

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES,
MUSLIMS' RELIGIOUS RIGHTS
IN CENTRAL ASIA,
AND LACK OF FOREIGN PRESS COVERAGE
OF RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

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Introduction

The five former Soviet republics of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are predominantly Muslim in population and strongly authoritarian in governance. All are secular states with constitutions that promise freedom of religion and belief and prohibit discrimination based on religion.

Since independence in 1991, there have been frequent violations of religious rights of their citizens, including those of Muslims. Many such violations are grounded in assertions by repressive regimes that religious practitioners are involved with or sympathetic to what are labeled

terrorist organizations, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Islamic Liberation) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and thus are regarded as threats to the continuing political power of those regimes.

This article examines violations of the religious rights of Muslims in Central Asia in the aftermath of the countries' repudiation of Marxism-Leninism. It opens with a description of the religious and media setting in the region and a review of prior research. The next section uses international human rights reports to present an overview of regulation of and restraints on the practice of Islam. Then through qualitative content analysis, the ar-

ticle examines press coverage of the issue by Western news organizations, primarily the Norway-based Forum 18 News Service. Last, it discusses

the implications of the failure of Western media to report adequately on such rights violations and suggests directions for future research.

Religion and Politics

Religion and politics have been intertwined since the five countries gained independence in 1991 after the U.S.S.R. dissolved, just as anti-religion and politics had been intertwined during seventy years of official atheism under communism in a region long influenced and dominated by Russia. The Bolshevik Revolution triggered a split between conservative Muslims associated with the Society of Ulama and reform-minded (or revolution-minded) Jadids. After the Bolsheviks' accession to power, they launched what Khalid characterized as an assault on Islam: "It was in the matter of religion that the Bolsheviks and the indigenous reformers could never find common ground. The Jadids based their program heavily on modernization of their faith. The Bolsheviks had absolutely no need for faith."¹

Once independence arrived, all the regimes continued to strictly control religious practices, motivated in part by worries that Islamic fundamentalism or political Islam might destroy their authoritarian lock on power. As McGlinchey writes, "The post-Soviet Uzbek government attempts to manage Islam much as it attempts to manage many other aspects of Uzbek life."²

Political leaders fear Islam will be a destabilizing force for their regimes, a rationalization that become ever more visible after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and subsequent incidents in the region linked to radical groups. Ro'i and Wainer describe the governments as ones "where Islam is suspect almost *a priori* as a potential breeding ground of subversion and 'terror.'"³ Central Asia's Islamic revival followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and helped fill the ideological void created by the demise of Marxism-Leninism, especially among younger Muslim men. For example, in Turkmenistan where a "tightly controlled revival of Islam" occurred, the number of mosques increased from four at the end of the Soviet era to 398 in 2009, although "traditional mosque-based Islam does not play a dominant role in society."⁴ That situation holds true in all five countries. The reasons include government constraints on religion, cultural traditions, and the legacy of a long era of atheism.

Geography plays a role as well. What Podoprigora describes for Kazakhstan is true for the rest of Central Asia—"located far from major Muslim centers"—and it is a region where other religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism, have "helped to determine the religious atmosphere."⁵ There are also differences in the depth of observance within these countries. The proportion of practicing Muslims and mosque attendees in Uzbekistan is higher outside the capital of Tashkent than in the city; a similar distinction exists in Kyrgyzstan, where residents of the more traditional

¹ A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2007, p. 60.

² E. McGlinchey, "Divided Faith: Trapped between State and Islam in Uzbekistan," in: J. Sahadeo, R. Zanca, *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 2007, p. 305.

³ Y. Ro'i, A. Wainer, "Muslim Identity and Islamic Practice in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, No. 28 (3), 2009, p. 305.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2009: Turkmenistan," 26 October, 2009.

⁵ R. Podoprigora, "Religious Freedom and Human Rights in Kazakhstan," *Religion, State & Society*, No. 31 (2), 2003, p. 123.

South are generally more devout than northerners, including residents of the capital, Bishkek. However, there are significant differences in the types of observance. Interview research by Ro'i and Wainer⁶ among almost 700 Muslims in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan found a higher proportion (42.1 percent) of respondents in rural areas who never attend mosque than of respondents in major cities (34.4 percent); virtually identical proportions (18.1 percent rural, 18.1 percent major cities) reported attending mosque every Friday. However, 27.7 percent of rural respondents pray five times daily, compared to 15.6 percent of urban respondents, while 60 percent of rural residents and 70.6 percent of urban residents do not pray daily.

Although men participate in the Islamic revival more than women do, Kyrgyzstan is witnessing growing involvement with, or sympathy for, Hizb ut-Tahrir among women, "especially those living in rural or conservative areas where traditional gender norms prevail."⁷ Interestingly, a 2009 public opinion survey of Kyrgyzstanis' trust in twelve institutions found the highest level of trust in religious institutions, with media second and the education system third; political parties, law enforcement bodies, and the judicial system held the bottom three positions.⁸

At the same time, Ro'i and Wainer conclude that the Islamic revival has "stalled," saying, "Central Asians have learned how to live their lives as 'ordinary, moderate Muslim believers.'" They add that most want to disassociate religious observance "from the political arena, insofar as this is possible between the phobias and paranoia of the regimes in question and the inroads that radical Islam tries to make in their lives."⁹

In the two decades since independence, the region's religious demographics have changed significantly due to large-scale emigration by Central Asians of Russian, German, and Jewish ancestry; some of their families had lived there since the 19th century. Some of the reasons for the out-migration are rooted in ethnicity, such as bias, language, and cultural traditions. While Islam is dominant, the region has religious diversity, but no country as much as Kazakhstan. It claims more than 4,000 religious groups from forty-six denominations, with 1,400 mosques, 257 Russian Orthodox churches, 600 Protestant chapels, eighty-two Roman Catholic churches, and twenty-eight synagogues, as well as representatives of other groups.¹⁰ By one widely accepted set of statistics,¹¹ Islam is the majority faith in four of the countries and the plurality religion in the fifth (see Table).

Policies and constraints on religious freedom reinforce the regimes' intent to develop—or to "fabricate a new identity"¹²—national identities for countries whose artificial borders were drawn in Moscow in the 1920s. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan defined their new countries in secular and multi-ethnic terms, and Khalid explains, "Along with the nativization of political power came the maturing of ethnonational identities in Central Asia."¹³ Hann and Pelkmans observe that secular authorities may use Islam as an asset in nation-building by controlling and co-opting religious expression.¹⁴

All their national constitutions promise religious freedom. For example, Art 1 of Turkmenistan's constitution declares the country "a democratic secular state operating under the rule of law," and Art

⁶ See: Y. Ro'i, A. Wainer, op. cit., p. 316.

⁷ International Crisis Group, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," *Asia Report*, No. 176, 3 September 2009, p. i.

⁸ See: International Republican Institute, Baltic Surveys Ltd., Gallop Organization, Agency SIAR-Bishkek, U.S. Agency for International Development, "Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, 22 April-9 May, 2009," 2009.

⁹ Y. Ro'i, A. Wainer, op. cit., p. 303.

¹⁰ See: U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Approaching the OSCE Chairmanship: Kazakhstan 2010," *Hearing*, 12 May, 2009.

¹¹ See: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2010.

¹² A. Rashid, "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia," *World Policy Journal* No. 18 (1), 2001, p. 45.

¹³ A. Khalid, op. cit., p. 93.

¹⁴ See: C. Hann, M. Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)Socialism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 61 (9), 2009.

Table

**Religious Breakdown of the Population of
Central Asian Countries (%)¹⁵**

Country	Muslim	Other*
Kazakhstan	47	53
Kyrgyzstan	75	25
Tajikistan	90	10
Turkmenistan	89	11
Uzbekistan	88	11

* Most non-Muslims belong to the Orthodox Church.

Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (2010).

11 states: “The government guarantees freedom of religion and faith and the equality of religions and faiths before the law. Religious organizations are separate from the government and may not perform governmental functions. The governmental system of education is separate from religious organizations and is secular in nature. Everyone has the right independently to determine her or his own religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others, to practice no religion, to express and disseminate beliefs related to religious preference and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals and ceremonies.”¹⁶

In reality, however, governmental policies, administrative directives, and unofficial but governmentally sanctioned practices restrict religious freedom and observance for majority Muslims as well as for adherents of minority religions. (Although this article focuses on Islam, other religions, whether favored such as Russian Orthodoxy, or “nontraditional” and “minority,” such as Pentecostal, Baha’i, Judaism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Church of Latter Day Saints, Unification Church, and Baptist, are also subject to repressive regulations and controls.)

Only on a few occasions do those constraints draw official international scrutiny. Once exception came when the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe wrote to the president of Kyrgyzstan criticizing draft legislation that it said would in part “severely restrict religious freedom by raising the minimum number of members for registration; ban unregistered communities; restrict the education of children; censor imported religious literature; [and] threaten the liquidation of religious communities.”¹⁷ The commission is an independent federal agency also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticized Kazakhstan’s religion law as that country prepared to assume its role on 1 January, 2010 as chair-in-office of the OSCE. In addition, the U.S. commission held a public hearing on religious and other human rights concerns in Kazakhstan, with testimony from its ambassador to the United States, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of State, and other witnesses; there were no specific ref-

¹⁵ In 2009, the U.S. State Department estimated that even higher proportions of Central Asians consider themselves Muslim, whether observant or not: 97 percent in Tajikistan, 90 percent in Uzbekistan, 80 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and 65 percent in Kazakhstan; the department reports give no estimate for Turkmenistan.

¹⁶ [<http://www.uta.edu/cpsees/TURKCON.htm>].

¹⁷ U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Helsinki Commission Expresses Concern over Religion Law in Kyrgyzstan,” Press release, 7 January, 2009.

erences to violation of the rights of Muslims at the hearing,¹⁸ and the only press coverage came from Eurasianet.org.¹⁹

Governmental Constraints on the Press

All five governments face frequent criticism for abusing press freedom and obstructing independent and oppositional media. The U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House classifies their press systems as “not free.”²⁰ Among the domestic and international monitoring and press rights defender groups that monitor the regimes are the public association Journalist (Kyrgyzstan); Adil Soz (International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech, Kazakhstan); Committee to Protect Journalists (United States); Freedom House (United States); Reporters sans Frontières (France); Institute for War & Peace Reporting (United Kingdom); Human Rights Watch (United States); Amnesty International (United Kingdom); Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (Russia); International Research & Exchanges Board (United States); International Freedom of Expression Exchange (Canada); World Association of Newspapers (France); International Press Institute (Austria); and International Center for Journalists (United States).

Just as there are constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, there are similar assurances of press freedom. In Tajikistan, for instance, Art 30 of the constitution states: “Each person is guaranteed the freedoms of speech and the press, as well as the right to use information media. Governmental censorship and prosecution for criticism are forbidden. A list of information considered secrets of the state is determined by law.”²¹

And just as systematic violations of religious rights occur, so do pervasive violations of press rights. Governmental constraints vary from country to country but may include official censorship; onerous criminal libel and “honor and dignity laws” that threaten to bankrupt mass media organizations and imprison journalists; bans on privately owned media; government monopolies on printing house; tax audits; and regulatory and licensing schemes that give officials a lock-hold on print and broadcast outlets.

Other intimidating barriers to independent journalism include insufficient market support for economically sustainable independent outlets; self-censorship by journalists and media owners; lack of professional skills; low salaries; little public trust in the media’s credibility and integrity; and unethical practices such as “envelope journalism”—bribes to cover or not cover specific stories or issues. News organization offices have been burglarized and vandalized. Journalists have been harassed, assaulted, imprisoned, or forced into exile. In the most serious cases, journalists have been kidnapped or murdered for practicing their professions. Among them, independent journalist and human rights activist Alisher Saipov was shot to death on 24 October, 2007, in Osh, Kyrgyzstan.²² Investigative reporter Oralgaisha Omarshanova of Kazakhstan, who often covered corruption, disappeared in March 2007, four days after her newspaper published her article on ethnic clashes in two villages; she has not been found and is believed dead.²³

¹⁸ See: U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 12 May, 2009.

¹⁹ See: N. Simon, Interview with the author, U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Washington, D.C., 24 August, 2009.

²⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2009*, 2009.

²¹ [http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/untc/unpan003670.htm].

²² See: Committee to Protect Journalists, “Kyrgyzstan Must Disclose Findings in Alisher Saipov Murder,” *News Alert*, 27 October, 2009, available at [http://cpj.org/2009/10/kyrgyzstan-must-disclose-findings-in-alisher-saipo.php].

²³ See: Committee to Protect Journalists, “In Kazakhstan, Reporter Disappears after Writing Critical Articles,” *News Alert*, 18 April, 2007, available at [http://cpj.org/news/2007/europe/kazakh19apr07na.html].

Previous Research

Scholars inside and outside the region have generated a growing body of research about Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia, including studies of political Islam,²⁴ national identity,²⁵ radicalism,²⁶ and religious extremism and extremist groups.²⁷ Khalid's *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*²⁸ is perhaps the most comprehensive and insightful such study. The book addresses a range of relevant issues and topics in the context of the region's pre-Soviet, Soviet era, and post-Soviet history, cultures, nationalism, and politics.

Other studies examine the relationship between Orthodox Christianity—which was significantly more prevalent and politically influential before independence prompted a large-scale out-migration of ethnic Russians—and Islam. For example, Peyrouse describes an alliance between those two dominant faiths to jointly support governmental bias against so-called “untraditional faiths,” including minority Muslim sects.²⁹ There are also studies focused on public attitudes toward Islam. Among them, Fletcher and Sergeev³⁰ conclude that Islamic religious beliefs do not drive religious intolerance in Kyrgyzstan and found public support for a military response to efforts to establish an Islamic state by force. McGlinchey³¹ looks at attitudes toward Islamic revivalism in Kyrgyzstan; his study considers whether that revivalism provides a mechanism for the public to cope with the ineffective central government that has ruled since the country's 2005 regime change and that that has not ended either authoritarianism or corruption.

However, there have been few studies of how foreign or domestic press outlets cover religion-related news in Central Asia. Wolf³² content-analyzed five years' worth of stories in *Vicherniy Bishkek*, Kyrgyzstan's largest-circulation newspaper, about Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose ideology is to re-establish a caliphate under Islamic law. Governments in the region, and some elsewhere, classify Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organization. She notes that ordinary citizens' knowledge about radical clandestine organizations usually comes from the media rather than from direct interaction, and she finds that the threat of terrorism, real or exaggerated, can shape media coverage. Freedman and Chang³³ content-analyzed articles about religious issues and controversies in Central Asia by Forum 18, an Internet news organization. Their study found that articles about Christianity appear more frequently than those about Islam or other religions; it also found that the news service cites religious-affiliated sources more often and more prominently than official sources.

²⁴ See: E. Karagiannis, “Political Islam and Social Movement Theory: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan,” *Religion, State & Society*, No. 33 (2), 2005.

²⁵ See: O. Sidorov, “The Islamic Factor in Central Asian Countries' Domestic Stability,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 43 (1), 2007.

²⁶ See: G. Yemelianova, “The Rise of Islam in Muslim Eurasia: Internal Determinants and Political Consequences,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, No. 5 (2), 2007.

²⁷ See: M. Abisheva, T. Shaymergenov, “Religious-Political Extremism in Central Asia: Why and How It Is Spreading,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 42 (6), 2006; I. Mirsayitov, “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: Development Stages and Its Present State,” *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, No. 42 (6), 2006.

²⁸ See: A. Khalid, op. cit.

²⁹ See: S. Peyrouse, “The Partnership between Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Central Asia,” *Religion, State & Society*, No. 36 (4), 2008.

³⁰ See: J. Fletcher, B. Sergeev, “Islam and Intolerance in Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 54 (2), 2002.

³¹ See: E. McGlinchey, “Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, No. 56 (3), 2009.

³² See: I. Wolf, “Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan as Presented in *Vecherniy Bishkek*: A Radical Islamist Political Organization through the Eyes of Kyrgyz Journalists,” in E. Freedman, R. Shafer, *After the Czars and Commissars: The Press in Post-Soviet Authoritarian Central Asia after Independence*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, Michigan, 2010 (forthcoming).

³³ See: E. Freedman, K. Chang, “Religious News and Controversies in Central Asia: A Case Study of a Western ‘Christian Initiative’ News Service,” *Religion, State & Society*, No. 35 (4), 2007.

Statement of the Problem

The interplay of religion, authoritarianism, and the media highlight two principal areas of inquiry:

- First, what methods do Central Asian governments use to control and regulate Muslim organizations and the observance of Islam?
- And second, how have Forum 18 and other Western news organizations covered such regulations and controls?

Therefore, this article attempts to advance scholarly examination of the violation of Muslims' religious freedom in Central Asia and coverage of such violations by Western media, which this study defines as newspapers and wire services in the United States, Canada, and Europe, excluding Russia.

Constraints on Muslim Organizations and the Practice of Islam

Each regime has its own portfolio of techniques that effectively constrain the ability of Muslim entities and organizations—especially ones regarded as outside the mainstream of government-approved entities and theology—to operate and that impede believers' worship, other religious practices, and access to the Qur'an and religious material. Those techniques also enable authorities to use the specter of Islamist terrorism as a rationale for tighter controls over religious and other human rights. Although the details and applications of those techniques vary from country to country, commonalities emerge from an analysis of human rights reviews by foreign governments,³⁴ NGOs such as the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, and multinational agencies such as OSCE, and from press accounts of events in these countries.

- *Laws, directives, policies, and official regulations that impose, reinforce, and tighten governmental restraints*

These measures include registration requirements, limitations on the training of clergy, and restrictions on the publication, importation, and distribution of religious literature. Religious groups that fail to register are illegal. Restrictions may bar religious garb in public, except by clergy. In Tajikistan, for instance, girls and women are not allowed to wear hijabs at public schools and universities; in 2009, its Ministry of Education prohibited students from wearing religious clothing but modified the decree into a recommendation after receiving complaints. Statutes governing religion have become increasingly restrictive, as with Tajikistan's 2009 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations that added population quotas for registration of Friday prayer mosques and five-time prayer mosques and that authorized state selection of imams and imam-khatibs.

- *Central government agencies to oversee religious matters as arms of the state*

The Council on Religious Affairs in Turkmenistan reports to the president and includes Sunni imams but no Shi'a imams; the government also financially underwrites—and closely

³⁴ See, for example: U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2009," 26 October, 2009, country reports for all five republics.

monitors—officially approved Hajj pilgrims to Mecca. Its counterpart entity in Uzbekistan is the Religious Affairs Committee, in Kazakhstan the Ministry of Justice's Religious Issues Committee, in Tajikistan the Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Culture; and in Kyrgyzstan the State Agency for Religious Affairs.

■ *Enforcement actions by local and national government authorities*

Among such measures are closure of mosques and criminal prosecutions that result in lengthy prison sentences. Religious activists are sometimes placed under surveillance, as in Uzbekistan where the government has ordered mahallas, or neighborhood committees, to identify residents whom they think might engage in extremist activities, including Muslims who pray daily.

■ *Discrimination between favored and disfavored Muslim sects, including the establishment of an official oversight body for Islam*

Clergy and mosques of the dominant sect are often state-financed and state-sponsored. For example, a government may grant privileges to Sunni over Shi'a mosques, as in Tajikistan; there is no official state religion, but Hanafi Islam, the predominant Sunni sect, has "special status." In Uzbekistan, the government-controlled Muftiate is in charge of the Islamic hierarchy, sermon content, and publication of religious materials; the Muftiate does not allow the training of Shi'a imams, except in Sunni madrassahs. The Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan, which is closely tied to the government, coordinates Hajj travel and exerts major influence over mosque construction and background checks for prospective imams. The Council of Ulama, made up of imams and scholars, plays a similar role in Tajikistan; its fatwas and decisions reflect government policy. Kyrgyzstan's comparable entity is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, or the Muftiate, which can censor publications and oversee Islamic groups, madrassahs, institutes, and mosques.

■ *Regulation of religious educational institutions such as madrassahs and Islamic universities*

Such measures include government determination of curricula and approval of faculty. Uzbekistan finances the Tashkent Islamic University and treats graduates of madrassahs the same as graduates of secondary schools; the regime also closed two madrassahs in the Fergana Valley, the country's most religiously observant area. Tajikistan's Ministry of Education approves the rector and programs at the Islamic Institute; the government also monitors classes and examines curricula at private madrassahs.

■ *Bans on organizations deemed extremist or terroristic*

Organizations outlawed in one or more countries include Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Members of such groups are frequently arrested for distributing allegedly extremist literature and participating in rallies. The most prominent of those groups is Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is outlawed in all five countries and which the U.S. government describes as "an extremist Islamist political organization motivated by a socioreligious ideology that is virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western and calls for the overthrow of secular governments"³⁵; Wolf offers a more benign description, saying, "The core of its ideology is to re-establish a caliphate and apply Islamic law in all spheres of life."³⁶ Also commonly banned is Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary group that identifies itself as apolitical and promotes worship and other practices dating from the Prophet Muhammad's time.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2009: Kyrgyz Republic," 26 October, 2009.

³⁶ I. Wolf, op. cit.

Government bans extend beyond organizations that arguably support or advocate violence but merely interpret religious doctrine differently—usually more strictly—than do government-favored sects. Uzbekistan has arrested dozens of members of Nur, a Turkey-based organization that advocates adoption of Shari‘a and promotes a pan-Turkic ideology; the Uzbek government also has repressed Akromiya, an informal association that advances business under religious principles. Tajikistan cites “national unity and stability” as a basis to outlaw the Salafiya Organization, which advocates returning Islam to its purest roots; in 2009, Tajikistan also closed a Salafi school and raided a mosque during evening prayer in the capital of Dushanbe, taking about forty suspected members into custody. In Kazakhstan, the Ahmadi movement, which describes itself as committed to spiritual renewal, was targeted in a 2009 raid during worship in a private apartment.

Western News Coverage of Violations of the Religious Rights of Muslims

There is little coverage of abuses of Central Asian Muslims’ religious rights by mainstream Western print and broadcast news organizations. For example, a search of the *New York Times* electronic archive using the terms “Islam” or “Muslim” and “Central Asia” or “Uzbekistan” or “Kyrgyz” or “Tajikistan” or “Kazakhstan” or “Turkmenistan” found only two relevant stories for the study period of 1 January, 2008, through 30 June, 2009. One reported on a revival of interest in Islamic rituals in Tajikistan; the other, only one paragraph, was a Reuters item on Kyrgyzstan’s banning head scarves from schools. A search of the LexisNexis “Major U.S. and World Publications” and “News Wire Services” using the same search terms for the same period found only eight relevant stories from mainstream news organizations: Associated Press (4), *Washington Times* (1), *Economist* (1), United Press International (1), and Agence France-Press (1). All but one reported on the arrest or death of suspected terrorists or extremists. The exception was a *Washington Times* article about constitutional council action in Kazakhstan to reverse legislation restricting religious freedom. A separate search of the *Washington Times* electronic archive found no other relevant stories in that period.

Some Western Internet news services and online publications cover Muslim religious rights-related issues and events from time to time, including the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (a United Kingdom NGO); Eurasianet.org (a U.S.-based NGO); Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL is a broadcast unit of the U.S. government); and *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* (the biweekly journal of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, based in the United States and Sweden). As examples, during the study period RFE/RL reported on the criminal charges against followers of Tablighi Jamaat in Tajikistan³⁷; Eurasianet.org reported on Uzbek surveillance of mosques during Ramadan³⁸; and *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* reported on a Tajik cleric’s criticism of the Salafi movement.³⁹

Forum 18 News Service

The only sustained Western coverage of the issue originates with Forum 18, an Internet news service headquartered in Oslo. Its name comes from Art 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

³⁷ See: F. Najibullah, “Tajiks Target Obscure Islamic Group for Prosecution,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 May, 2009.

³⁸ See: “Uzbekistan: Authorities Tighten Grip on Religion during Ramadan,” *Eurasianet.org*, 25 September, 2008.

³⁹ See: A. Sodiqov, “Tajik Cleric: Salafism Major Security Threat,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 14 January, 2009.

which reads: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Some of its stories are picked up and redistributed or posted by other news outlets, usually religious in nature, or by RFE/RL, but Forum 18 does not systematically track reuse of its articles, nor does it charge other media outlets and other organizations to republish and redistribute them. Editor Felix Corley⁴⁰ says that “my impression is that general news outlets, human rights agencies, [and] country-specific news outlets tend to reuse our religious freedom reporting based on the seriousness of the situations we cover, without regard for which religious community is targeted. Indeed, many of the violations—such as raids on worship or censorship of religious literature—touch a number of different faiths or all faiths in a country.” He also says that news outlets affiliated with a particular religious community tend to be interested primarily in their co-religionists. Thus, some Islamic-related organizations, publications, and Web sites mainly or exclusively reuse articles about religious rights violations affecting Muslims.

From a professional journalism perspective, the news service generally follows conventional Western news story structure, opening with a summary or hard-news lead and structuring articles so the most important news—in the journalists’ professional judgment—appears high in its stories. It describes itself as “objective, presenting news in a deliberately calm and balanced fashion and presenting all sides of a situation. The overriding editorial objective ... is to as accurately as possible present the truth of a situation, both implicitly and explicitly.” That statement is consistent with widely accepted Western professional standards. However, it also describes itself as committed to furthering religious freedom as a matter of Christian faith, not merely reporting about religion; in other words, it espouses an advocacy philosophy that is inconsistent with U.S. mainstream journalistic values of neutrality in news coverage. Its mission statement describes the organization as “a Christian initiative which is independent of any one church or religious group” and is committed to reporting about “threats and actions against the religious freedom of all people, regardless of their religious affiliation.”

Corley says most government officials in the five countries are reluctant to discuss religious freedom issues with Forum 18 journalists, regardless of the religion involved in a story. Addressing the willingness or reluctance of religious leaders to be interviewed by journalists, he observes that the governments treat Islam—“as the majority religious community in most countries of Central Asia”—differently from other faiths. Citing governmental power to name leaders of the Islamic community, he says, “State nominated leaders are normally unwilling to criticize the state which nominated them. Hence, many leaders—especially from the Islamic community which states particularly focus on—are reluctant to speak on the record.”⁴¹ Especially in light of what he characterizes as a worsening human rights situation in the region, “all religious leaders in the region have to weigh up carefully whether speaking up about violations of their religious freedom rights will help prevent the state take further repressive measures or lead to greater repression and reprisals.”⁴²

Forum 18 posted thirty-eight relevant stories that dealt exclusively or in large part with Muslims’ religious rights, activities, or organizations during the 18-month study period of 1 January, 2008 to 30 June, 2009. Aside from two stories about religious freedom surveys in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, most coverage fit three principal categories:

■ *Laws, regulations, and politics*

One such story reported on the president of Kazakhstan’s comment on the need to “suppress the activity of illegal religious movements” and on a Justice Ministry program against

⁴⁰ See: F. Corley, E-mail to author, 21 October, 2009.

⁴¹ See: F. Corley, E-mail to author, 11 January, 2010.

⁴² F. Corley, E-mail to author, 21 October, 2009.

“radical religious movements whose aim is total Islamization or evangelization.”⁴³ Another covered the impact on Muslims of Tajikistan’s tightening of its religion law.⁴⁴

■ *Arrests and prosecution*

Forum 18 covered criminal enforcement and prosecution activity in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It reported that fifteen Muslims were convicted at a secret trial in Kazakhstan on terrorism charges and sentenced to from three to 19½ years in prison; the defendants denied planning to blow up a secret police building and contended that the true reason for prosecution was their belief that Muslim communities should be allowed to operate independently of the government-supported Muftiate, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan.⁴⁵ It covered the embezzlement conviction and sentencing of an imam in the remote Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan.⁴⁶ Other stories dealt with the arrests in Uzbekistan of followers of Said Nursi, the Turkish Muslim theologian; two defendants were associated with the government-shuttered Islamic-inspired newspaper *Yetti Iqlim* (Seven Climates).⁴⁷ In some cases, restraints on religious rights also constitute censorship. For example, Forum 18 reported how Uzbekistan’s State Agency of Press and Information filed criminal charges against five writers for *Irmoq* (Spring), an Islamic religious newspaper, and stripped the newspaper of its license to publish.⁴⁸

■ *Worship and religious practices*

Forum 18 reported on an Uzbek police drive to prevent children from attending mosques for Friday prayers.⁴⁹ Another story from Uzbekistan told about security agency efforts to prohibit the sale of white prayer caps and to ban prayer in Internet cafes.⁵⁰

Discussion and Conclusions

Human rights abuses pose difficult questions for international relations where nations fear jeopardizing their own economic, security, diplomatic, and other priorities if they speak out, at least loudly, against violations of the rights of another country’s citizens or if they impose sanctions such as foreign aid cuts. Uzbekistan evicted U.S.-affiliated NGOs such as Internews in retaliation for U.S. complaints about its human rights practices. At the same time, media coverage of such abuses—as frequently occurs in connection with China’s violations of the rights of Tibetans—can generate public pressure on a government to act against regimes that commit such violations. The dearth of Western news coverage of religious rights issues in Central Asia makes development of public pressure against the five governments less likely.

⁴³ M. Bayram, “Kazakhstan: How Threatening are President Nazarbayev’s Comments?” *Forum 18 News Service*, 5 February, 2008.

⁴⁴ See: M. Bayram, “Tajikistan: Religion Law’s Worst Impact is on Muslims,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 19 June, 2009.

⁴⁵ See: M. Bayram, “Uzbekistan: Religious Movements are Trying to Destabilize Uzbekistan,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 8 April, 2009.

⁴⁶ See: M. Bayram, “Uzbekistan: Seven Protestants in Self-Financed Detention, Imam Sentenced,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 29 October, 2008.

⁴⁷ See: F. Corley, M. Bayram, “Uzbekistan: Prisoners of Conscience Still Held for their Faith,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 6 April, 2009.

⁴⁸ See: M. Bayram, “Uzbekistan: Muslims and Christians Latest Victims of Religious Literature Crackdown,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 17 February, 2009.

⁴⁹ See: M. Bayram, “Uzbekistan: Children and Parents Threatened for Attending Places of Worship,” *Forum 18 News Service*, 12 January, 2009.

⁵⁰ See: M. Bayram, “Kazakhstan: Heavy Sentences on Muslims ‘to Discredit Islam and Believers?’” *Forum 18 News Service*, 8 April, 2008.

An illustration of how Western media can provide such coverage exists not only as to Tibet but immediately to the east of Central Asia where the U.S. and European press reported in depth about conflicts between ethnic Han Chinese and Muslim Uighurs in western China's Xinjiang province.⁵¹ Although the violence of the summer of 2009 was new, Uighurs have long complained about religious restrictions and discrimination by the communist government in Beijing and about the influx of Han Chinese, who secure the best jobs and other economic opportunities.⁵²

From a journalism and news value perspective, two major distinctions exist between the situations in Xinjiang and the five post-Soviet countries, however.

- First was the extent of the clashes that left an estimated 200 dead and led to more than 1,700 injuries and about 2,000 arrests, mostly of Uighurs.
- Second was the high-profile role played by human rights activist Rebiya Kadeer, who lives in self-imposed exile in the United States and immediately became the highly visible and articulate advocate for her fellow Uighurs in Western press outlets, including *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, the Associated Press, and National Public Radio.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that traditional news judgment criteria and the economic realities of contemporary news organizations play significant roles in journalists' decisions on what stories to cover, how to cover them, and how to play those stories.

- First, in determining what is newsworthy for their audiences, journalists generally consider a story's relevance, usefulness, and interest. Those broad criteria include factors of impact, proximity, and timeliness, conflict, novelty or oddity, and prominence or celebrity.⁵³ Those traditional criteria for newsworthiness do not militate for sustained, in-depth coverage by Western mainstream media of violations of the religious rights of Muslims in Central Asia. Not only is the region geographically distant from Western Europe and North America, but their Central Asian diaspora and heritage communities in the West are relatively small. Even when it comes to conflict, large-scale religion-related violence such as that between the Uighurs of Xinjiang province and Chinese troops may draw Western press attention, but individual or small-scale incidents such as those generally covered by Forum 18 or, sporadically, by a Western news outlet are not apt to draw much attention.
- Second, U.S. and other Western news organizations have been shrinking the space or air time allocated to international news.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, news organizations are closing foreign bureaus and cutting budgets for travel, interpreters, and other costs incurred in foreign coverage. The *State of the News Media* annual report for 2008 found that coverage of the U.S. presidential election and the economy filled half the news hole of the study's U.S. mainstream media. Even those outlets' attention to Iraq, the leading foreign news topic, dropped by about three-quarters, and "coverage of other hot spots crucial to U.S. interests, most notably Iran and Pakistan, dropped as well—about 75% in the case of Iran and 40% with Pakistan."⁵⁵ Those trends mean that a story must be even more compelling than in the past to draw on-the-ground cover-

⁵¹ See, for example: S. Elegant, "Spotlight: China's Ethnic Riots," *Time*, 20 July, 2009; M. Hennock, "Bad Press: The Uighur Riots in Western China are Teaching the Government How to Spin," *Newsweek*, 7 July, 2009; A. Lowrey, "Seven Questions with Rebiya Kadeer," *Foreign Policy*, 20 August, 2009.

⁵² See: L. Kung, "National Identity and Ethno-Religious Identity: A Critical Inquiry into Chinese Religious Policy, with Reference to the Uighurs in Xinjiang," *Religion, State, and Society*, No. 34 (4), 2006.

⁵³ See: B. Brooks, G. Kennedy, D. Moen, D. Ranly, *News Reporting and Writing*, 8th edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 2005.

⁵⁴ See: H. Wu, J. Maxwell, "U.S. Foreign Correspondents: Changes and Continuity at the Turn of the Century," *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, No. 66 (6), 2004.

⁵⁵ Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media," 2009, available at [<http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/index.htm>].

age. Abuse of religious rights in Central Asia does not generally reach that threshold of compulsion.

One area for future research is to analyze how the national and ethnic language press and Russian-language press outlets in the five countries cover these issues and events. Of special interest is how domestic media frame stories about religious rights, minority Muslim sects, religious practices, and government legislation and regulation. Any distinction in coverage between state-controlled and independent or opposition media would be especially intriguing in light of constraints on press rights. Given political realities, it is unreasonable to assume that independent domestic media will report aggressively on religious rights abuses. Perhaps representative of the lack of true independence is the independent Kyrgyz weekly newspaper *MSN*'s call that "the Kyrgyz judiciary should immediately follow the example of their colleagues in Russian and Tajikistan" by banning Tablighi Jamaat for "spreading a radical form of Islam" and seeking to establish "a single Islamic state."⁵⁶

Scholars might also undertake comparative studies of foreign coverage of the rights of Muslims in Central Asia and other world regions, encompassing both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries with both authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes; one example would be comparative exploration of how the press covered the debates over laws in France, Turkey, and other countries that restrict the wearing of headscarves in schools.

⁵⁶ "Kyrgyz Paper Urges Banning Religious Association," BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 20 May, 2009.