

Book Review

The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?

Ahmad Rashid. London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994.

As Boris Yeltsin's ruthless suppression of Chechnya's struggle for independence becomes one more item in a series of turbulent and bloody events involving Russia and some of the republics of the former Soviet union and the former Yugoslavia, Ahmad Rashid's *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism* grows in significance for students of that region. The author is a Pakistani journalist with a vast knowledge of the area. He has utilized effectively his many travels to the region in developing an authoritative history of Central Asia.

Rashid shifts gears back and forth in history quite effectively in this study to make his points. For instance, in the first chapter he notes that "much of the world's ancient history originated in Central Asia, for it was the birthplace of the great warrior tribes that conquered Russia, India, and China" (p. 8). Also note his following observation: "Central Asia has always been different. At the heart of Central Asia is not the story of princes and their courts, but the story of the nomad and his horse" (p. 9). In the same chapter, he quotes a Turkoman foreign ministry official's concern, expressed to him in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's implosion, to the effect that "the future is extremely bleak. The West will help Russia and other Slav republics to survive, but who will help us?" (p. 4). This book is replete with such examples. The first chapter contains a condensed version of the "great game" between the two colonial powers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Russia and Britain.

Russia underwent two major revolutions in the twentieth century: one in 1917 and the second in 1991. The first revolution, bloody as it was,

enabled Russia to emerge as a communist empire known as the Soviet Union. The revolution of 1991 brought an end to this empire, largely but not entirely, for Russia even in its present form remains an empire of several ethnic and religious groups. What is important to note here is that during both revolutions, Russia had to encounter a Central Asia that "was in the throes of an internal revolution in which Islam, tribalism, nationalism, and socialism were fiercely competing for ideological dominance amongst the local elite and masses."

One reason why no political independence movement took root in Central Asia, according to Rashid, was the fact that the native elite was extremely small, remained deeply divided, and failed to broaden its support among the masses. Thus, when the communists won the civil war after the 1917 revolution, they coopted the Muslim elites into the communist system "and thus made the political transition from tsarism to nationalism and then to socialism within a single generation" (p. 27). Those Muslim leaders who refused to go through this transformation were killed by Stalin. This treatment of the Central Asian Muslim leadership, notes the author, "was only a continuation of the early refusal of the Bolsheviks to acknowledge any of the local political trends or popular aspirations" (p. 27).

Stalin's policies sought to shatter the "hopes of pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic movements." He divided the Central Asian peoples into separate ethnic groupings, killed their hopes for having "a common homeland, a common language, and a common destiny.," Stalin clearly wanted to "pit one republic and one ethnic group against another" (p. 32). This was not enough. The communists invested their best efforts in eradicating the presence of Islam through massive anti-Islam propaganda, by banning the use of Arabic and replacing it with a Latin script first and then Cyrillic, and by closing mosques. The author cites some statistics in order to underscore the effectiveness of the anti-Islam campaign carried out by the Soviet communist czars: There were 26,000 active mosques in 1917; however, this number was reduced to a mere 400 by 1985. According to the communist rulers, they were attempting to "create a new Soviet man." For Central Asia, this was only an excuse for greater Russification, writes Rashid (p. 32).

Lest one get nostalgic about the purported universal application of the twin policies of perestroika and glasnost by Mikhail Gorbachev in Central Asia after his accession to power in 1985, Rashid observes that these policies were "never duplicated" in that region (p. 37). The Central Asian communist regimes continued to rely "on the well-tried tactics of repression, the police state and patronage to maintain themselves in power" (p. 37). The Central Asian leaders were not happy with Gorbachev's decision to pull out of Afghanistan and expressed their anger at him for signing a United Nations-sponsored agreement between Kabul and Karachi in 1988. This agreement led to the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Rashid is very prescient about describing the role of Islam in Central Asia. He notes that Islam serves as a "defining circle" for the cultural world of an Uzbek or a Kazak. It provides him/her with a distinct identity and

serves as one of the defining factors of ethnicity. This explanation about the powerful presence of Islam in Central Asia also speaks volumes about the political culture of that region. It also explains why Central Asian countries' ties with a democratic or a nondemocratic Russia in the coming years are not likely to be smooth. It is not the political future of Russia that would play a major role in its ties with these countries, notes the author. Rather, it is the challenge related to Islam that is likely to become a major source of concern for Moscow. As a great power, it is likely to strive to subdue, though not subjugate, these countries. However, these countries, because they are destined to become increasingly Islamic, would pose a challenge to Russian attempts to assert their influence in the coming years. The historical baggage of Russian colonialism is not a minor variable that is likely to be forgotten. Thus, "the gap between Muslim and non-Muslim worlds [in that region]," as Rashid observes correctly, "could not be bridged" (p. 42).

Russian domination of Muslim Central Asia was carried out by mass deportation of local ethnic groups, pursuing policies strengthening monopolistic Russian control over Central Asian economies and making sure that "Central Asia would continue to provide the lumpen manpower for the Soviet economy and military, but little of the brain" (p. 56). The deliberate policy of "Russification" that was aimed purportedly at creating a "new Soviet man" was in reality a systematic campaign to deprive the Central Asian masses of their culture, religion, language, and ethnic identity (p. 59).

The brunt of the Soviet campaign for modernization in Central Asia "was only aimed at increasing cotton production." Yet the processing of this cotton was done in Russia. In order to further deprive Central Asians of the economic benefits of their cotton crop, the tax rates charged heavily favored their Soviet masters. Rashid cites a telling figure in this statement: "There was an average tax of 400-600 roubles on one ton of raw cotton, while on the finished products the tax was in the region of 1,200-1,700 roubles" (p. 60). This emphasis on "one crop economy"—the cotton monoculture—proved to be disastrous in several ways. It "had destroyed the farming patterns of centuries, the lack of crop rotation had weakened the soil and overirrigation had increased salinity." It "had also eroded the nation's health, industry and finally even public morality as cotton scandals came to the surface, in which top officials had made piles of money."

The cotton monoculture created acute water shortages in countries like Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Aral sea almost dried up because of the diversion of water from the Syrdarya and Amudarya, the two rivers that fed it. The seriously reduced capacity of this sea was underscored by the fact that it "has shrunk to 80 kilometers and its depth has decreased by 123 meters." It lost 69 percent of its original volume of water.

Rashid devotes one chapter each to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. These chapters are well documented and contain an excellent historical overviews. Anyone interested in becoming familiar with a quick but not-too-superficial overview of these countries will find these chapters quite informative.

For me, the most important part of this volume could have been the last two chapters: "The Great Game Revisited—Central Asia's Foreign Policy" (chapter 9) and "Uncertain Homelands—Security, Islam, and Nationalism" (chapter 10). However, chapter 9 is basically a journalistic rehash of the Turkish, Iranian, and Pakistani endeavors to enhance their presence and influence in these countries. It contains little new information. The last chapter returns to the subtitle of the book: Islam or Nationalism?

The issue of security is an added variable to this chapter. Nationalism in Central Asia, as Rashid sees it, is "an amalgam of modernism and reaction, of democratic intentions and totalitarianism, state control over industry yet half-hearted attempts at privatization" (p. 242). Central Asia has been cut off from the rest of the world for generations. It has to become aware of what economic and political models or arrangements are being implemented beyond its geographic boundaries. What arrangements would suit its needs? Whether it is the "Turkish model of secularism and capitalism," the "Chinese model of the market economy, leadership worship, and little democracy," or the "South Korean model of economic development and consumerism at the cost of political freedoms" remains to be seen.

Then there is that all-powerful role of Islam that has kept all these countries firmly under its banner. With the passage of time, all indications are that this aspect of the Central Asian personality is only going to be strengthened. In the meantime, notes Rashid,

The region will continue to be buffeted by competing international interests both economically and politically. While Russia and the West are trying to pull Central Asia away from the Islamic world, its Muslim neighbors are determined to build a greater economic and political consensus with the Central Asian states. Central Asia will also continue to be pulled in different directions by the disputes between the Arab world and Iran, between India and Pakistan, and between Iran and Turkey. It still has major problems with Russia. All this will make any Central Asian unity much more difficult to realize. (p. 250)

In closing, Rashid writes:

Central Asia will have to find its own way to real freedom, and that will have to draw upon its own magnificent past and the best modernizing influences that the outside world has to offer. This enormous landscape, these courageous people who have suffered such extraordinary calamities in the past century need time and space to rediscover their own souls. (pp. 251-52).

In general, Rashid's book is an excellent treatment of its subject matter. I have three criticisms to offer. The first one is about his use of the phrase "Islamic fundamentalism." I suppose being a member of the west-

ern media, he felt obligated if not compelled to use this pejorative, wrong-headed, and nonanalytical phrase to describe the Islamic resurgence in a number of Central Asian countries. However, as a Pakistani journalist, he should have known better. Second, Rashid pays scant attention to the economic problems faced by these republics in the coming year. This, in my view, is too serious an issue to be ignored by any serious student of that region. My final criticism is that while the author discusses peripherally the problem related to the cotton monoculture, he barely mentions the related environmental rape of these countries by the communist czars.

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