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The Islamic Revival and the National Question in Post-Soviet Dagestan

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Over the last 4–5 years the institutions and values of Islam have quickly regained their former influence on the social and political life of Dagestan, which they had lost in the Soviet era. Only at the end of *perestroika* did persecution of Muslims cease, and at once the Muslim congregations (*jamaat*) at the functioning village and town mosques which had remained intact in Soviet times were legalised. From the beginning of 1990 the number of mosques grew rapidly, and new congregations together with them: from 27 in 1988 they rose to 800 by the autumn of 1992, and then to almost 5000 by the beginning of 1994. For comparison, let us note that before the 1917 Revolution there were about 1702 mosques in Dagestan.¹ From 1993 to 1994 part of the lands (*vaqf*) belonging to them before the Revolution were returned to mosques in a good dozen mountain villages (*aul*), though, it is true, not always publicly. In some places, for example in Gergebil' district, this undertaking had the support of the local administration.² Moreover, from the beginning of the 1990s, after an interval of almost 70 years, the *haj* to the holy places was renewed. With today's hyperinflation the cost is rising fast and by the summer of 1994 it had reached 800,000 roubles. Nonetheless tens of thousands of Dagestanis have performed the *haj*, some of them two or three times.

Today, as a rule, not a single important question at village assemblies or sessions of the local administration is decided without the participation of the Muslim scholars (*alim*) and imams (*dibir*), including quarrels over land, which have intensified since the fall of the Soviet regime. Teaching of the Arabic language and courses in Islamic science are openly conducted in reopened schools and *madrassah* attached to mosques. Their graduates can continue their education in Islamic institutes founded in the republic and also in Islamic universities in Turkey and Arab countries, where several hundred Dagestanis are already studying³. From autumn 1992 a course on the history of religion has been introduced in secondary schools and groups for the optional study of the Arabic language have been started, with Muslim alims admitted as lecturers.

For Dagestani politicians of different persuasions it has become a rule of accepted behaviour to advertise one's adherence to 'Islamic traditions'. The Islamic factor was actively employed by the majority of republican party blocs during campaigning for elections to the Russian parliament on 12 December 1993.⁴ In 1992 to 1994 the questions of proclaiming Islam the state religion of Dagestan, introducing compulsory courses on basics of the Koran in schools, changing the day off to Friday and compulsory slaughter of cattle and birds according to the *sharia* were raised more than

once during the debate on the new Dagestani Constitution in the republic's Supreme Soviet. R. Abdulatipov, G. Gamidov, M. Tolboyev and other representatives of the new generation of Dagestani politicians have actively supported Islamic charitable funds, helping their fellow-countrymen to perform the haj, to receive Islamic education abroad and to restore mosques and madrassahs.⁵

In this article, written on the basis of my field studies in Nagorny (Mountainous) Dagestan and materials provided by my Dagestani correspondents, I shall refer to an as yet unstudied aspect of the stormy movement for the Islamic revival of the republic. I shall try to explain what the underlying national cause of the movement is. Why has it enveloped chiefly the northern and western, the Avar-Dargin and Kumyuk districts, and barely touched the Laks of central Dagestan or the Lezgis, Tabasarans, Rutuls and other peoples of southern Dagestan?

In Soviet times the Muslims of north-west Dagestan maintained their adherence to Arabic and Islamic traditions, which had long ago become the basis of their national culture, better than other Dagestanis. Whereas in the central districts of the republic, and especially in the south, the anti-Muslim repressions under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev caused the erosion of traditional popular Islam, in the mountains and foothills in the north and west it survived, although it was driven back into isolated and inaccessible districts. From the 1930s to the 1980s the mountain-dwellers continued to live, behind the backs of the authorities, according to the laws of the Islamic faith (*din*) and the sharia. Since the haj was impossible, pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to the holy places of Mountainous Dagestan took on a special meaning⁶. In spite of the repressions the village alims did not cease to teach the Arabic language and the basics of Islamic knowledge to the children of their fellow-villagers.

The first upsurge of popular Islam, long forced to hide itself underground, occurred in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s in village congregations (*jamaat*) of mountain-dwellers who had resettled in the Terek-Sulak lowlands. From the 1950s to the 1970s more than 200,000 Muslims from the Avar-Dargin high mountain districts, where there was insufficient and low-yielding land, were resettled there. They brought with them the ancient Islamic customs and rituals of their forefathers and reverence for the holy tombs of the sheiks and descendants of the the Koreishits who had settled in Dagestan in the second century of the *Hijra* (the ninth century AD). Gradually there arose groups of young people calling themselves disciples (*murid*) of the holy sheiks of their jamaats at Kokrek, Nechayevka, Sasitli, Yasnaya Polyana and other resettled villages. Using severe measures the authorities suppressed the murid movement, throwing its activists into prisons and camps for political prisoners.⁷

By the end of the 1980s Islamic enthusiasm had again seized northern and western Dagestan. At present the majority of restored mosques and madrassahs are to be found there. According to the calculations of the sociologist and political activist Denga Khalidov, which although approximate reflect the true state of affairs, their number in the Avar-Dargin districts is 1.5–2 times greater than for the Kumyks and 3–5 times higher than in the villages of southern Dagestan.⁸ In practically every village of the north-western region there is a group of young people studying the Arabic language and the basics of Islam. In the town of Khasavyurt in 1992 I counted up to 80 of these groups, under the leadership of local imams and alims. Moreover, all five of Dagestan's Islamic institutes are concentrated in this region, one each in Makhachkala, Gergebil' and Kizlyar and the two largest in Buinaksk. It is important to note that many imams of village and town mosques on the plain are natives of the Avaro-Andi and Dargin mountain villages.

To a slightly lesser extent the Islamic revival stirred up the Kumyk jamaats on the plain and in the foothills. A number of Kumyks took part in the haj. Islamic education in the Kumyk lands is proceeding quickly. The main concentration of Muslim knowledge here, as before the 1917 Revolution, is in Buinaksk (formerly Temir-Khan-Shura). From 1991 to 1994 the majority of mosques and historic memorials of Islam in large Kumyk villages, which continued to play the role of local Islamic centres, were restored by the donations of individuals and Muslim communities. The most important of them are Endirei-Aul, Tarki and Shamkhal near Makhachkala. In particular, on 30 April 1994 another mosque with a madrassah was solemnly opened in the last of these. Leaders of religious and political movements in the republic, deputies of the Dagestani and Russian Parliaments and imams and muftis from the northern Caucasus were invited to the ceremony in Shamkhal.⁹

Alongside the national traditions of the Muslim peoples of Dagestan the heritage of Soviet times is also definitely making itself felt in the republic's Islamic revival. It was no coincidence that this movement arose in those districts where the policy of 'national consolidation' of the Muslim peoples of Dagestan was successfully carried out from the 1930s to the 1980s. As is known, it led to the merging with the Avars of 13 small Ando-Tsez peoples and Archins, who were turned into the biggest nation in Dagestan (27.5 per cent of the republic's inhabitants according to the 1989 census.)¹⁰ Kaitaks and Kubachins became Dargins, the peoples of the central plateau became Laks and the Terkemens joined the more numerous Kumyks.¹¹ In this way, Muslims of the mountain region and the plain were split into a series of large national communities vying with one another. A bitter, though for the time being hidden, struggle for leadership in the republic's party and Soviet apparat grew up between them. From the end of the 1940s the Avars were victorious.

Despite the false assurances of former Soviet leaders about 'national harmony' and the 'gradual dying away of inter-national contradictions' in the USSR, the national consolidation of the Dagestanis led to the development among the Kumyks of a complex of national grudges towards the national communities of the mountain-dwellers which the authorities had purposefully moved into their historical territory in the postwar decades. While Soviet power in the republic was strong the development of inter-national contradictions was temporarily contained. After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 the Muslims of Dagestan were drawn into a whole series of dangerous inter-ethnic and ethno-territorial conflicts. The Islamic political movement which had arisen in the last years of *perestroika* was split on the basis of nationality from the very beginning.

At the first session of Muslims of the Northern Caucasus, which took place in May 1989 in Buinaksk, mufti Gekkiyev, who had compromised himself by collaborating with the state security organs, was deposed. The Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus continued without a leader for several months and at the beginning of 1990 broke up into several independent republican branches. In its turn the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Dagestan (SDMD) broke up into several national communities at the third congress of the republic's Muslims, which took place in Makhachkala in February 1992. The SDMD was headed by one of the leaders of the opposition Avar Islamic-Democratic Party of Dagestan, the rector of the Islamic Institute in Kizilyurt, S.-A. Darbishgajiyev. However, he was supported only by the Avar jamaats, the religiously indifferent Tabasarans and Laks and also a small part of the Dargins and Chechens. Soon after the congress the independent Kumyk Spiritual Directorate in Makhachkala and the Dargin Kaziye in Izberbash were formed. At their heads were the former leaders of the Dagestan SDMD, the Kumyk

Bagautdin-haji and the Dargin Abdulla-haji.

According to reports in the republican Islamic press, independent Spiritual Directorates of the Laks and the Lezgis are being formed at present.¹² The Dagestani Chechens are grouping around the followers of the ancient Sufi brotherhood of the Naqshbandi. This organisation, renowned for its participation in the *gazavat* (holy war) of the mountain-dwellers against the Russian conquerors in the nineteenth century and for leading the Dagestanis' uprising for liberation in 1877, was able to withstand Soviet religious repression. At the beginning of the 1990s it left the underground and began actively to recruit supporters in north-western Dagestan, in regions bordering Chechnya.

Islam, having become a means of national self-expression for contemporary Dagestanis, is consolidating the more religiously indifferent Lezgis of southern Dagestan. The creation in the autumn of 1993 of the Muhammed al-Yaragi Foundation has considerable significance for them; Muhammed al-Yaragi was the celebrated mentor of the nineteenth-century Dagestani imams Gazi-Muhammed and Shamil. More than twenty organisations and many village jamaats, scholars and imams of southern Dagestan joined forces with the aim of building a memorial with a joint mosque, madrassah and shrine (*mazar*) in the Lezgi village of Yarag-Kazmalyar, the alim's home. By summer 1994 the Foundation had already received donations covering a considerable part of the 700 million roubles it is estimated the project will cost.¹³

The national schism of the pan-Dagestan Muslim community had been largely pre-determined by the sympathies and antipathies of Muslim organisations and movements representing different national communities. The majority of the jamaats and religious movements of the Avars inclined to the side of the government, where the lobby of the former *nomenklatura* Avars was still strong. The union of Avar Muslims with former party functionaries, which was gradually formed towards the end of 1993, forced representatives of the former Islamic-Democratic opposition to swing to the right.

In this connection the behaviour of the 'Avar' Spiritual Directorate was especially characteristic. Whereas in many meetings in 1991 to 1992 it had always supported the leaders of the opposition, in April 1994, at a meeting at the federal counter-intelligence service of Russia (the former KGB of the USSR), it spoke in favour of cooperation with the authorities for a successful confrontation with the radical Islamic opposition movement ('reactionary Wahhabism').¹⁴ It was no coincidence that the protégé of the Islamic-Democratic Party, S.-A. Darbishgajiyev, was replaced in January 1994 in the post of mufti by the politically more conservative M. Darbishev, who was loyal to the republican government.

After the downfall of the Dagestani democrats at the elections of December 1993 the Islamic-Democratic Party itself swung to the right. At the final extraordinary congress of the party in January 1994 a decision was taken to delete the adjective 'democratic' from its title and rename it the Islamic Party of Dagestan. Although its statute and programme have not yet been changed its new leader, replacing the democratically-inclined A. Saidov, is the more conservative S. Asiyatilov, a people's deputy in the Dagestani parliament.¹⁵

The jamaats and Muslim religious movements of those nationalities whose interests were severely restricted under the Soviet regime have remained in opposition to the authorities. These are the Kumyks, Dargins, Lezgis and Lats, who have not yet achieved parity with the Avars. A certain dissatisfaction with the policy of the current Dagestani parliament has recently made itself felt among the jamaats of the

small mountain peoples. Under the Soviet authorities, as already mentioned, they had been deprived of their national identity and been joined to their more numerous and powerful neighbours, the Avars.

Among the young people of the mountain villages and the resettled colonies of mountain-dwellers on the plain the radical Islamic groups of a fundamentalist hue, the Islamic Revival Party and the *Muslimi Jamiatul*, are quite popular. The first has been active in Dagestan since summer 1990. Its leaders are Avars, the Kebedov brothers and A.-K. Akhtayev, who is at the same time president of the opposition Islamic Centre of Dagestan. The second movement was founded in 1989 by the Dargin Kh. Khasbulatov together with the *kazi* of the Dargin village of Akusha. At the very end of the existence of the Soviet regime Kh. Khasbulatov was thrown into prison for propagandising Islam, and thanks to this he now enjoys considerable fame. By the beginning of 1994 both parties numbered several thousand members each: the first in the Avar-Andi-Tsez districts and the second in the Dargin and part of the Kumyk districts. Both had the organisation of a series of antigovernment meetings in Makhachkala and the towns of northern Dagestan in 1991 to 1993 to their political credit. Nonetheless the majority of the Muslim population of the above-mentioned districts are not adherents of these radical movements. They prefer to keep their traditionally-minded imams, who are loyal to the authorities and accuse the Islamic radicals of 'Wahhabism'.¹⁶

In the national-Islamic opposition the Kumyk religio-political movements have the most intransigent attitude towards the government. During the past three or four years they have more than once supported the jamaats of the Kumyk villages which have tried to dispute the ownership of historic Kumyk territories with the resettled mountain-dwellers. At its many meetings from 1991 to 1994 the popular Kumyk 'Tenglik' movement, supported by the Kumyk Spiritual Directorate, has been trying to achieve equal representation of Kumyks with Avars and other Muslim mountain nations in Dagestan's power structures. Moreover, it has the aim of achieving the now hardly realistic territorial and ethnic demarcation of the Muslim and non-Muslim peoples of the republic. These demands, supported by a number of Kumyk imams, were heard again at the Unifying Congress of the Kumyk people which took place in Makhachkala in March 1994.¹⁷

Recently there has been a positive effort to seek ways of inter-national cohesion amongst Muslim communities in the whole of Dagestan, and it is a theme in speeches by religious leaders of both the pro-government and the opposition camps. Today some leaders of the Kumyk and Avar Spiritual Directorates are calling for unification muftiates and have resolved to discuss prospects for this after the completion of the 1994 haj. A series of republican cultural events have been devoted to propaganda for the unifying of the multinational Muslim communities of Dagestan. These have included a competition for young people for the best reading by heart from the Koran, which place on 5 March 1994 in the Northern Caucasus Islamic Institute in Buinaksk by the *Yedinstvo* (Unity) charitable organisation.¹⁸ However, it is still too early to talk about the possibility of putting these ideas into practice. Islamic integration cannot yet heal Dagestanis of the national isolation which is their legacy from the Soviet era.

Notes and references

¹ *Islamskiye novosti (Al-Akhbar al-islamiya)* (Makhachkala), no. 12, 1992, p. 3; no. 13, 1992, p. 3. Cf. *Obzor Dagestanskoi oblasti za 1909* (Temir-Khan-Shura, 1910).

- ² *Dagestanskaya pravda* (Makhachkala), 3 March 1994.
- ³ *Islamskiye novosti*, no. 12, 1992, pp. 3–4.
- ⁴ *Dialog* (Makhachkala), no. 20, 1993, pp. 2–3; *Vse dlya vas* (Dagestani issue) (Moscow), no. 50, 1993, p. 1; *Novoye delo* (Makhachkala), 17 December 1993; and other Dagestani periodicals during the pre-election period.
- ⁵ *Novoye delo*, 4 September 1992, p. 4, 28 January 1994; *Severny Kavkaz* (Nal'chik), 29 January 1994; *Haqiqat (Truth)* (Makhachkala) 20 April 1994.
- ⁶ L. I. Lavrov, *Etnografiya Kavkaza* (Leningrad, 1982), pp. 100, 106, 118, 135, 164.
- ⁷ *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 28 April and 23 November 1979, 7 May 1982, 26 February 1983, 28 June and 29 July 1984, 30 November 1985; party archive of the Dagestan Regional Committee of the CPSU (now in the Central State Archive of Dagestan) f.1, op. 113, d. 35, 1.104; op. 14, d. 32, 11.36, 39, 323; op. 131, d. 25, 1.292; d. 27, 1.148.
- ⁸ *Islamskiye novosti*, no. 13, 1992, p. 3.
- ⁹ *Novoye delo*, 1 April 1994.
- ¹⁰ *Itogi vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1989 goda* (Moscow, 1991); *Novoye delo*, 9 November 1993, p. 4.
- ¹¹ *Traditsionnoye i novoye v sovremennoi kul'ture i byte dagestantsev pereselentsev* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 22–23, 32.
- ¹² *Islamskiye novosti*, no. 13, 1992, p. 3; *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 19 November 1993.
- ¹³ *Vol'ny gorets* (Makhachkala), no. 1, 1994, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 6 April 1994; *Severny Kavkaz*, 16 April 1994, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ *Put' Islama (At-tariqa al-islamiya)*, no. 2, 1994, p. 1; *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 27 January 1994.
- ¹⁶ *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 19 September 1992, 10 February 1994.
- ¹⁷ *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 16 April 1994; *Novoye delo*, 4 March 1994.
- ¹⁸ *Dagestanskaya pravda*, 2 February 1994; *Severny Kavkaz*, 16 April 1994.

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