

The Sufi & the President in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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Sufi masters and Sufi orders have historically played an important role on both popular and elite levels in Central Asia. In particular Naqshbandi branches were strongly involved in Uzbek court affairs in Tashkent and Bukhara. Historically, Sufi shaykhs (*ishon*) were leading the forces of opposition against Russian colonization of the area, as well as several popular uprisings, particularly in Ferghana valley. During the Soviet period they went underground preserving their brotherhoods in secrecy.

The cover of Najmiddin Komilov's book, *Najmiddin Kubro* (Toshkent: 1995)

Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in August 1991, Uzbekistan declared its independence. The First Secretary of the former Uzbek Communist Party, Islam Karimov, became president of the republic of Uzbekistan and set up an authoritarian presidential regime. Since then Karimov's state has systematically and violently oppressed any political opposition, including movements that find inspiration in the various trends of political Islam. In fact, the mantra of "the dangers" posed by Islamic activists, or "terrorists," is today used to curb any man-

Uzbekistan is experiencing an ambiguous revival of Sufism; while people are rediscovering their religious traditions and Sufi groups are recomposing themselves, at the same time a form of state Sufism is emerging. Great mystical masters are celebrated as role models for today's citizens and their teachings are reinterpreted in a politically correct way. In this respect, post-Soviet Uzbekistan is reinventing itself through its Sufi heritage, while preserving political habits from the recent Soviet past.

ifestation of popular discontent. Last May, the regime even legitimized the brutal suppression of protests in the town of Andijon claiming—without producing any validation as such—that "Islamic terrorists" aiming at the destabilization of the Ferghana Valley provoked the violence. The "war on terror" has given the US cooperative Karimov regime a further license to continue suppressing any opposition using the same old Soviet tactics.

The 1991 constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees "freedom of conscience and religious association," which allows Sufi orders, Sufi gatherings, or pilgrimages to Sufi mausoleums to take place despite the opposition of some of the clergy. The question as to whether the Uzbek state has no need to suppress Sufi organizations and practices because Sufism does not pose a "danger" to the present political order is difficult to answer. One of the problems is that researchers have only limited access as yet and, consequently, field data are not ready at hand. Contemporary Sufism, as in the past, is not necessarily a sui generis or a sub-cultural, a-political inclination. To the contrary Sufism can be organized and even directed by the State. Today in Uzbekistan certain trends in Sufism are endorsed by the state and used to sanction official politics. Not unexpectedly, Uzbek state Sufism is highly rhetorical in its manifestations.

Sufism as heritage

Uzbek state officials, together with some intellectuals and religious authorities—engaged in a quest for salvaging national heritage (*meros*)—initiated a policy to rehabilitate and take advantage of the rich Sufi heritage of Central Asia. In September 1993, President Karimov and the state mufti, Abdullah Mukhtar Khan, pompously celebrated, in his mausoleum near Bukhara, the 675th anniversary of the birth of Baha' al-Din Naqshband, founder of the Naqshbandiyya order. Another Sufi master was commemorated when the year 1994 year was officially declared the "Yasawi year" after the eleventh century Sufi master Ahmad Yasawi, who became at that time the subject of numerous conferences throughout Central Asia. President Karimov described the saint as a symbol of "the strength of spiritual heritage."¹ The famous fifteenth century Naqshbandi poet and administrator, Alisher Navoi, is ubiquitously mentioned and quoted in order to illustrate the model of a Sufi figure occupying an official position and loyally supporting the court, e.g. the State.

Although some Sufi masters were also commemorated during the Soviet period as being part of the cultural heritage of the area, the current handling of the Sufi heritage takes place in a larger and fully different experience of patrimony making. State reconstructed Sufism is now represented as part of the Uzbek spiritual heritage: by comparing Sufi masters with western philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach (it is notable that these thinkers in particular were severely criticized by Marx and Engels and consequently condemned by the Soviet orthodoxy), the young Republic of Uzbekistan re-shapes the spiritual masters' image to serve its own convenience. Sufi sheikhs—in addition to conquerors and writers such as Tamerlane and Pahlavon Mahmud—are included in the celebrated group of the founders of the Uzbek nation, recreating a medieval and illustrious past to a state that was created no earlier than 1924 as part of the Soviet Union. This official discourse on Sufism remains silent on instances of subversive, oppositional, and autonomous activities of the Sufi leaders and their following throughout history. Indeed, authorized historiographies often encourage a complete (religious, social, as well as political) Sufi model of loyal citizenship.



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRE PAPAS, 2005

Re-writing the Sufi sayings

Since the early 1990s many books and pamphlets on Sufism have been published in Uzbekistan. Among the most prolific authors are the poet Sadridin Salim Bukhoriy and academic Najmiddin Komilov, an advisor to Islam Karimov on cultural and religious issues. Both authors regularly publish treatises on the life of Sufi shaykhs, their teachings, their roles in history and on more general aspects of Sufism, including doctrines. These treatises are diffused in bazaar bookstalls, at holy shrines, and mosques. One of the principal rhetorical techniques used by the authors is quoting Sufi writings in combination with other, often sacred, texts. An example of this neo-classical method is Bukhoriy's *Dilda Yor (The Beloved in Heart)* in which he explains the Naqshbandi spiritual path through a didactic question-answer construction, combining Sufi poetry, Medieval court poetry, Quranic references, hadith (sayings attribute to Muhammad) and *tafsir* (commentary) extracts.² Embellished with various Sufi anecdotes, such publications have the appearance of a traditional Sufi hagiography except that the substance and the aim are very different. If the traditional hagiography presents a model of sainthood, the modern hagiography puts forward a model of "mankind" and "citizenship." The text is not aimed at the Sufi disciple to show him the spiritual path but at the pious citizen to explain the proper way to live a submissive life. Typically, in one story of a shaykh imploring the help of Baha' al-Din Naqshband against the Bolsheviks, Bukhoriy makes the appearing saint answer that the bad situation of Uzbek Muslims is due to their lack of faith: neither jihad—inner or outer—nor any other action but the restraint of the believers and the total submission to God offers a way out.³ Thus these writings teach an obedient Sufism that would validate in the name of God the established political order.

Sufism as conformism

In two publications, *Tasavvuf 1. yoki Komil Inson Ahloqi (Sufism 1. or The Virtues of the Perfect Man)*⁴ and *Tasavvuf 2. Tavhid Asrori (Sufism 2. The Secrets of Unicity)*⁵, Najmiddin Komilov develops his views on mystical Islam. He firstly formulates an essential distinction between "correct" Sufism and "incorrect" Sufism; whereas the former promotes the progress of humankind, the latter leads to religious dogmatism and fanaticism both of which are to the prejudice of the labour class. By criticizing, on the one hand, the principle of the renunciation of the world in terms of socially disastrous behaviour and, on the other, the excessive influence of the spiritual guide on people as fanaticism, the author promotes a kind of middle-of-the-road Sufism, which consists, basically, in private spirituality and in loyalty to the public authority. Komilov also revisits the notion of *futuvvat*; by distorting the classical meaning of "spiritual honour code" or "spiritual chivalry", he attributes to it a conformist model of citizenship, which enhances the values of labour, camaraderie, and sense of duty. Such rhetoric—Sufi vocabulary aside—has an all too familiar sound in a former Soviet republic.

In an interview, Komilov stated that "...our honoured President Karimov, speaking about the necessity for us to learn and to get progress, ... said that both mature and young people have to study, but they should not forget their Uzbekness (*özbeklik*) and should bind together spiritual accomplishment and humanism."⁶ Sufism, in this perspective, should be considered as a form of Islam promoting modern education and patriotism. And that is how the Sufi spirituality, as the president suggests, comes to crown the moulding of the Uzbek citizen. This is the direction given to the nation by both the President and the Sufi: a politically correct and correctly political Sufism at the service of a Republic where public opinion is not allowed to opine.

Sufism as anti-extremism

Within the state supported Sufi discourse Sufism is also presented as an antidote to Islamic extremism. Significantly, for the celebration of the 900th anniversary in 2003 of the birth of 'Abd al-Khaliq Ghijduwani, a master of the Khwajagan-Naqshbandiyya order, the imam khatib of the great mosque of Bukhara, Abdulghafur Razzoq Bukhoriy, published *Tariqatga yo'llanma (A Guide to the Sufi Path)*. In this didactic volume, the scholar points out that two Islamic political movements, Wahhabism and Hizb ul-Tahrir, have been recently introduced in Uzbekistan and represent a danger for Uzbek Islamic traditions. In order to counter these "foreign" trends, Sufism is presented as the right path because it consents to various rituals of Uzbek believers (especially the

cult of the saints), it disagrees with the notion of an Islamic state or Caliphate, moreover, it respects the existing state and social order.⁷ This official discourse deliberately mixes different types of argumentations and relies on an overtly oversimplified vision of Sufism in Central Asia. Clearly, by obscuring facts and features of religious history, the state's aim is to encourage through mystical Islam society's submissiveness to the state. Here, Sufism appears as an artificial Islam, and the Sufi as a creature of the President.

Notes

1. See Thierry Zarcone, "Ahmad Yasavi, héros des nouvelles républiques centreasiatiques," *REMM*, 89-90 (2000).
2. Sadridin Salim Bukhoriy, *Dilda Yor (Hazrat Bahouddin Naqshband)* (Toshkent: 1993), 80.
3. *Ibid.*, 43-44.
4. Najmiddin Komilov, *Tasavvuf 1 (yoki Komil Inson Ahloqi)* (Toshkent: 1996).
5. Najmiddin Komilov, *Tasavvuf 2. Tavhid Asrori* (Toshkent: 1999).
6. *Milliy Tiklanish*, 21 October 1997.
7. Khoji Abdulghafur Razzoq Bukhoriy, *Tariqatga Yo'llanma. Naqshbandiya ta'limoti asosida* (Toshkent: 2003), 18-21. With a foreword by Najmiddin Komilov.

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