhara's and Samarkand's place in the Islamic world. In the past, seven visits to Bukhara were considered by people equivalent to a *haj* pilgrimage.

Islam in Uzbekistan is now poised to exert greater and greater influence on the life of the Uzbek people. The increasing number of mosques and greater attendance at mosques, the rising number of *Haj* pilgrims every year, and

strong popular inclination to adopt other Islamic customs, rituals and practices, all show the dynamics of religious revivalism. In independent Uzbekistan, Islam is emerging as a major factor to influence economic, cultural political and social life of the people.

In practising democracy (which is the government's main agenda) various religious groups, organisations and political parties have emerged on the scene and are actively contributing in the Islamic revivalism. Some of the political parties like 'Birlik' and 'Erk' have nationalism as their main agenda while others like 'Islamic Renaissance party (IRP)' and 'Adalat' have made Islamic revival as their main weapon in order to grab political power of the country, causing a danger for the secular fabric of the country. This has also caused fear and insecurity among the non-Muslims, especially Russians, encouraging their out-migration. Determined to maintain the secular nature of the country, the Uzbek government has banned all the political parties and groups based on religion or nationalism under the new Uzbek constitution. The Uzbek president Islam Karimov has stated that 'Islam manifest itself in the way of

life of the people, their psychology and in the building of spiritual and moral values and enabling us to feel rapport with those who practice the same religion.¹ The government is opposed to link religion, with the state. On the other hands, the fundamentalists believe that Islam is a socio-political ideology and there can be no separation, between the state and mosque. They have dubbed the government of Islam karimov as authoritative and undemocratic. But at present Islamic political forces are seen lying low and may not pose any major threat to politics of the country. The democratic nationalist parties like 'Birlik' and 'Erk' are much stronger political forces than the IRP or 'Adalat'.

The deteriorating economic condition of the country has been further aggravated by the out-migration of skilled Russian workers, causing the closure of many basic industries. As a result, the rising unemployment and inflation have provided an opportunity to the Islamic groups to agitate against the government. The fundamentalists have been trying to convince the unemployed Uzbek youths to join

1. Hiro, Dilip, op.cit., p.182.

them and they promise them jobs after capturing the political power. On the whole, the situation remains manageable for President Karimov.

The role of Islamic countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the Islamic revival of Uzbekistan, also cannot be undermined. All these countries have been making vigorous efforts to create their influence by developing economic and political ties with the Uzbeks. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been pumping large sums of money for the construction of mosques and madrasahs and also sending religious teachers to guide the people in preaching the true form of Islam. For Saudi Arabia, the *Haj* becomes a magnetic attraction for Uzbeks Muslims. "The revival of Islamic rituals and practices in Uzbekistan are seen in the West and elsewhere as fertile ground for theocratic Islamic state. Initial success of diplomatic moves from Iran, Turkey and Pakistan are cited as evidence." But the Uzbek government seems to be very cautious in its foreign policies, especially with the Islamic countries. Although direct ties have been established with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and agreements have been signed with them on economic

cooperation and financial credits accepted, ideologically they are kept at a distance.²

In the post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Islam will greatly affect the social and cultural life of the people. As a result of long isolation of Central Asia from the main centres and cultural processes of the Muslim World, and a shortage of religious literature and restricted religious practice, the level of religious education declined dramatically during the Soviet period. The Islam professed and practiced by the Central Asian masses at present is largely an amalgam of clan heritage and *Quranic* teachings. In this situation, the mullahs seem to play an effective role in the restoration of true form of Islamic rituals and practices. They have been convincing people to adopt the real Islamic way of life.

The government of Islam Karimov is also aware of the importance of Islam in Uzbek culture and has been sponsoring the revival of secular form of Islam. The government is paying serious attention towards the building of new mosques

2. Imam, Zafar, New Russia, (New Delhi, ABC Publishing House, 1995), See chapter 21 "Whither Central Asian Muslims?" pp.102-105.

and madrasahs and other Islamic institutions for the deep study Islamic teaching and philosophy. A very special attention has been given towards the religious education. Primary schools have begun to teach Arabic, the Koran and Islamic customs. Such schools open mainly in rural areas, but all children have the right to go to Muslim schools after classes in state-controlled schools. It will ensure that the future generations of the country will have a good knowledge of Islam and its practices.

But, the negative aspects associated with the Islamic revivalism cannot be ignored here. Though, at present the fundamentalist forces are not strong enough to pose any major threat to the secular basis of the country, but their growing influence in the Uzbek society cannot be undermined. It is clear from the fact that, the militant brand of Islam like 'Wahabism' has been very much active in Uzbekistan especially in the Ferghana valley.

Uzbekistan's intense religious and political polarization is perhaps affecting women the most : some are being forced to conform to fundamentalist social mores, while other confront fundamentalism by taking up women's rights

issues. The fundamentalist have been demanding the withdrawal of young girls from the schools. This in turn will greatly affect the status of women in Uzbek society. During the Soviet period women had been enjoying almost equal status with men. In coming days, the role of women in the Uzbek society may decrease, if the influence of fundamentalists forces continue to grow.

In the independent Uzbekistan the role of Islam and its effect on the Uzbek life cannot be minimized on any account. It has emerged as a potential factor to influence the cultural, economic, political and social life of the country and various forces have been making vigorous efforts to manipulate it in their own favour. But at present, there seems to be no major threat to the secular fabric of the country. The Uzbek people are pleased with the religious freedom granted by the government and there has been a growing influence of Islam in their daily life. But, the revival of Islamic rituals and practices in Uzbekistan may not be confused with the rise and growth of fundamentalist Islam.

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