

The Change in the Role and Status of Sufism in Central Asia

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Abstract

This research surveys the role and status of Sufism as one of the most important movements and elements of Islam in Central Asia. In this context, the main focus is on identifying the role of Sufis and Sufi orders, since the emergence of Islam in Central Asia. Thus emphasis will be on the role and status of Sufism during the reign of the Mongols and the Tsarist Russian and especially the effect of policies communist leaders in the Soviet Union and then the independent republics toward Sufism. In this regard, reference is made to the reasons for the repression of Sufis in Soviet era and re-attention the leaders of the newly independent republics give to the Sufism. In this research, we have tried to study the subject using a descriptive-analytical method and using available scientific books and essays in this field. The compilations previously written in relation to Sufism in Central Asia focus more on the historical context and the cultural and Islamic role of Sufism and or its impact on the status of women in the region. Other works also according to their release date, despite the examination of the status and role of Sufism before the Soviet era or the period of the Soviet Union, It was not possible for them to study contemporary times and their adaptation to the past. But the works pointing to the current role of Sufism in Central Asia have had a single-dimensional look, especially their approaches to the use and benefits that Central Asian leaders have of Sufism and there is no mention of the interaction of these actions on the role and status of Sufism in this region and it is only limited to the potential and the possibility of re-emergence of this current in the political and social arenas. But the remarkable matter is that despite more than two decades of independence, the Central Asian republics and the decreasing role of Sufism in the region in comparison to the past, some of these compilations, without explicitly explaining how to reduce the role and place of Sufism in Central Asia, only point to the potential risk of this current and the worries that might make it in the future.

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Therefore, the main question of this research is “what developments have happened in the role and status of Sufism in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet union?” This study tries to indicate and explain that the influential role and status of Sufism in Central Asian societies have declined as a result of the dual policies of the communist leaders towards Sufism. What we mean by “dual policies” is repressive and violent policies in the Soviet era and the flexible policies after independence of the Central Asian republics. In this regard, it is pointed out the reasons for the repression of the Sufis during the Soviet era and the renewed attention of the leaders of independent republics to the Sufism. Accordingly, this research considers the influence of factors such as the challenges of national identity and the emergence of Islamic extremism in the late-Soviet era, which has now become one of the concerns of the Central Asian statesmen. Finally, the paper surveys the impacts of the actions and policies of Soviet communist leaders and independent republics on the role and status of the current of Sufism in general and the Sufis in particular.

In fact, Central Asia, which was formerly known as a part of Transoxiana, was embracing Islam after the domination of the Arab troops in this region and then became one of the main centers of Islamic culture and civilization. Meanwhile, the emergence of Sufism played an important role in spreading Islam in Central Asia. Although most Sufi currents, emphasize the internal interpretations of Islam And they are opposed to apparent interpretations of Islam but the formation of Sufism in Central Asia and its continuity have been different from other Sufi currents. They at the same time responded to the theoretical questions, also presented plans for individual, social and political behavior. So that most Sufi movements either developed in protest to corrupt rulers or in opposition to religious literalism. During the 13th and 18th centuries, especially after the Mongols attacked Islamic lands, the Sufis became one of the main pillars of the Central Asian power structure. After the supremacy of Tsarist Russians in this region, efforts to fight the infidel administrations and establish Islamic sharia in society became part of the purposes of the Sufi orders.

After the 1917 Revolution, when the Bolsheviks came to power, different conditions prevailed over Islamist groups, especially the Sufi orders in the region. They were well aware of the power and influence of the Sufi Sheikhs and the ability of the Sufis to organize the popular uprisings in Tsarist times. Therefore, the most intense actions of the Soviet government against the endowments (Waqfs) were that the Sufis used these holy places and monasteries to finance their needs and attract the followers and train their disciples. During this period, were imposed severe suppression and conditions of repression against Muslims including Sufi currents and the Sufi orders only succeed to preserve the superficial and apparent Islamic in the region, which is referred to as “parallel Islam”. After the independence of the republics, new leaders having a lot of experiences about how the

Soviet regime collided with Sufism, changed their approach to Sufi currents. In the new conditions, from one side Islamic extremist groups were developed that their approaches were far more dangerous than the precedent of the Sufism. On the other side, not only didn't they deem it necessary to suppress the identity and historical symbols of Sufism but they should be used to create national identity, solidarity and integrity. Hence, Central Asian leaders affected a flexible policy and controller simultaneously. While they sometimes distort the works of the Sufis for their own benefit, they focus more on the reconstruction of holy places and Sufi symbols. However, the Sufi Sheikhs and their ceremonies are heavily under the control of the governments of the region and even sometimes they are banned from doing their rituals and training. Despite the Continuity of some anti-Islamic policies by the leaders of these republics, Sufi leaders have not reacted to these actions and even Central Asian leaders have directly and indirectly expressed their support for this current. Indeed, maybe it can be said that the role and status of Sufism in its historical process in Central Asia, from an efficient current has become a passive current.

Keywords: Central Asia, Islamic Extremism, National Identity, Soviet Union, Sufism.