

## Analysis

# Islam and the State in Russia

By Aleksei Malashenko, Moscow

### Abstract

In dealing with Islam, Putin has sought to ensure that Muslims remain loyal to the state and suppressed any political opposition that appears in religious form. In Muslim-majority regions, local leaders often promote Islamic traditions and use the association with their religion to bolster their authority in the political sphere. The federal authorities often support the use of tradition as a way of promoting stability in the usually volatile North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the authorities seek to exert tight control over what they perceive as an Islamist opposition. Often the federal authorities use harsh methods to crack down on the Islamists, provoking anger in the Muslim community. Traditional forms of Islam are now becoming politicized, giving Muslims a new identity which is gradually cutting off the North Caucasus from the rest of Russia. With its focus on political loyalty, the Kremlin has overlooked this development.

### The State's Approach toward Islam

In post-Soviet Russia, the authorities made it a priority to establish control over Islam. In practice, this control entails:

- Demanding that the Muslims remain loyal to the state;
- Subordinating the Muslim leadership to the state;
- Exerting oversight over the activities of religious and political-religious organizations, including religious educational organizations, and
- Monitoring foreign contacts with the goal of countering their internal influence.

What kind of model has the Russian state established in its relations with Islam? Does it function as a director, architect, defender, engineer, or partner? I think that mainly the state functions as an architect and then, once the building is in place, becomes a director, not only conducting the "Muslim musicians," but Russia's entire multi-confessional orchestra.

While remaining an architect and director, the state also maintains partner-like relations with Islam. Russian Minister for Nationalities Policy Vladimir Zorin has positioned himself as a "supporter of active interrelations between the state and religious organizations." In fact there are spheres where partnership between the state and Muslim structures can be extremely useful. In particular, in combating the drug trade, helping those infected with HIV, and saving homeless children. Cooperation in the penitentiary system is also taking shape. There is also interest in legally regulating the entrepreneurial activity of charitable organizations. Likewise, the state and religious organizations also have to agree on suitable land taxes.

Like his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin also thought about how to build relations with the Muslims. Having established authoritarian methods

of leadership in the country, for a while he was attracted to the idea of setting up an "Islamic vertical of power" with a single organizational center and head. Putin's approach includes strong parallels to the way that the Russian empire dealt with Islam, when the authorities tried to set up something like a "Russian Islamic Church." At the same time, the state categorically rejects the legal existence of the Islamic opposition and mercilessly suppresses any appearance of political protest in religious form.

### Relations with the Muslim Regions

There are three types of Russian regions defined according to their relationship with Islam: regions in which Muslims constitute the majority; regions in which they are compact, but significant, minorities; and those where there are relatively few Muslims. The following discussion will focus on Muslim majority regions, particularly in the North Caucasus.

In the North Caucasus and the Muslim regions of the Volga, particularly the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, decisions adopted at the regional level and the implementation of decisions made in the center must be carried out while taking into account the specific features of the indigenous populations' religious mentality. One should not exaggerate the significance of these religious feelings, but ignoring them is not wise.

In the Muslim regions, the regional leadership must inevitably appeal to Islam because of the traditions of society and the authorities' need for additional religious legitimacy. Islam is particularly important when public officials have no other way to build their own authority.

Naturally, there are differences among the Muslim republics. In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, the secular authorities freely manipulate Islam and control the religious situation. In contrast, the authorities in Dagestan,

Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria need Islam as an ally. It is simply impossible for them to subordinate Islam. In the Volga, the regional authorities are in complete solidarity with the federal authorities. In the North Caucasus, the regional authorities, as a part of traditional society, correlate their behavior with tradition.

In the North Caucasus, traditional forms of behavior can take the most varied forms – from enthusiastic participation in religious holidays, periodic vows of fidelity to Islam, to the use of “Islamic levers” in political battle, and a search for support from all stripes of religious forces, including the most radical.

In this manner, while acting as the bearers of secular values (the constitution declares that the state and religion are separate), regional politicians behave essentially as religious authorities. For example, in several republics, Friday has effectively become a non-working day. The Muslim celebration of Kurban-Bairam, held during the hajj, has become an official holiday. In 2005, Ingushetia adopted an order outlawing the sale of alcoholic and tobacco products in public places during fasts and feast days.

Additional proposals have gone farther. Former Ingushetia President Ruslan Aushev, who was in office 1993–2001, and Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov are lobbying for the legalization of polygamy. This question has also been raised in the parliaments of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. The motivation for the proposal is largely pragmatic – the lack of young men in the area.

Kadyrov has recommended that female public servants, journalists, and students wear headscarves. (At the reception honoring Kadyrov's ascension to the post of republican prime minister, the former republican prime minister Sergei Abramov asked his Russian wife to wear a scarf.) At Chechen State University, Kadyrov gave nine female students wearing scarves \$1,000 each. In 2006, he dispensed \$1,500 per person to a large number of the men participating in the hajj. The Russian-backed Chechen president has also suggested teaching Islam in schools.

“Islam and Sharia law are the most beautiful and clean that can exist in religion,” according to Kadyrov. As the head of the republic, he says that he is accountable to God. According to Ruslan Yamadaev, an influential Chechen opposition politician, “there is an informal ‘morals police’ in the republic and Kadyrov wants to introduce Sharia law.” The Kremlin is concerned about Kadyrov’s devotion to Islam, considering that it is a small step from Islam to separatism.

## Using Tradition for Political Purposes

With the active support of the authorities in the North Caucasus, a process of traditionalizing societies is under way. These changes include incorporating Islam

into the sphere of administrative activities and defining day-to-day conduct. There are Sharia courts operating in Ingushetia, including a republican-level court which has been in operation since 1999. Since 2001, however, the court has operated as a consultative organ, rather than a legal one, and only has jurisdiction over individuals, but not legal entities. During the last two years, it heard one thousand cases and 90 percent of the people who appealed to the court were satisfied with its decisions. Sharia courts also operate in Dagestan, but there they are concentrated in Wahhabi communities.

In regions with Muslim majorities, local laws must take into account the beliefs of the population and at least partially restore Islam as a regulator of relations in society. Tatarstan’s constitution provides “expanded rights to believers employed in enterprises and organizations, where they have the opportunity to carry out religious rites during the working day. Religious organizations have the right to create a special network of enterprises and institutions to provide services to believers in accordance with canonical requirements.” Examples include the establishment of halal meat shops or the participation of medical personnel in circumcision ceremonies. Similar provisions exist in the legislation of the North Caucasus republics. Islamic tradition is one of the real sources of the law, but also a way of guaranteeing the legitimacy of the law.

Federal officials accept the inclination of local politicians toward traditionalizing society. In 2006, the Russian Federation Social Chamber Commission on Issues of Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience supported initiatives to revive traditional institutions in the North Caucasus in order to use them to stabilize and even modernize society.

Supporting traditional practices has serious downsides for the authorities since doing so means the introduction of traditional practices into areas that are directly controlled by the authorities. What is permitted and not permitted depends on the opinion of the authorities and, of course, their relationship to spirituality.

During the time of President Valerii Kokov’s rule in Kabardino-Balkaria, the authorities fired imams and other elected religious leaders and transferred ownership of some mosques (such as those in the village of Chegem) to the secular authorities. There was a well-known case in which law enforcement authorities interrogated female students for reading the Koran in a university auditorium. In 2006, the police in Adygeya did not allow the faithful into several mosques where imams who had fallen out of favor with the authorities were delivering sermons. In several parts of the North Caucasus, including Stavropol Krai, the authorities refused to reregister Muslim societies, claiming that

in doing so they were fighting terrorism. Mosques in Chechnya likewise are under strict control.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) constantly keep watch over the activity of Muslim societies, looking for the presence among them of radically-minded groups and individuals, who could be connected to the Islamic opposition.

### Crackdowns on the Islamist Opposition

What does the state perceive as the Islamist (usually described as Wahhabi) opposition? Obviously, partly they are focused on Muslims who have a negative attitude toward the authorities, reject the idea of the mosque cooperating with them, and consider the only possible exit from the crisis that society is facing to be an "Islamic alternative," which requires conducting jihad. The state describes the religious opposition as fanatics, terrorists, and bandits. In fact, Islamist extremists frequently use bandit methods, while criminals use Islamist phraseology, attempting to present themselves as fighters for the faith.

However, it should not be forgotten that the separatists are not bandits and the Islamists active in the region (at least the majority of them) are ideological fighters and consider themselves to be part of an international jihad.

The authorities' actions often draw the irritation of the Muslims, who are loyal to the Russian state but are critical of the methods its uses against the Muslim opposition. Pursuing members of the religious opposition often includes storming large apartment buildings with the consequent destruction hurting both residents and people passing by. The presence of tanks and armed personnel carriers on the streets of several North Caucasus cities has become part of daily life.

As both sides gain experience in the battle against terrorism, they become more cruel. The Chechen campaign and the counter-terrorist operations in the neighboring regions corrupt the law enforcement agencies and military units because the nature of the conflict gives them a feeling that they cannot be held accountable and this feeling is ultimately transferred to the rest of society. As the conflict drags on, the latent civil war gives rise to irreconcilable differences, which will be transferred to the next generations. Psychologists believe that the situation can deform both social and individual consciousness.

The police are tough on "Islamic dissidents" in other regions outside the Caucasus as well. In several cases, the police have conducted searches in mosques and detained people there, including in Moscow. On February 27, 2004, following a bomb blast on the Moscow metro, 80 members of Nafigulla Ashirov's Istorichesky Mosque were arrested. In July 2003, after a terrorist attack in

Tushino the police issued order 12/309 to conduct operation Fatima in which they checked women who wore traditional Islamic clothing, considering these signs of devotion as criteria for identifying potential female terrorists.

In recent years, the special services have paid special attention to the ties between Tatar and Bashkir radicals and their colleagues in the North Caucasus and to the penetration of the radical organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Islamic Party of Liberation) from Central Asia. The authorities have arrested supporters of the organization in Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Kurgan, Orenburg and other cities of the south Urals and Siberia.

Attempts to prevent the rise of religious radicalism include censorship of religious materials. In the 1990s, throughout all of Russia, including in mosques and bookstores, it was possible to buy any Muslim book, including the initiators and ideologists of fundamentalism: Hassan al-Banna (founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood), Abu Ala Maududi (founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami Islamic political party), Said Khutba, Yusuf al-Qaradawi (a prominent Egyptian scholar seen on al Jazeera) and others. In 2004 Moscow's Savelov Raion Court forbid the distribution in Moscow of *The Book of the Unity of God* by Mukhamad ibn Abd al-Wahhab at-Tamimi, the spiritual leader behind the Wahhabi movement, claiming that it violated the law against promoting hatred. In June 2008, the court outlawed the printing and distribution of Ayatollah Khomeini's last will and testament.

### Some Efforts to Understand the Enemy

This simplistic and primitive approach toward Muslims who think differently takes place along with sporadic attempts to try to figure out the "enemy." Although the general line is to destroy the Wahhabis, there are other interpretations of their work, though only rarely formulated and voiced. Then Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin made one of these first analyses during a visit to Dagestan in 1998. In the village of Chabanmakhi he met with a leader of the local Wahhabis, the so-called General Mukhtar Ataev, and even presented him with a medal. On returning to Moscow, Stepashin said that the Wahhabi threat was greatly exaggerated and that it was possible to talk to them. Quickly, however, his words were repudiated and he was fired, turning over his office to Vladimir Putin. Consequently, Stepashin was accused of "consorting with the Wahhabis."

Former Presidential Representative to the Southern Federal District Dmitry Kozak spoke reasonably carefully about Wahhabism. After investigating the local situation, he admitted that eliminating the religious opposition using only repressive methods would be impossible. In 2005 his staff prepared two reports – one

about the situation in the North Caucasus and one about Dagestan, which was described as a black hole. The reports pointed out that the “corrupt elite, dirtied in the battle for power, precipitated ethnic, *religious* (my emphasis – A.M.) and social conflicts.” Kozak’s reports did not result in serious steps to change the situation. The only reaction was to increase the number of soldiers in the region.

### Seeking Political Benefits from Fighting Extremism

The battle against religious extremism has been a convenient instrument for the authorities to confirm their power since the Yeltsin era, when the president sought to increase his popularity by launching a “small victorious war” in Chechnya. Likewise in 1999, the second Chechen war, this time called a “counterterrorist operation” helped Vladimir Putin take the “throne.” In 1999 in the North Caucasus, there were many rumors suggesting that Shamil Basaev’s intervention into Dagestan, which provoked a powerful Russian response leading to his defeat, was all but planned by the special services.

The authorities used the battle with the Wahhabis to strengthen the system of government and limit democratic freedoms. Following each large-scale terrorist act, Kremlin politicians make harsh statements calling for a further tightening of the screws in the name of victory. And that is exactly what happens. The “classical” example of this policy is the cancellation of the gubernatorial elections after the 2004 Beslan terrorist acts. Putin first suggested abolishing the elections at an expanded meeting of the government on September 13, claiming that a more hierarchical political system would improve the state’s ability to fight terrorism.

Carried away with the battle against “Wahhabis” and using it as a means to achieve their own goals, the federal authorities are paying unforgivably little attention to the fact that in the North Caucasus the Islamists are not only working underground, waiting for their chance to move into action, but have long been used as a instrument in local political intrigues. This situation is typical for Dagestan, and to some degree for Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria.

### Unintended Consequences

Today there is a new tendency in the North Caucasus and to a lesser extent in Tatarstan: Traditional Islam, including Sufi Islam, is becoming politicized. The sheiks and their followers are becoming legitimate participants in the political process. In particular, they are energetically fighting to increase the role of Sharia law and to

build society on an Islamic base. In this area, their position is merging with the position of the Salafis and between these long-time competitors, there is an unexpected consensus emerging. At the same time, the “neo-traditionalists” remain loyal to the authorities and moreover are gaining their understanding and even support. In the region, the process of retraditionalization is gaining greater strength in terms of consciousness and norms of behavior. De facto, a new identity is being created (or the old conservative one is being restored), which is gradually “cutting” the North Caucasus off from the rest of Russia. However, the Kremlin does not pay attention to this trend since its top priority is political loyalty.

The result could be that while distracted with the fight against Islamists, the federal authorities fail to notice another potential opponent: the neotraditionalist instructors. And explaining the appearance of a new “Islamic force” as the result of outside interventions will no longer succeed.

Moreover, in eliminating Wahhabism, the authorities remain indifferent to innovative religious ideas. However, neglecting how these Islamic ideas develop is short-sighted and even dangerous. Ultimately, they will influence politics.

Under the current political system, the state is succeeding in preserving control over a large part of the Muslim community. However, the religious-political opposition remains intact and it is mostly concentrated in the North Caucasus.

The increasing level of authoritarianism in the political system, the lack of serious reforms in the economy, the growing gap between rich and poor, and even the unpopularity of the Muslim religious elite eventually result in the elite becoming cut off from society and a growth in the popularity of religious radicalism, which will ultimately destabilize the situation.

“Today we still do not know how to address the problems of the North Caucasus and other Mohammedan lands with agricultural overpopulation and extreme poverty,” commentator Maksim Sokolov has pointed out. At the same time, the Kremlin authorities have convinced themselves that the worst is already past. Kozak is proud that the number of terrorist attacks in his sector dropped to a quarter of their previous level (of course, it is not clear how he came up with this figure). However, in 2008 few doubt that the Islamic radicals have considerable resources at their disposal and that they, as before, are able to launch effective and damaging strikes in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and even in Chechnya.

*Translated from the Russian by Robert Orttung*

#### About the author

Aleksei Malashenko is a Scholar-in-Residence and Co-chair of the Program on Religion, Society and Security at the Carnegie Moscow Center.