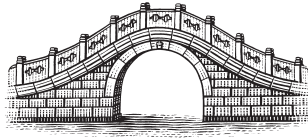


RESEARCH NOTE

# Islamic Leaders in Uzbekistan

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**KEYWORDS:** UZBEKISTAN; ISLAM; ISLAMIC ELITE; STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS; POLITICAL REFORM

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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This report analyzes the degree to which Uzbekistan’s Islamic elite are loyal to the Uzbek government.

**MAIN ARGUMENT**

Competing incentive structures determine how Uzbekistan’s Islamic elite respond to the state. Whereas political elites respond to patronage flows from the top, independent Islamic leaders in Uzbekistan are supported by Uzbek society, and it is to society’s demands—and not those of President Islam Karimov or the state—that Uzbekistan’s *imams* (local religious leaders) respond.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The United States should be aware that, despite the current Uzbek government’s attempt to equate independent Islam with militant Islam, both forms of Islam are present in Uzbekistan and both forms pose threats to the Karimov regime’s continued legitimacy and stability:

- Militant Islamists seek the forcible overthrow of the Karimov government and its replacement with an Islamic caliphate.
- Independent Islamic leaders, by rejecting government propaganda and providing the general population sanctuary from authoritarian rule in their mosques and communities, are allies for those who seek political reform in Uzbekistan.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE ESSAY**

Four sections follow the introduction:

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A conclusion (p. 143) summarizes the central points of the report.

The Karimov government has attempted to incorporate Islamic elites into its patronage-based system of rule. As the U.S. Department of State's 2003 report on religious freedom in Uzbekistan suggests, the Karimov administration controls and finances the *muftiate*,<sup>1</sup> "which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of *imams*' [local religious leaders] sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials."<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch similarly added in a report the following year that the Karimov government has developed a practice of "incorporating inherited [Soviet] methods of control and instituting new tactics to prevent religious faith from ever challenging the government's power."<sup>3</sup> As this report demonstrates, however, religious elites, and more specifically Uzbekistan's imams, do challenge the government's power. The logic of Islam, clientalism, and coercion do not readily mix, and—regardless of the vigilance of the Karimov government—the overwhelming societal demand for free-thinking religious leaders ensures that independent Islam will persist.

The findings of this report build on field research conducted in four regions and five cities in Uzbekistan in August and November 2004. Over the course of four weeks, the author interviewed seven imams and over fifty men and women who, either through their beliefs, their studies in *madrassas*,<sup>4</sup> or work as human rights defenders, are closely connected to Uzbekistan's Islamic leadership. Though by no means an exhaustive sampling of Uzbekistan's Islamic community, this field research nevertheless provides insight into why religious elites choose either to abide by or ignore government attempts to control and define Islam.

After providing a brief overview of the methodology used in this research, a second section then overviews past Soviet attempts to control Islamic elites in Uzbekistan. The main body of the paper discusses the findings of focus group and Islamic elite interviews. Focus groups, the subject of the third section, are important because they helped define the parameters of what Uzbeks

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<sup>1</sup> In 1943, the Soviet government established Muslim spiritual boards to oversee religious activities of Muslims in the Soviet Union. The Soviet-era Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Board (SADUM) was headquartered in Tashkent. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new boards—also called *muftiates*—emerged to coincide with post-Soviet national and territorial units, including in Uzbekistan, where a centralized *muftiate* continues to regulate official Islam in the country.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Uzbekistan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," December 18, 2003 ~ <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24443.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004), 5.

<sup>4</sup> In Arabic, *madrassa* can refer to any school, religious or secular. In the Uzbek context, however, *madrassa* denotes a religious school where students study Islam.

perceive as popular and unpopular, and dependent and independent imams. Moreover, focus groups helped to identify three independent or formerly independent imams whom I subsequently interviewed. In the fourth section I discuss cases of partial and failed government co-optation, beginning with Uzbekistan's most prominent Islamic figure—the former *mufti* (Muslim spiritual advisor) of Central Asia Mohammad Sodik Mohammad Yusuf. This section then moves on to cover lesser known yet equally influential and considerably more independent local imams in the southern city of Qarshi and in the Ferghana Valley city of Quqon, an Uzbek city close to the Tajik border. Importantly, none of these imams preach revolution. Neither, however, do they blindly praise the Karimov government. Rather, as I demonstrate, the imams' independence is a response to perceptions of a growing demand among everyday Uzbeks for a value system in which self-worth is defined by principles and not by patronage. Islamic leaders, in short, embody an alternative system of beliefs which, though not overtly political, has nevertheless grown in influence and presents a challenge to the regionally-based client networks that have long defined Uzbek authoritarianism. As such, independent Islamic leaders are natural allies for those who seek political reform in Uzbekistan.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN AND THE STUDY OF ISLAM IN UZBEKISTAN

In May 2005 Uzbek government troops fired on protestors in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijan. The number of casualties is disputed: the government states that 173 people (including 35 police officers) died, whereas opposition groups estimate the number of civilian deaths at over 500.<sup>5</sup> What is clear, however, is that the Uzbek government's justification for its heavy-handed response identified "fundamentalist groups" and "radical Islamists" as the leaders of the Andijan uprising and concluded that the police were correct to suppress these "evil forces."<sup>6</sup>

Islam was indeed a factor in the Andijan clashes. In the early hours of May 13th, armed militants freed several prominent and recently imprisoned Muslim businessmen. This jailbreak likely encouraged the mass upsurge of anti-

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "Three Uzbek Policemen Die in Hospital, Bringing Andijan Death Toll to 173," BBC Monitoring International Reports, May 27, 2005; and Burt Herman, "Uzbek Death Tolls Are Widely Divergent," Associated Press, May 18, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Press Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "Islam Karimov: No One Can Turn Us From Our Chosen Path," May 16, 2005 ~ <http://www.press-service.uz/en/content.scm?contentId=8908>.

government protest.<sup>7</sup> Accounts by participants, journalists, and eyewitnesses suggest, however, that everyday grievances (rather than religious fervor) motivated the majority of protestors. That the Karimov government should isolate religious extremism as the sole force behind the Andijan events—as it has similarly done following other demonstrations of popular opposition—illustrates the politicized and manipulated nature of Islam in Uzbekistan.

This heightened vigilance against religious extremism, even if partially justified, nevertheless presents unusual challenges for those who wish to study Islam in Uzbekistan. Mass public opinion surveys into popular perceptions of Islam, for example, are unfeasible. The stakes—for the Uzbek government, for Islamic leaders, for ordinary Uzbeks, and for social scientists in the field—are simply too high. Indeed, following the events in Andijan, local polling experts advised that my colleagues and I should indefinitely delay a politically sensitive public opinion survey on the effects of the Internet in Uzbek society.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, for that study as well as for the analysis of Islamic leaders I present here, I have chosen to limit field research to elite interviews and focus groups.

While this methodology offers the advantage of being more discreet than public opinion surveys, the smaller numbers and the nature of my respondents by necessity demand that caution be used when generalizing research findings to the broader Uzbek population. Respondents in my focus groups and elite interviews took the initiative and consciously chose to speak with an American about Islam. As a result, their views may diverge from those who did not or would not elect to discuss this politically sensitive topic.

All research designs face limitations. The constraints that a student of Islam confronts in authoritarian Uzbekistan are greater, though not altogether different, from the constraints that social scientists face in less difficult research settings.<sup>9</sup> In my case, concern for personal safety undoubtedly influenced who did and did not agree to speak with me. For the most part, the Uzbek voices in this article are of those who, to some degree or another,

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<sup>7</sup> Bagila Bukharbayeva, “Karimov Blames Islamic Militants, Violence Flares at Uzbek Border,” Associated Press, May 14, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Our Uzbek partners fear that little substantive survey research can be conducted given the current political environment. Information about the progress of this survey and our broader information communications technology project, “The Effect of the Internet on Society in Central Asia,” can be found at <http://depts.washington.edu/caict/funding.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> Note, however, that even in large public opinion surveys within non-authoritarian environments, respondents may similarly avoid sensitive topics. Adam Berinsky, for instance, finds in his analysis of U.S. National Election Studies survey data that “selection bias models reveal that some individuals who harbor anti-integrationist sentiments are likely to hide their socially unacceptable opinions behind a ‘don’t know’ response.” See Adam J. Berinsky, “The Two Faces of Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 4 (October 1999): 1209.

harbor reservations about the Karimov regime. Should Uzbekistan's political environment improve, I hope to complement these voices with the perceptions of a broader cross section of the Uzbek population. For now, however, the interviews and focus groups I present here provide a rare window into when and why Uzbekistan's religious elite obey or contest the Karimov government's attempts to control and define Islam; this research note should thus provide some insight into the role of Islam in Uzbek politics.

#### BRIEF HISTORY: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SOVIET-ERA PATRONAGE

Having outlined the methodology of this study, it is helpful to first review state-elite relationships in an earlier political setting. This is because the mechanisms that the Uzbek leadership currently uses in its attempts to control the Islamic elite are, with minor modifications, the same institutions that the Soviet government used to monitor and control its Muslim clergy. Moscow then, like Tashkent today, was limited in the extent to which it could suppress the Islamic elite. Domestically, outright suppression was untenable. In 1927, for example, the Bolsheviks initiated the *hujum*, a campaign designed to eliminate what they perceived as the most visible marker of Islam and the influence of the religious elite—the veil. The intended goal of the Bolsheviks' unveiling campaign was not simply to further women's liberation in Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> By challenging the veil, and Uzbek Islamic practices more broadly, Moscow hoped to split the religious elite and thereby undermine the clergy's ability to mobilize popular opposition to Soviet rule.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the 1927 campaign failed, as would subsequent unveiling campaigns in the mid-1930s and early 1940s. Underscoring the limits of Soviet power, one historian writes

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<sup>10</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001). See also Keller, “Women's Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926–1941,” in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Keller, “Women's Liberation,” 322.

of the failed Uzbek hujum that “even Stalin’s powerful government had set itself a task at which it was all but bound to fail.”<sup>12</sup>

Unsuccessful in their attempts to eliminate the Uzbek Islamic elite through coercion, the Soviets turned to co-optation as an alternative means for controlling the Islamic elite.<sup>13</sup> In 1943 the Soviet government created the Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Board (known widely as SADUM).<sup>14</sup> SADUM, also known as the muftiate, was formally independent of the government—a necessity given the atheist foundations of Soviet ideology.<sup>15</sup> In reality, however, SADUM was part of Moscow’s growing Central Asian administrative bureaucracy. Importantly, although unwilling to tolerate the hujum’s attack against the symbolic markers of Islam, Uzbeks had little difficulty accommodating Moscow’s supervision of the religious elite. Such external supervision was a familiar practice dating to the fifteenth century when the Timurid Dynasty began co-opting Islamic leaders into the state bureaucracy by awarding honorary titles and selectively supporting regional mosques and religious schools.<sup>16</sup> The ideology or ethnicity of the prevailing political elite mattered little; the religious leaders simply pledged loyalty to the government in return for local control over everyday Islamic life. Indeed, in the Soviet case, Uzbek religious leaders not only accepted Moscow’s supervision, but actively courted such supervision as a way to ensure continued power. Moscow likewise courted the Islamic elite in order to mobilize Uzbek support—first for World War II and later for the transformation of the Uzbek economy into one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 313. Shoshana Keller reaches a similar conclusion, finding that “Although the Soviets achieved significant changes in women’s status, particularly among the educated classes, in the end they failed to stamp out any of the traditional practices against which they had campaigned so diligently.” See Keller, “Women’s Liberation,” 322. For more on Soviet attempts to undermine Islam in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, see Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Yaacov Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Marianne Kamp, “Unveiling Uzbek Women: Liberation, Representation and Discourse, 1906–1929” (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998); and William Fierman, *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the Soviet coercion campaign did result in enormous casualties and relocations. Undoubtedly, this weakened not only Uzbek society, but the Uzbek religious elite as well. As concluded by both Northrop and Keller (see note 11), however, coercion ultimately could not eliminate the religious elite.

<sup>14</sup> SADUM is the acronym for *Sredneaziatskoe dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man*.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtiyar Babajanov, “Sredneaziatskoe dukhovnoe upravlenie musul’man: predistoriia i posledstviia raspada” [The Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Board: Early History and the Consequences of Its Collapse], in *Mnogomernye granitsi Tsentral’noi Azii* [The Multidimensional Borders of Central Asia], ed. Martha Brill Olcott and Aleksei Malashenko (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 55–69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

world's largest cotton producers.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for example, was the Babakhan family able to maintain firm control over the Central Asian Islamic leadership for most of the Soviet period.<sup>18</sup> In short, Moscow's patronage created a loyal and stable Central Asian religious elite. Through this proxy elite, Moscow accomplished indirectly what it failed to accomplish directly through the hujum: manage Islam in Central Asia.

Political patronage continues to be an effective tool in regulating the Islamic leadership in Uzbekistan. Much as Moscow did with SADUM, Tashkent now uses the post-Soviet muftiate in an attempt to regulate all aspects of Islam, including religious education and the appointment of imams in local mosques. Through this new muftiate, Tashkent has created a coterie of loyal Islamic leaders. Regional Islamic leaders—those who oversee the activity of Uzbekistan's many local or *mahalla* (state-controlled neighborhood committee) level imams—are watched particularly closely by, and are largely compliant with, both the government's Committee on Religious Affairs and the government-controlled Muslim Spiritual Board. The head imams of Quqon in the Ferghana Valley and of Qarshi near the Afghanistan border, for example, both noted in interviews that, given what they saw as the Uzbek population's susceptibility to radical Islamic teaching, the government needed to regulate religion. Illustrating his point, Qarshi's head imam concluded that the government was correct to imprison one of the city's local Islamic leaders who purportedly taught *Wahhabi*, or extremist Islam.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, however, not all Islamic leaders tow the government line. Though imams may obey some governmental regulations—such as submitting to yearly attestation exams and registering their mosques with the Muslim Spiritual Board—many imams will flout those restrictions that they perceive as unjust. Some Islamic leaders in Tashkent, Quqon, and Qarshi, for example, confided that they regularly hold Quran discussions in spite of the 1998 law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” that prohibits the “private teaching of religious principles.”<sup>20</sup> Other leaders, such

<sup>17</sup> See Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, 102–3.

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 150. The Babakhan “dynasty” was composed of Ishan Babakhan (1943–57), his son Zaiutdin Babakhanov (1957–82), and Ishan Babakhan's grandson Shamsuddin Khan, (1982–89).

<sup>19</sup> Author's interviews with Abdulmajid qori, head imam of Quqon city, November 18, 2004, and Ismail Hajji Raikhanov, head imam of Qarshi, November 24, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> See Article 9 on religious schools, from the 1998 law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” ≈ <http://www.pravo.uz>.



as a village imam near Quqon and a Sufi imam in the Ferghana Valley, lead prayers despite having no authorization from the Spiritual Board.<sup>21</sup>

Placing one's beliefs above government law invites considerable risk, however. Human Rights Watch estimates that the Uzbek government has jailed approximately seven thousand people for what it deems illegal religious activities.<sup>22</sup> A large portion of those in prison are members of the radical Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), an Islamist group banned for its extremist ideas not only in Central Asian states but in Germany and Turkey as well.<sup>23</sup> Though having no evidence of HT involvement in terrorist attacks, the U.S. government similarly sees the organization as a destabilizing force in Central Asia and the Middle East. More specifically, the U.S. Department of State has faulted HT for encouraging "Muslims to travel to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight Coalition forces."<sup>24</sup> Many of those imprisoned in Uzbekistan, however, are neither HT members nor militant Islamists; rather, they are independent Islamic leaders whom the government, in an effort to limit challenges to its legitimacy, has strategically labeled as extremists. Importantly, though, beyond the knowledge that a growing number of imams have been imprisoned, Western analysts know comparatively little regarding Uzbekistan's independent Islamic leaders. Why, for example, do these religious leaders choose not to conform to the state-controlled Muslim Spiritual Board? What makes for an independent Islamic leader in the eyes of Uzbek society? Why do some Uzbek imams pursue goals that invariably invite unwanted attention from security services? Data gathered through focus groups and interviews with Islamic leaders themselves will help to address these questions.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Independent and dependent Uzbek imams were identified through the help of focus groups conducted in August and November 2004. These focus groups were held in the Ferghana Valley cities of Andijan, Namangan, and Quqon, as well as in Tashkent (the country capital) and the southern city of Qarshi. Though not a random sample of the Uzbek population, the focus

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<sup>21</sup> Author's focus groups conducted in August 2004 in Andijan, and November 2004 in Quqon.

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> HT is outlawed in Turkey and Central Asian states because the group seeks to replace secular governments with an Islamic caliphate. HT is also banned in Germany due to its anti-Semitic propaganda.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*, Washington, D.C., April 2005, 47.

groups did nevertheless capture a cross section of Uzbekistan's "active" Muslim population—those Uzbeks who are interested in topics relating to Islam, but not necessarily those who are themselves devout Muslims.

My central goal in the focus groups was to discover what Uzbeks perceive as the qualities of a respected Islamic leader. In order to contextualize this question within perceptions of Islam more broadly, I also asked for respondents' attitudes toward such topics as *sharia* law, politics and Islam, women and Islam, education, and religion. Perceptions of what makes for a respected Islamic leader varied little according to the answers given to these supplemental questions. Among all but one focus group, independence and knowledge of the Quran were what was most valued in an imam. The Uzbeks with whom I spoke preferred that their religious leaders not engage in politics, be it the politics of the state or of the opposition.

Human rights activists helped in arranging focus groups in Namangan, Andijan, and Qarshi. In addition to two local human rights defenders, the Namangan group also included three members of the city's "unofficial clergy"—Islamic scholars and imams who study and teach independently without the accreditation of Uzbekistan's muftiate. The Namangan respondents were the most anti-Karimov of all the Uzbeks with whom I spoke. All members had grievances against the government. One respondent, for example, stated that he had been falsely charged with drug possession. Another claimed that he had lost his job as a truck driver for a state-owned company because he refused to shave his beard. A third expressed frustration at the refusal of his local mahalla to subsidize the funeral of a young acquaintance who died in police custody after being charged with Islamic extremism. The Namangan group was uniform in asserting that imams must be independent if they are to be influential. The group underscored, however, that finding such independent imams was difficult; the Karimov leadership, they explained, had systematically replaced older clergy with new, younger imams. These interviewees emphasized that the younger imams, though less knowledgeable, are considerably easier for the Uzbek government to control.

The Andijan respondents were the most diverse of the five focus groups. One member of the nine-person group, an HT activist in his mid-twenties, quickly became frustrated with the others and left a mere fifteen minutes into the discussion (I met individually with him the following day). In addition to the HT activist, respondents included a human rights activist, a schoolteacher who had studied Islam for several years in the Middle East, two journalists, and two Islamic teachers from neighboring villages. Similar to the Namangan group, the Andijan cohort lamented the lack of "authoritative" Islamic lead-

ers. Several in the group, however, distinguished between official and unofficial leaders, emphasizing that the unofficial clergy and *aksakals* (elders) are both knowledgeable and free from government control. Others, most notably the HT member, disagreed, and asserted that the *aksakals* were ignorant and that many among the unofficial clergy were, in reality, controlled by government imams.

The most candid and, in many respects, the most helpful respondents were those in Quqon and Qarshi. I met with the eight-member Quqon group during *gap*, the weekly Saturday evening talk session during which classmates from the same cohort gather to share news and advice. Several members of these talk sessions recalled police visits to their homes and intimidation both as early as in the 1990s and, more recently, following the March 2004 bombings in Tashkent. They attributed this intimidation to their association with Muhammed Rajab, Quqon's charismatic and independent head imam whom the government jailed in 1994. Despite their shared hardships, however, the Quqon focus group was considerably more sanguine than their Namangan and Andijan counterparts concerning the potential for knowledgeable, independent Islamic leaders. This optimism was in large part due to their assertion that, despite Rajab's imprisonment, other independent imams in and around Quqon continue to preach.<sup>25</sup>

The Qarshi group, which consisted of eight women, was less optimistic. They invited me to meet with them to discuss the recent imprisonment of their local imam, Rustam Klichev, along with the imprisonment of many of their husbands. Understandably, in contrast to the Quqon group, the Qarshi women questioned the future of independent Islam in Uzbekistan.

The fifth focus group consisted of five students enrolled at Tashkent State Islamic University (TSIU). Unlike respondents in other focus groups, the Tashkent students were reticent to discuss state relations with Islam, despite the focus group interview being conducted not at the university but in a student apartment. Though all five students attended TSIU, only one sought to become an imam (and even this student declined to discuss the Karimov regime's policy toward religion). After his friends had left the apartment, the future imam asked me about my work in Qarshi. He was from that city and was visibly distressed when I mentioned the Klichev case. He and Klichev, he explained, were acquaintances; there was nothing in Klichev's behavior,

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<sup>25</sup> The explanation as to why Quqon has more independent imams than other regions is not immediately clear. I hope to answer this puzzle in future research.

the student puzzled, that suggested the young imam had sympathized with extremist groups such as HT.

### CASE STUDIES ON INDEPENDENT IMAMS

This section examines the Klichev case and presents case studies of the two other imams that focus groups noted as being independent or formerly independent. These case studies draw on interviews with the imams—except for Rustam Klichev, who is currently in jail—as well as the impressions of focus group respondents themselves. Though confirming that Uzbekistan’s imams and their followers face considerable pressure, these studies also reveal the limits of Tashkent’s influence. Although perhaps having a monopoly on political control, the Karimov government is markedly less influential when it comes to Uzbekistan’s Islamic elite. Religious leaders face different incentive structures than do their political counterparts, and it is these incentive structures—as much society-driven as they are state-manipulated—that ensure the continued future of independent Islam in Uzbekistan.

#### *Mohammad Sodik Mohammad Yusuf*

Studies of Islamic elites often emphasize the role that the political opposition plays in the construction of popular religious leadership.<sup>26</sup> Of the three imams examined in this study only one, Mohammad Sodik Mohammad Yusuf, can be associated with the Uzbek opposition (and even in Sodik’s case, this association is largely involuntary). Rather, focus groups suggest that, for the most part, Uzbeks prefer their Islamic leaders to be independent of all politics and to be beholden neither to the government nor to the opposition. Focus group respondents preferred that religious leaders ideally refrain from all politics and instead devote their attention to religion and religious instruction.

To some extent, these misgivings toward political imams stem from Uzbek society’s dissatisfaction with the changing roles that Uzbekistan’s most prominent Islamic leader, Mohammad Sodik, has played in national politics. In the years immediately following the Soviet collapse, Sodik was championed by his supporters as an alternative to President Karimov’s authoritarian rule.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); William B. Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria’s Transition from Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998); and Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

By 2000, however, to the dismay of much of Uzbekistan's Muslim population, Mohammad Sodik could be heard on television and the radio supporting Islam Karimov's presidential election bid.

Despite his continued support for the president, Mohammad Sodik nevertheless remains Uzbekistan's most prominent Islamic figure. Indeed, when I asked focus groups to identify national-level Islamic leaders whom they respected, his was the only name that emerged with any frequency.<sup>27</sup> Sodik, though seen as partially co-opted by the Karimov regime, nevertheless remains popular and, in several important respects, independent.

Following the Soviet collapse, Sodik's avoidance of the Islamist opposition and his current support for Karimov is likely as much a strategy for survival as it is the product of political ambition. As Uzbekistan's most prominent and popular Islamic leader at the time of the Soviet collapse, Sodik was seen as a natural leader by Islamists. He had served as Central Asia's mufti and director of SADUM from 1989 to 1991 and, during this tenure, won widespread praise for his efforts to bridge the differences between Central Asia's Islamic elites.<sup>28</sup> Even after the Soviet collapse in 1991, Sodik continued to press for unity among the region's religious leaders.<sup>29</sup> While Sodik pressed for regional cooperation, many of those with whom he was negotiating were, however, pressing their own agendas—agendas that often challenged the continued rule of Soviet-era political elites.

In 1992 Tajikistan's mufti, Qazi Akbar Turajonzoda, broke with the Dushanbe government and sided with the paramilitary Islamic Rebirth Party in Tajikistan's increasingly bloody civil war. Turajonzoda's decision, though not supported by Sodik, nevertheless demonstrated to Central Asia's rulers, and in particular to President Karimov, the real challenges that Islamist opposition posed to their continued authoritarian rule. Sodik, for his part, attempted to distance himself from Turajonzoda, stating that he had repeatedly warned the Tajik mufti not to take sides in the civil war.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Sodik added that he, unlike his Tajik counterpart, had no political ambitions and shared "nothing in common with the Islamic Rebirth Party."<sup>31</sup> Despite the mufti's public disavowals, or perhaps seeing in these statements a strategy for the mufti

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<sup>27</sup> The name of Uzbekistan's current mufti, Abdurashid Bahromov, was also frequently mentioned, but never in a positive light.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the collapse of SADUM, see Babajanov, "Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Board," 55–69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Interfax, "Leader of Central Asian Muslims Condemns Turanjonzoda Involvement in Conflict, January 27, 1993," in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, January 29, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

to avoid government suspicion, many Muslims in Uzbekistan continued to champion Sodik as an attractive alternative to Karimov's continued patronage-based authoritarian rule.

In September 1991, for example, angry demonstrators in Quqon hoisted signs calling for the resignation of Islam Karimov and for Sodik to become president.<sup>32</sup> Three months later, in nearby Namangan, protestors detained Islam Karimov and refused to free the Uzbek president until he agreed to hold a parliamentary debate on the merits of Islamic rule.<sup>33</sup> In Namangan Islam Karimov saw firsthand that his administrative power had collapsed. Members of the religious group Adolat (Justice) had wrestled security powers from the local police, and began to extend *sharia* law to the city's 300,000 residents.<sup>34</sup> Karimov's own appointees were powerless as Adolat members, calling for sharia, began to tear away at the foundations of Uzbekistan's clientalistic state. For the Adolat activists, Mohammad Sodik—whether he intended this or not—was a powerful symbol: he was a local figure with a nationwide reputation who was, most importantly, a potential ally in their fight against continued *nomenklatura* rule. To the Uzbek president, Sodik was a threat, a rival with proven charismatic legitimacy.

Though Sodik may have sympathized with the discontent of the protestors in Quqon and Namangan, it is unclear if he himself desired political power. Sodik had built his career in the religious hierarchy, rising to the chairmanship of the Muslim Spiritual Board by maintaining good relations with Uzbekistan's secular elite. Sodik, at least in public statements following the Soviet collapse, expressed a desire to maintain this status quo. In a 1992 interview, for example, Sodik told reporters that it was the Turkish—and not a theocratic—model that should guide Uzbekistan's post-Soviet political transition:

The Turkish path of development with secular power, economic reforms, Muslim religion and, certainly, the existence of any other confessions is close to us. The republican government shares our view.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Uzbekistan Muslims Demonstrate Against Communist Leadership," Russian television program airing at 1700 GMT, September 22, 1991, in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, September 24, 1991.

<sup>33</sup> Uran Botobekov, "Situatsia v Ferganskoidoline religioznyi ekstremizm" [The State of Religious Extremism in the Fergana Valley], in *The Multidimensional Borders of Central Asia*, ed. Olcott and Malashenko, 48.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Kremlin International News Broadcast, "Interview with Mufti Mukhammad-Yusuf Mukhammad-Sedik, Head of the Central Asian Theological Moslem Board," *Federal Information Systems Corporation*, January 9, 1992.

Mohammad Sodik's press releases, however, did not allay the president's concerns. Karimov, like all Central Asian rulers, has a record of identifying threats—in particular Islamist threats—where in all likelihood none exist. In August 1997, for instance, Karimov recalled two thousand Uzbek students from Turkey on the grounds that they had been exposed to radical Islamist groups while attending university.<sup>36</sup> Any associations, voluntary or involuntary, with Islamist groups—and Sodik had many—was suspect in Karimov's mind.

In 1993 Sodik left Uzbekistan for Libya, ostensibly to pursue research and writing but also to escape growing pressure from the government.<sup>37</sup> The Karimov regime had accused Sodik of being an Islamic extremist, and he was suspected of harboring radical leanings that stemmed from a relationship with Akbar Turajonzoda, the former Tajik mufti and a subsequent supporter of the militant Islamic Renaissance Party.<sup>38</sup> Oddly, eight years later the Karimov government reversed its position and called Sodik home, this time to fight extremism. Sodik returned to Uzbekistan briefly in 2000 and then permanently in 2001. Sodik explained he returned because Uzbekistan's Muslims wanted him home.<sup>39</sup> While there indeed was continuing widespread popular support for the former mufti, it was not only Uzbek society that wished to see Mohammad Sodik back in Tashkent.

The Uzbek government also saw benefits in having the popular former mufti in Tashkent. In the years since Sodik's departure, radical Islam had grown steadily. In February 1999, the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) detonated six bombs in Tashkent in an assassination attempt against the president, and in the summer of 1999 and 2000 initiated armed incursions across the Kyrgyz and Tajik borders into eastern Uzbekistan. IMU activities have decreased in recent years, a phenomena that some attribute to the death of the group's leader, Juma Namangani, in November 2001. Other groups, however—most notably Hizb ut-Tahrir—continue to challenge the Karimov regime. In one of its pamphlets, for example, HT instructs Uzbeks not to “bow down your heads to the arrogant, tyrant ruler.”<sup>40</sup> Who better to counter these challenges than the popular former mufti?

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<sup>36</sup> “Uzbek Students Withdrawn from Turkey,” *Hurriyet*, August 25, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Author's interview with Sodik.

<sup>38</sup> Alexei Malashenko, “Islam in Central Asia,” in *Central Asian Security: The New International Conflict*, ed. Roy Allison and Lena Jonson (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), 52.

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Sodik, August 17, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> “The Practices of the Rulers of Uzbekistan,” April 20, 1999 ~ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/leaflets/april2099.htm>.

There is actually no concrete evidence of such a deal between Sodik and Karimov. Despite this, respondents in the focus groups I conducted throughout Uzbekistan see the former mufti's public statements in support of President Karimov and against radical Islam as a clear indication that Sodik has traded a measure of independence for the right to return to Uzbekistan. For example, speaking to television reporters during a trip to his hometown Andijan just prior to the January 2000 presidential elections, Sodik instructed his Ferghana Valley compatriots:

The candidates are known ... The people's trusted son who has done so much for our people and cares for them, namely Islam Karimov, is one of the candidates ... God willing, a majority of people, all, will vote for him ... I pray to God that our people stay well on election day and that they will reelect the man they love to the post of head of state.<sup>41</sup>

Following the elections in February, Sodik appeared on television alongside the president and pledged that he was "determined to work with Karimov."<sup>42</sup> Sodik has remained true to this pledge. He has been an outspoken critic of Islamist extremism, regularly using his weekly radio broadcasts to denounce the "radical and violent ideas" of HT and the IMU. At the same time, Sodik has also championed what he stresses are the moderate values of Uzbekistan's *Hanafi* school of Islam.<sup>43</sup>

To dismiss Sodik as a puppet of the Karimov regime, however, would be a mistake. As he did prior to his departure in 1993, Sodik continues to fault the government for placing onerous restrictions upon Islamic education. There exist few opportunities to study moderate Islam, and trained scholars are cowed by threats of imprisonment should they conduct classes without "permission from a corresponding central administration body."<sup>44</sup> Sodik thus believes it is only natural that some Uzbeks might turn to extremist groups willing to operate outside the law:

People who want to learn Islam have no possibility to do that in an easy, correct and free way. That's why Hizb ut-Tahrir and other

<sup>41</sup> "Visit to Uzbekistan of Exiled Mufti," Eurasianet.org, January 2000 ~ [http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/uzbekistan/press\\_digest/digest2.1.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/uzbekistan/press_digest/digest2.1.shtml).

<sup>42</sup> Yury Mashin, "Uzbekistan po etapno idet k demokratii (Uzhe mozhno smotret' televizor)" [Step by Step Uzbekistan Moves Toward Democracy (Uzbeks Can Even Watch Television Now)], *Kommerstant*, February 1, 2000, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Sodik has weekly radio shows on the Uzbek station Narooz, and on the Uzbek language broadcasts of the BBC and Radio Freedom (author's interview with Sodik). The Sodik quotes are from Charles Recknagel and Zamira Eshanova, "U.S.: 11 September—Muslims Debate Fundamentalism In Wake Of Attacks (Part 5)," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 6, 2002 ~ <http://www.rferl.org/features/2002/09/06092002190208.asp>.

<sup>44</sup> See Article 9 of the 1998 law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations."



radical groups have had a chance to spread their radical and violent ideas by illegal and secretive ways and to introduce their ideas to ordinary people as true Islam. *To stop this process, Islamic education should be put on the right track.*<sup>45</sup> [emphasis added]

Sodik, however, holds few delusions that the government will lift restrictions and allow Uzbekistan's imams to expand Islamic instruction. The Karimov government, Sodik notes, has promised to "fight ideas with ideas."<sup>46</sup> By maintaining controls over the moderate Islamic leadership, however, the government has instead allowed radical ideas to go unchecked. Had the Uzbek government "really done what it said it would," Sodik reasoned in a 2002 interview, "we would not have the Hizb ut-Tahrir."<sup>47</sup>

Revealingly, Sodik believes that, "to be an imam in Uzbekistan today is to be dependent on and controlled by the government."<sup>48</sup> Though Uzbeks in my focus groups disagreed with this statement, maintaining instead that there were indeed independent imams, Sodik's observation may be correct as a self-assessment. The former mufti, once an attractive alternative to Karimov, is now perceived as having been partially co-opted by the presidential political machine. Indeed, as one member of the Andijan focus group observed, Sodik is now a "servant of the government." A respondent in Qarshi expressed similar sentiments, labeling Sodik as "Karimov's man." An Andijan schoolteacher added, in frustration, that "there are more religious prisoners in jail now than there are criminals, yet Sodik does nothing about this, he doesn't protest against the government."

Others, however, were forgiving and pragmatic. They regretted the mufti's close ties with Karimov, but at the same time acknowledged that Sodik had little alternative but to compromise with the president. A respondent in Namangan asked rhetorically: "What, in reality, can Mohammad Sodik Mohammad Yusuf possibly do?" One member of the Andijan focus group added that "Mohammad Sodik is a bird locked in a cage; it is to be expected that, perched next to the president in Tashkent, Sodik will repeat those phrases that are constantly shouted at him."

Sodik's cage is as much his prominence as it is his location. Authoritarian rulers do not welcome competition; as Sodik's case demonstrates, they re-

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<sup>45</sup> Recknagel and Eshanova, "Muslims Debate Fundamentalism."

<sup>46</sup> G. Bukharbaeva, "Byvshii mufti Uzbekistana—o religioznoi zhizni v strane" [The Former Mufti of Uzbekistan—About Religious Life in the Country], *Institute for War and Peace Reporting* (IWPR), November 8, 2002 ~ <http://www.fergana.ru/4printer.php?id=712>.

<sup>47</sup> Bukharbaeva, "The Former Mufti of Uzbekistan."

<sup>48</sup> Author's interview with Sodik.

press, exile, or co-opt those they perceive to be a challenge.<sup>49</sup> In 1993, the Uzbek government chose coercion, using charges of Islamist extremism to chase Sodik out of the country. In more recent years, Karimov has pursued a strategy of co-optation. Sodik, in return for being allowed to return to Tashkent, lent his name to Karimov's re-election campaign as well as to the president's crusade against HT and the IMU. This exchange, at least in the eyes of some Uzbeks, has not been in Sodik's favor. The mufti, once the icon of the Islamist opposition, is now seen as a partial client of the Karimov state.

*Rustam Klichev—Former Head Imam of Navo Mosque, Qarshi*

Mohammad Sodik's national prominence has been both an impediment and an asset. His visibility made him an early symbol of the Islamist opposition and a perceived threat to the Karimov regime. At the same time, Sodik's widespread popularity likely protected him from more severe forms of repression. Not all Islamic leaders, as Qarshi imam Rustam Klichev's case clearly demonstrates, have enjoyed such protection.

Rustam Klichev is popular today for many of the same reasons that Mohammad Sodik was popular in the early 1990s. Imam Klichev, his supporters emphasize, is intelligent and devoted to teaching Islam. Most importantly, Klichev—much like Sodik in the early 1990s—does not engage in politics. Unlike other local imams, Klichev does not sing the praises of the Karimov government during Friday prayer.

Klichev was arrested in April 2004. Six months later he was sentenced to fourteen years in prison. Klichev was found guilty of attempting to undermine the constitutional order, establishing a militant Islamist organization, and plotting to bomb the Khanabad airbase, a U.S. installation adjacent to Qarshi and home to one thousand U.S. military personnel.<sup>50</sup> I spoke with Klichev's supporters both prior to and after the imam's October 20 sentencing. The imam's backers insisted that the government's charges were fabricated. Klichev was not an extremist and had neither the skill nor the desire to bomb the nearby U.S. airbase.<sup>51</sup>

Klichev was, however, an admired imam. The 29-year-old imam, despite his youth, is the leading local authority on Islam. He won a regional Quran

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<sup>49</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 223.

<sup>50</sup> Author's interviews with Imam Klichev's supporters, August and November 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Three cordons of Uzbek and U.S. troops secure the Khanabad base.

knowledge competition in 2002.<sup>52</sup> He is fluent in Arabic. In contrast to Qarshi's head imam, Klichev wrote his own sermons rather than simply adapting the notes that the Muslim Spiritual Board in Tashkent sends all imams for Friday prayers.<sup>53</sup> Klichev insisted on independence, his followers maintain, not because he opposed the government but rather because he wanted Islam to speak to the local challenges—unemployment, poverty, illness—that people in Qarshi faced. Klichev, by all accounts, found a wide audience. Three thousand people regularly attended Klichev's Friday sermons. His followers—from Qarshi and beyond—were both more numerous and considerably younger than those of other imams in the region. It was this growing cohort of devoted young believers, local human rights defenders told me, that alarmed the regional and central government authorities.

Other aspects of Klichev's practices and training likely troubled the government as well. Klichev, though far from being a radical, was not the pliable imam that the Uzbek government prefers to install in its mosques. At first glance, Klichev's Islamic education appears unremarkable. Like most young Uzbeks who seek to become an imam, Klichev enrolled in a state-run madrassa.<sup>54</sup> After graduating from the madrassa, Klichev considered attending Tashkent Islamic University (TIU), the state's flagship institution for preparing religious elites and, oddly enough, computer programmers and business managers.<sup>55</sup> Klichev, unimpressed with the combination of religious and secular education at TIU, decided instead to intern as a deputy imam in Qarshi. In 2000, after a one-year apprenticeship, Klichev was appointed head imam of Qarshi's new Navo Mosque, a mahalla mosque designed to serve residents of Qarshi's sixth micro region. Word of Klichev's knowledge and sermons spread quickly, and by 2002 the young imam's neighborhood mosque had become the regional center of the Islamic community, drawing worshippers from as far away as Samarqand and Bukhara.

Just as Klichev's growing number of supporters would later draw unwanted government attention, so too would his contacts abroad eventually raise government suspicion. Klichev made the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) in 2002. During his travels, Klichev's supporters explained, the young imam was befriended by several Saudis. In addition to supplying Klichev with Islamic

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<sup>52</sup> Author's focus group, August 2004, and author's discussions with human rights activists.

<sup>53</sup> Qarshi's head imam, Ismail Raikhanov, described the Spiritual Board's prepared notes for Friday prayer as a "great help ... They draw from multiple sources and scholarly works ... I would not be able to write such a sermon alone." Author's interview with Ismail Raikhanov, Qarshi, November 24, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Klichev attended the Kitab madrassa, one hundred kilometers northeast of Qarshi.

<sup>55</sup> Author's interviews with students at Tashkent Islamic University, August and November 2004.

texts, these Saudis helped Klichev financially. Though Saudi support of Uzbek mosques and imams had been commonplace during the years immediately following the Soviet collapse, most Uzbek imams stopped accepting private Saudi money in the late 1990s. Rakhmatulla qori Obidov, for example, one of Tashkent's most prominent imams, acknowledged that in the early nineties Saudi donors had given \$1 million to support the construction of his Kokcha Mosque. Obidov emphasized that today, however, the mosque operates only with the funds of its congregation.<sup>56</sup> Obidov's desire to distance himself from Saudi money is understandable. Wealthy members of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi sect, which adheres to a strict, fundamentalist version of Islam, have actively funded the IMU and HT, the two groups that are most actively contesting Karimov's rule.<sup>57</sup> Klichev, in contrast to his Tashkent counterpart Sodik, maintained his Saudi contacts despite these associations. Qarshi human rights activists claim that the government exploited these Saudi ties in its prosecution of Klichev. Indeed, few were surprised when police declared that they found a Wahhabi leaflet while searching the popular imam's house.<sup>58</sup>

Rustam Klichev's popularity, despite these charges of extremism, remains high in Qarshi. Outside of southern Uzbekistan, however, few know of Klichev and his recent imprisonment. In August 2004 Mohammad Sodik told me that he had not heard of Klichev. Indeed, it is likely that this lack of a national profile was what made Klichev, like other independent local imams, expendable in the eyes of the Tashkent government. In the eyes of his supporters, Klichev—in contrast to Mohammad Sodik—has not bargained with the government and thus remains uncompromised. In addition to Klichev, there are other imams at the local level who likewise believe Uzbekistan's mosques should not be instruments of government propaganda.

Klichev's case raises important questions: why do these local imams persist in maintaining their independence? Why not follow Sodik's strategy of compromise and avoid government persecution? As I learned in my discussions with an independent imam in Quqon who, fortunately, has not been repressed by the government, many imams choose a strategy of compromise. For others like himself, the imam suggested, submitting to government threats would be worse than going to prison.

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<sup>56</sup> Author's interview with Rakhmatulla qori Obidov, Tashkent, November 17, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Asking For Holy War," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 9, 2000, 28–29.

<sup>58</sup> Author's interview with Qarshi human rights activists, November 2004.

### *An Independent Quqon Imam*

I attended one of the imam's Friday prayers in late November. Despite poor weather, hundreds had come to hear the sermon. The central prayer hall where I sat was filled to capacity; outside the mosque hundreds more endured the rain and cold to hear the imam speak. In many respects, the imam's sermon was unremarkable. There was no expression of distaste at the current regime, and no call to resist Karimov's authoritarian rule. Rather, similar to imams' sermons I had heard in U.S. mosques, the Qoqon imam counseled the congregants as to how they might apply the principles of the Quran to challenges encountered in everyday life.

I spoke with the imam following his sermon and asked for his thoughts as to why some imams prove more popular than others. In many ways his answer paralleled those I had received in focus groups throughout the Ferghana Valley, Tashkent, and Qarshi. His answer, moreover, suggested what was so different about his seemingly normal sermon. He concluded that "some imams are too radical whereas others are clearly government imams ... in fact, some imams do not speak of anything other than the government." The imam underscored the fact that, while few Uzbeks want their religious leaders to be government figureheads, neither do they want their Islamic leaders to be extremists or oppositionists. Abstaining from politics, however, does not in and of itself make for influential leadership. Not all Uzbek imams, he lamented, have sufficient knowledge and charisma to deter their followers from the attractions of fundamentalism.

This imam is well aware of the risks that popular and independent Islamic leaders face in Uzbekistan. Several respondents in my Quqon focus group likened him to Muhammed Rajab, the city's charismatic head imam whom the government jailed on charges of extremism in 1994. This flattering and troubling comparison has not been lost on him. He knows his position is tenuous and, understandably, he concluded our discussion by requesting that he not be identified by name in any publications.

### CONCLUSION

When asked why he continues his work despite government threats, the Quqon imam responded that he has no choice and that a good imam can only fear Allah. If the small number of independent Islamic leaders is any indication, the imam's explanation would likely seem foolhardy to most Uzbek imams. The majority of religious elites in Uzbekistan accept a different reality;

though they may sympathize with leaders like Klichev and this imam, they understand that the Karimov government, through both control of the Muslim Spiritual Board and through coercion, can dictate and define the practice of Islam in Uzbekistan. This control, however, remains incomplete. Not all imams respond to the same incentives that have worked so well in ordering Uzbek politics. Religious beliefs often trump coercion and the promise of material rewards.

Such beliefs, moreover, are further reinforced by the relationship that independent imams have with society. Uzbek religious elites, in contrast to political elites, must be responsive to their constituencies. Whereas the average Uzbek has little recourse if he dislikes his local government administrators, he is free to choose his religious leaders. Should he dislike one imam, he can travel to the next district or the next city to seek spiritual guidance from another imam. Thus, in contrast to Uzbekistan's political elite, who respond almost exclusively to government incentives, Uzbekistan's religious leaders must balance government directives from above with society's demands from below. In short, in Uzbekistan there is a market for independent Islamic leaders but no such demand for independent political leaders.

While it may not be possible to assess how many independent Islamic leaders there are in Uzbekistan, this study demonstrates that such leaders do exist, why they are popular, and why, in contrast to their political counterparts, they cannot readily be controlled by patronage politics and coercion. Moreover, though rarely holding political ambitions, these independent Islamic elites will certainly continue to shape Uzbek politics. Their independence undermines the image of government control and their imprisonment erodes the façade of state legitimacy. These may be challenges that the Karimov regime can continue to overcome, but they are not challenges that will soon disappear.