

PLACE AND ROLE OF ISLAM IN REGIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE CAUCASSUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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POST-SOVIET MUSLIM "ACTIVISTS" IN TATARSTAN:
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Rustam Gibadullin,

PhD(History), Associate Professor,

Naberezhnye Chelny Institute,

Branch of Kazan (Volga region) Federal University

Roza Nurullina,

PhD(Sociology), Leading Research Associate,

TAS Center for Islamic Studies

The authors of the article examine a range of problems connected with the institution of imams in Tatarstan (typology, structure, social portrait, contradictions, development trends). The authors explain their close attention to this subject by the fact that the imams form an original Muslim "team of activists" which can be viewed as an indicator of mass sentiments and ideas in the local community.

The authors of the article believe that the development of Islam and the Muslim community in Russia is largely determined by the condition of the institution of the imams, representing the grassroots of religious figures. In their work the authors use the term “imam” in its micro-social connotation (leader of collective prayer and or Muslim community – initial meaning of the word in the Muslim world). The authority of imams is based on their informal status and election tradition. In the religious practice of Muslims in post-Soviet Russia the imam is an “attendant” at a mosque who is chosen by the leader of a local community as the most authoritative and knowledgeable person in the questions of faith and who can conduct a collective prayer and read a sermon. The imam is also the leader of the “primary” link in the structure of official spiritual boards.

At the same time the authors point to the fact that due to the Soviet “anti-religious” policy the Russian imams have largely lost their basic professional qualities and the deterioration of the Muslim medium to the level of simplified “popular” Islam contributed to their role of only conducting certain rites. But by virtue of their position they still represent a kind of the “active Muslim team” at a lower level, which, as previously, serves as an orientation point for rank-and-file Muslims, and this is why it may be regarded as an indicator of public sentiments ruling Islamic society.

The authors note the cultural and ideological heterogeneity of the “Muslim activists,” which is due to the influence of different factors, as a result of which various forms of religious practice emerge, from “popular” to “fundamentalist.” The heterogeneity of the body of the Russian imams can largely be explained by the contradictory conditions of the post-Soviet epoch, when it was being formed.⁰⁰ The main factor influencing this process in Tatarstan and the Volga area was the tumultuous growth of the number of mosques, communities and the absence of the necessary number of well-trained imams. The situation was worsened by the fact that the educational infrastructure necessary for tackling this

problem has only started to be formed in Russia, and the possibilities of the education of Russian Muslims in foreign centers were very limited.

The authors single out a quite essential factor, which influenced the formation process of the institutions of the imams, namely, the autonomy of Muslim communities based on the tradition of Islamic self-organization, which allowed them to elect their leaders independently, without agreeing this with official bodies and their approval. In practical terms it meant that the statute of imams could receive even persons without any religious education.

The internal heterogeneity inherent in the imam community can be seen and perceived differently. First, ideologically – in the imams' adherence to various trends in Islam. Secondly, there are differences in the level of religious education and skill, which may vary rather widely. This should be regarded as a factor, which is negative for the development of Islam and Muslim community in Russia.

In this work the authors examine the post-Soviet “Muslim activists” on the example of Tatarstan, one of the oldest regions of Islam in Russia. The authors analyze the results of a sociological survey (2011–2016) carried out by the Center of Islamic research of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan in cooperation with the Russian Islamic Institute (city of Kazan) and Kazan Federal University. Seven hundred respondent-imams in Tatarstan (about half of their overall number) have been polled, and they were offered an opportunity to choose themselves the questionnaire either in Russian or in Tatar; the latter comprised about 90 percent, which reflected the ethno-linguistic composition of the entire body of imams in the region. (Such is a social portrait of the post-Soviet body of “Muslim activists.”)

Having analyzed the existing typologies of imams compiled by such researchers as R. Pateyev, R. Muhametshin and V. Yakupov, the authors of this work suggest a typology which more fully reflects a social portrait of “Muslim activists” and

makes it possible to take into account the multidimensional character of its characteristics. According to the typology, the body of present-day imams includes two generations (Soviet and post-Soviet) and their groups.

1. Generation of imams which took shape in the Soviet period. It consists of two groups;

a) Former imams who received religious education in the Soviet period (madrasah "Mir-Arab" in Bohara), who began their activity in mosques working at the time. They are distinguished by traditional authority among believers and great experience of work at official religious bodies in the post-Soviet period.

b) Former people's mullahs - numerous rural mullahs working in the Soviet conditions unofficially and legalized during the post-Soviet period. They have a weak religious preparation and represent "popular" Islam characterized by apartness from official religious and power bodies.

2. Generation of imams who began to work in post-Soviet time. It consists of three groups:

a) Imams-"specialists" - graduates from post-Soviet Russian Muslim educational institutions, which became certified specialists. They are distinguished by rather high quality of their religious preparation (Islamic universities and institutes, higher and middle madrasahs) and the form of study (daily and correspondence).

b) Imams from abroad - young imams who received religious education in foreign countries. They are characterized by a comparatively high level of theoretical (theological and legal) preparation and often by fundamentalist orientation. The latter feature makes them an object of criticism by part of the official Muslim bodies of the Volga Region, which adhere to the traditional Hanafite mazhab. Although this group of imams is often regarded as bearers of alien religious traditions and agents of foreign influence, it is they who are respected for intellectual supremacy and ideological rivalry, which is seen during various informal open discussions.

c) Imams-“neophytes” who became practicing Muslims on the wave of the post-Soviet Islamic rebirth and were put forward to the post of imams as active members of Muslim communities. They represent various social groups and are characterized by activity in their religious quests and self-education. They are liable to influence by different ideological trends in Islam, including those upholding the idea of an autonomous Muslim community.

The authors emphasize the three mass groups of imams: the former “people’s mullahs” (1b), “specialists” (2a) and “neophytes” (2b). The group of former “peoples mullahs” is characterized by a greater number of Tatars (95 percent), Tatar-language speaking men (91 percent), rural dweller (90 percent), former workers (86.5 percent), elderly persons (76 percent), those from former “people’s mullahs” who do not know Arabic. Former “people’s mullahs” retain their adherence to “popular” Islam with its communal character, which has always been expressed in the striving of imams to distance themselves from official structures and get rid of their keeping and control. Many administrative initiatives of spiritual boards to strengthen their control functions cause displeasure of a considerable part of former “people’s mullahs.” A group of imams-“specialists” consists of Tatars (96.3 percent), Tatar-language speaking men (88 percent), rural dwellers (84.8 percent). In contrast to the previous group of imams, this group included men of a higher social status and intellectuals (26.1 percent). This group is distinguished by a higher educational level, both secular and religious. But 78 percent of people of this group do not speak Arabic and feel the need to raise their educational level. In contrast from former “people’s mullahs,” imams-“specialists” do not have experience of religious work. They connect their mission in their community with religious education (31.6 percent) than with rites and rituals (24.7 percent). Imams-“specialists” are the most trustful and loyal towards official spiritual and government bodies. The group of imams-“neophytes,” just as the preceding groups, is characterized by the preponderance (95.6 percent) of the Tatar-language persons

(95.8 percent), rural dwellers (88.5 percent). Their confessional specialization is typical which is explained by be family succession. Imams-“neophytes,” by their major characteristics, take intermediate position between former “peoples mullahs” and imams-“specialists.” Imams-“neophytes” face the greatest difficulties in their professional activity due to a short term of work and inadequate qualification level. As to the imams-“neophytes,” their adherence to the influence of various trends in Islam can be explained by the activity of the leaders of communities who came to the fore due to their religious activity in the conditions of the pluralism of post-Soviet Islam. The ideological heterogeneity of this group can be explained, among other things, by the absence of ideological “tempering” usually acquired in madrasah, and also their self-realization in religion.

In conclusion, the authors of the article make the following forecasts. The former “people’s mullahs,” as a phenomenon borne of Soviet time are not reproduced in the post-Soviet conditions and gradually disappear from the scene of Russian Islam, however, they retain their influence on a definite part of Muslim public. The share and social role of imams-“specialists” are growing, and the interest of the official and religious authorities may result in the monopolization of the leading functions by imams-“specialists” in Muslim communities. Imams-“neophytes,” by their socio-cultural, professional and ideological characteristics hold the middle position between the former “people’s mullahs” and imams-“specialists.” Due to their “middle” characteristics the group of imams-“neophytes” acquires the key significance in the examination of the processes and tendencies determining the changes inside the entire post-Soviet body of imams.

A comparative analysis of the characteristics of imams-“neophytes” and imams-“specialists” enables the authors to make an important conclusion, namely, that the contradictions between official bodies relying on the conformists and the opposition existing in Soviet time who upheld “people’s” Islam and democratism and the autonomy of Muslim communities do not

disappear in the post-Soviet period, but are restored by the new generation of imams. Thus, conformist and unitarist rules are more inherent in imams-“specialists,” and the spirit of opposition and ideological pluralism is inherent in imams-“neophytes.” The essence of this opposition, which has latent forms as previously, is the same, that is, the unwillingness to recognize unquestionably the authority of the Spiritual Board in religious-legal questions and its administrative prerogatives as the controlling body.

At the same time the results of the examination make it possible to suppose that the real public role and authority of the imams-“neophytes” will depend on the specific conditions in which a greater part of the Muslim activists was formed during the perestroika and post-perestroika periods. So far the socialization of Russian imams is greatly determined by the formation model of imams-“specialists.”

Author of the abstract - Elena Dmitrieva

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Kseniya GRIGOREVA,
PhD(Sociology), Research Associate,
Institute of Sociology, FCTAS RAS

S. Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations is verified by the materials of an empirical research conducted in the Republic of Bashkortostan. The author refuted the thesis about the incompatibility of the values of Muslim and Orthodox Slavic