

# ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY: DAGHESTAN'S PROGRESS TOWARD DEMOCRACY

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The elections to the State Duma of the Russian Federation that took place on 7 December, 2003 revived an interest in the nearly forgotten issues of the alignment of political forces in Daghestan and in what sort of democracy people would like to see there. One should bear in mind that United Russia, the so-called party of power, scored the most convincing victory in the republic (66.3

percent of those who came to the polls).<sup>1</sup> The Communists with 17.7 percent of the votes suffered a crushing defeat—it was nearly half of what they had won in 1999. It should be said that another striking result of the same elections is no less interesting.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Molodezh Daghestana* newspaper, 12 December, 2003.

We have in mind the spectacular 4 percent won by the Islamic Party of Russia (IPR) that went to the elections under a new name—True Patriots of Russia—the only one among the “new” parties to draw so many voters to its side. The Islamists performed a veritable breakthrough. In other words, the party justified the hopes of those who had set it up to rob the Communists and Liberal Democrats of some of their supporters.

This was not enough, though, to get to the State Duma—the result that could have been easi-

ly forecasted. One should bear in mind, however, that in the nearest future the republic will elect its People’s Assembly: the True Patriots of Russia, acting together with other forces loyal to the Islamists may count on two-thirds of the votes. This will allow them to act as they will see it fit and to amend the republic’s constitution. Such developments will inevitably revive discussions about democracy and whether the republic should embrace its Western traits, civil society in particular, or whether it should rely on the local “Islamic” traditions.

## Pro et Contra

One should bear in mind that locally an opposition to the current reforms among the Communists and Islamists is mounting. While the situation in the Communist Party is more or less clear (its members are driven by nostalgia and revanchist sentiments) the situation in the Islamic political movements is not quite clear. During the elections to the People’s Assembly and the State Duma and in the course of knocking their party together the Islamists stepped up their propaganda efforts and involved, on a great scale, banking capital and the official Muslim clergy; all sorts of public movements were exploiting Islamic rhetoric not only to acquire identity—they did it under the pressure of clerics wishing to impose the Islamic social model on the republic. At a conference in Makhachkala those who represented the Islamic Party of Russia stated in so many words that the electoral system of Western “democracy” had proved pernicious for Daghestan and Russia as a whole. They insisted that the republic should at least try to build an Islamic republic patterned on Iran ran by “mullocracy,” which means another period of social experimenting. Those who believe that the republic should follow another road point to the countries with positive experience, high standards of living and protected constitutional rights. They have in mind European democracy and they refer to the well-known Churchill’s pronouncement: “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried from time to time.”

This speaks volumes probably because the issues related to political reforms and transfer from semi-totalitarian to democratic systems are very much important not only for Daghestan but also for all other regions with the so-called “Islamic or any other authoritarian social model.”

Any discussion about democracy in the republic should be prefaced by a statement that different researchers understand the “democratic society” concept differently. Sometimes it seems that democracy is another utopia. This explains why communist (and Islamist) political scientists in an effort to transcend the vicious “individualism-collectivism” antimony are identifying democracy with a global commune or an umma. This belongs to the sphere of mythology. In fact, the discussion about Islam and democracy going on in periodicals and academic publications is not anything new.

It is the recent events in the Northern Caucasus that added urgency to the issue. As soon as the analysts pointed to conceptual contradictions between the principles and institutions of democracy and Islam in a sincere effort to find answers to these questions, they attracted critical fire of Muslim clerics. The latter are obviously unwilling to admit that there are antidemocratic elements in Islam. At the same time, this deprives society of a chance to fully and objectively analyze the current developments and to find solutions to the conflicts that are being fanned in the so-called “arc of instability.” It should be added that the most pragmatically minded among the Muslim clergy spend no time on insisting that Islam is the most democratic of all religions. They have admitted that the thesis does not hold water and that the flock should be urgently informed about Islam’s democratic nature.

## The Missionary Parties

The hastily knocked together groups of religious propagandists sped to schools, higher educational establishments, ministries and settlements; they even visited kindergartens in an effort to convince people that Islam meant peace and that it was the only answer to the landslide of misfortunes.

These arguments look shop-soiled and bring to mind the leading and guiding role of a party, Islamic in this case. The wave has left unanswered certain very important questions: Why did the Northern Caucasus, including Daghestan, find itself part of the so-called arc of instability? Why do the geopolitical interests smack of religion there? And, finally, will the clerics' sincere statements stop a slide toward religious extremism obvious among part of the opposition?

It is not easy to answer these questions. We are convinced that the instability regions should be studied through the prism of the place of religion in politics and social life and the extent to which Western democratic values have been accepted there. When applied to the Northern Caucasus, and to Daghestan in particular, this approach reveals two rivaling dimensions. On the one hand, there is Islam and its deeply rooted ethnic and cultural traditions; on the other, there are actively imposed Western democratic principles that raise doubts among the local people or are even regarded as provocative.

More and more often the ideas of Western democracy are described as threatening Islam and its values. Official clerics and large religious-political organizations (the Islamic Democratic Party, the Islamic Party of Russia, the True Patriots of Russia, etc.) have accepted enmity to the West and its values as their major issue. These structures (that we shall call missionary parties here) are busy planting their ideas by gradually brainwashing the local people living in a secular state. They use all sorts of religious books and humanitarian aid; with the same aim in view they set up and support religious schools and all sorts of funds, build mosques, open prayer rooms in state offices; they have not left out of sight those of the clerics who prefer traditional Islam.

M. Radjabov, the IPR head, is convinced that time has come to unite all Islamic organizations into a single party able to address not only the problems of the Muslims of Russia but the country as a whole. One would like to know how the party is going to bring all Muslim movements together: they are numerous and are headed by people of different or even conflicting political convictions and ambitions. As far as we know, the IPR does not look at other Islamic movements as its rivals, yet neither the Union of Muslims of Russia, nor Refah, nor the Islamic Democratic Party, etc. are represented in its governing bodies. It is interesting to note that Maksud Sadikov is the Chairman of the Presidium of the party's general council while his brother is among the members of its auditing commission. The latter is known as an active founder of the Republican Branch of the Nur Islamic movement that preached Islamic-communist moral ideals. In 1998, after the murder of Mufti of Daghestan Abubakarov he was among the organizers and heads of the Congress of the Peoples of Daghestan that demanded immediate resignation of the republic's State Council and the cabinet. The presence of the brothers in the governing structures says that the party wants to create a political field of its own and is prepared to compete for power. The growing pressure of PR actions, an active involvement of banks and the official Muslim clergy might attract those of the politicians who have lost much of their influence; all together they may consolidate the party into a powerful political force able to address political problems. The IPR is determined to increase its membership: its structure presupposes membership of mosques of cities, towns and villages while the republican legislation directly forbids religious organizations to take part in political structures.

We think that the Islamic rhetoric the party is using is much more than a mere attempt at self-identification (a logical and never-ending process in Daghestani society)—it is prompted by active efforts of the clerical circles to desecularize social life in the republic. Politicians are doing their best to tap the clerics' potential by drawing them to their side to create an organization able to close the gap between the religious structures and the public; in the future—between religious structures and the state. One can offer a concise formula of the IPR's political stand: liberation of society from the still lingering ideological chi-

meras; abandonment by the state of its atheist nature; clericalization of politicians; state support of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Daghestan and other Islamic organizations; restoration of Islamic specifics in the republic's state order.

This structure is obviously intended as an alternative to the Communist Party of Daghestan with its high organizational potential: The Communist Party is the only political organization with fixed membership (with cells in 44 cities and districts). Today it has over 10 thou members. Being aware of the communists' strong positions in the republic, the IPR's organizers hope to attract at least some of the rank-and-file communists under their green banners. The old conflict between the Muslims and the communists as well as some of the newly formed party's documents leave no doubts about its intention to hunt on the communists' territory. A special issue of *Nur-ul-Islam* dedicated to the IPR carries a contribution by one of the most respected sheikhs Said Afandi. He answered the question whether the republic needed the party as: "This question can be asked only by those who objected to the Islamic Party in general. The Communist Party's advent to power from the very beginning was aimed at the destruction of Islam. Being aware of the evil it has already caused, the Muslims should be able to create a party they want."

Obviously, the IPR is trying to bring Islamic elements into politics with the help of those religious leaders who support it; it is looking for weighty and unbeatable arguments in favor of its right to carry out its agitation among the Muslims. This is simple enough—the old formulas are all here: the Muslim culture of the local peoples; Islamic specifics and traditions, jihad, etc. They can be exploited by those who have resolved to rescue and revive not only Daghestan but the whole of Russia as well.

## Islam and Democracy

There is a wide gap between Islam as a religion and liberal democracy as the foundation of modern civil society. Therefore, one is tempted to ask: What kind of society do the Islamic leaders have in view? An open confrontation is not inevitable—democracy is a multi-layered idea that includes Islamic norms together with others. The main Islamic texts do not speak of a specifically Islamic political form such as the Caliphate or an Islamic republic. Still, one has to bear in mind that the Muslims are better aware of their responsibility for the state of society; the roots of this responsibility go back to their religion: "You are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong" (Surah Al-i-Imran: 110). This is not only a religious or a mystical statement: it calls on the Muslims to implement the Koranic words in society—consequently none of the faithful can remain indifferent. Conceptually, the Muslim community's concern with social issues takes the form of constant attempts to impose Islamist programs on political parties, public movements, opposition and even on the powers that be. Their programs contradict the idea of civil society the main function of which is to extend (to a certain extent) the limits of freedom, to encourage all people to contribute to social changes, to extend social protection to all members of society irrespective of their ethnic and religious affiliations.

Our opponents may point out that the West is degrading and dying out; that it is steeped in prostitution, drugs and AIDS, that it is playing the role of international gendarme, etc. This is an oversimplification and looks like a propaganda bait. This can also be found in the Muslim regions. The West is successfully coping with these sores; Western society is more open, everything that happens in it becomes known to the public. In fact, other figures—infant mortality, life expectancy, the standard of living, real per capita incomes—speak eloquently about how society treats its members.

The problem lies elsewhere, though. There are developed countries in the Muslim East, too; the richest men in the world also live there. The fundamental distinction between Islam and Western democracy is manifested through the legislative competence issue. Islam contains no ideas about the sovereignty of people. The right to execute laws has been removed from the people's competence—it belongs to God (in the Koran and the Sunnah) and is exposed in fiqh. This explains why there are no autonomous legislative

bodies in the Muslim states; the main task of Islamic society is to apply the laws granted by the supreme authority. The Muslims can adopt legal norms outside the Shari'a (though there is practically no space for this outside it) and have by all means to adjust them to the Shari'a.

Such state concentrates on strengthening the fundamental Islamic values; welfare for all means protection of the religion, in the first place, while the highest values are Islam and the Islamic umma (as distinct from liberal democracy that concentrates on the citizen and his rights). In an Islamic state power does not always belong to an elected government: it can be a monarchy, theocracy or a dictatorship; supernatural features can be ascribed to the autocratic ruler (the king, sultan, caliph or sheikh). One cannot exclude that the ruler may also perform the supreme religious or spiritual functions (ayatollah, the supreme mufti). In the Islamic scale of values equality of an individual and his rights depend on how he treats Islam: this cannot co-exist with the principle of equal rights for all. At the level of individual religious ideas the Muslims declare complete freedom. The declaration is obviously dogmatic: their freedom is limited by the Shari'a.

As distinct from Muslim society in which the mosque is the central object, civil society stands on the idea of a "citizen"—the main subject that affects the state of affairs in society and brings about its changes. Its members reveal themselves through their direct involvement in public organizations, parties, movements, the media, etc. The development level of such society directly depends on the extent to which the NGOs and noncommercial structures are developed; on the distance between them and the state and their independence from the latter. By contrast, the political communities in which the Muslim organizations (even those loyal to the authorities) monopolize spiritual life are non-civil societies.

In the economic sphere the differences are as glaring. Any Islamic economic system takes account of two factors: the ban on usury—*riba* (stated in many ayats) and *zakat* (fixed social tax) imposed by the Koran. This ban interferes with functioning of market economy because it rules out bank interest—one of the main economic instruments channeling money (the capital) to the maximally profitable spheres. This can also be said about the fixed social tax.

The above fully proves that Islam and liberal democracy, Islam and civil society cannot exist side by side in one state.

## Middle Eastern Parallels

Many countries have already embraced economic and political reforms. The Muslim world alone demonstrates certain traits that make it a vast territory rejecting the major trends of historical development. The Islamic order of things is better suited to quite different political and economic systems. In Jordan, for example, the dying king suddenly altered his last will in favor of his son Abdullah and pushed away his brother as the legal successor. In Syria the military wiped away the opposition and remained in power for 30 years ruling with the use of force. Egypt, where the pharaonic features are still alive, is ruled by Hosni Mubarak, a former military. The nation's main slogan says: "Mubarak is a president for life." In Africa Sudan is undoubtedly one of the seats of anti-democratic resistance; in 1989 the military with General Omar Bashir at the head came to power there and built an Islamic society cut according to their own patterns. They are building a system in which they try to bring together the Islamic rules and injunctions and their social tradition. They are convinced that democracy should be locally raised and that political pluralism in the country of about 40 tribes is unwelcome: the people will be divided into ethnic groups with adverse consequences.

The same applies to all other Mid-Eastern countries; they all are ruled by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes because the totalitarian dogmatic ideology has nothing else to offer. Protest assumes the form of extremism, since totalitarian ideology can only be defeated by a still more rigid ideological system. The conception of a political system formulated by Egyptian ideologist Sayyid Qutb, the founder of Islamic extremism, says that it is by force alone that the genuine Islamic state can be imposed on the fake Muslim societies.

In many countries growing extremism and an erosion of the political system are caused by inadequate democratic awareness, domination of conservative thinking among the functional elites (parties, public organizations, law enforcement bodies, etc.). The Muslims painfully respond to all attempts to alter the situation and transgress the dividing line. In many of the Muslim states anti-Western trends openly predominate; statistics and experts agree that the majority of the Muslims dislikes the West and mistrusts it, to say the least.

This explains why the TV picture of the collapsing Twin Towers aroused satisfaction among some of the Muslims: "Finally, somebody has taught them a lesson!" Bin Laden is popular among the Islamists because what he is doing is interpreted as a liberatory effort that cripples Western domination. More likely than not, the armed conflicts at the periphery of the Islamic world (in Central Asia and the Caucasus) are caused by a direct contact of the Western and Islamic models. In the political sphere, the Shari'a rule in the Kadar zone and the "Botlikh breakthrough" clearly demonstrated the opposition between Islamism and democracy on the territory of Russia.

Since Russia is busy building a democratic society and an open market economy, its regions with the predominant Muslim populations find themselves in the sphere of a never-ending conflict (the Volga area and the Northern Caucasus). In this sense, today Daghestan is not merely an area where the future of the Russian Federation and its territorial integrity is decided; it is an area where a real alignment of forces (for and against democratic reforms and for and against civil society) is evolving. In fact, this problem creates difficulties and the local specifics of the economic and political reforms in the Northern Caucasus.

### *C o n c l u s i o n s*

In these conditions democracy should obviously stand opposed to the fairly powerful (legal and clandestine) confessional forces. The experience of countries that lived through religious Protestantism showed that democracy should rely on the following principles. First: it should effectively oppose the forces resolved to take power with the help of religious slogans. Second: opposition per se cannot produce desired results in the absence of an institutional system with a balance of varied secular political movements. In the final analysis, it alone makes it possible to push aside the religious movement, be it Islamic or Christian Orthodox, and neutralize its political ambitions. Third: it is necessary to organize a pluralistic political process far removed from religion and a multi-party system that are varied enough to make a civil society possible.