



Checking Islam in the Steppe

by Jonathan Aitken

IN WHICH ISLAMIC COUNTRY IS spiritual moderation prized, tolerance of other faiths encouraged, and religious extremism suppressed? The unexpected answer is Kazakhstan, a much more interesting and complex state than the caricature in *Borat*. This oil-rich Central Asian nation is probably not ranked high on the State Department's good boys list of shining liberal democracies. But when it comes to keeping a firm hand on mad mullahs and wild imams, perhaps there's something to be said for a dose of Kazakhstani illiberalism.

I have just spent a few days in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, where the exotic architecture contains its fair share of minarets, crescents, gold domed mosques (gifted by the ubiquitous emir of Qatar), and other symbols of expansionist Islam. But this country is not fertile ground for conversions. Most Kazakhs call themselves Muslims rather in the manner of Brits calling themselves Church of England. The locals here drink, like their politics secular, and enjoy the glittering prizes of Mammon. They don't make many concessions to the stricter rules of Islam such as fasting, beard-wearing, paying *zakat*, keeping Ramadan, or making their women wear veils. Yet most of their regional neighbors, from Iran to Afghanistan via a volatile collection of minor-stans (Uzbeki, Kyrgyz, Turkmeni, etc.), are hotbeds of religious militancy, full of extremists trying to export their doctrines by wars, terrorism, or fiery preaching. How is Kazakhstan steering clear of these troubles?

Part of the answer is to be found in the steppes, whose immensity never fails to astonish. Kazakhstan's northern border with Russia is longer than the United States' border with Canada. The great steppe

or *Sary Arka* runs more or less contiguously with these frontiers from Siberia to the Caspian, swinging down into the country's central and eastern regions a thousand miles to the south.

These massive grasslands are the ancestral home of the Kazakh nomads. Their environment shaped their spirituality. As a result the early tribes worshipped as their principal deities *Tengri*, the god of the sky, and *Zher-Suw*, goddess of earth and water. When the Arabs first exported Islam to Central Asia in the 10th century, they found it pointless to build mosques in Kazakhstan because the peripatetic nomads were always moving their flocks around and had no fixed abodes or places of worship. So all Islam managed to do was to water down Tengriism, or maybe it was the other way round. The net result was that Kazakhstan's Muslims were at best semi-detached followers of the Prophet, their lukewarm religion much diluted from the heady brew imbibed by the Sunnis, Shiites, and Wahhabis of the Middle East.

Other ingredients weakened or at least altered ancient Kazakh religion in other directions. Paganism, Shamanism, and Zoroastrianism all had their day in various parts of the country. Then in the 20th century the Soviet empire occupied Kazakhstan. The atheism it imposed was the least of its brutalities. Stalin starved or deported at least three million Kazakhs in the 1930s while simultaneously importing millions of victims from his purges into Kazakhstan. They were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Chechnyans, Kurds, Meskhetian Turks, Armenians, Balkars, and East Germans. Many of these groups secretly practiced their traditional religions under Soviet rule until Gorbachev's USSR broke up in 1991, leaving a vacuum that was filled, somewhat

hesitantly at first, by Kazakhstan as an independent nation state.

The first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has now been in power for 17 years. The *Washington Post* describes him as a dictator. Perhaps autocrat would be a fairer word, since he has actually held three elections watched by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. These OSCE types grumble about the size of Nazarbayev's majorities, which are in the suspiciously high 80 percent range, and make criticisms about the "atmosphere of intimidation" at the polls in some regions. Nevertheless, almost all international observers and Western embassies agree that Nazarbayev is politically popular and would romp home by a big majority even if Kazakhstan's elections were run by an electoral commission from the United Nations. So perhaps it's worth looking at the side benefits of Kazakhstan's autocracy, which are real in matters of religion.

NAZARBAYEV HAS NO TIME FOR, and gives no space to, religious extremism. He champions tolerance of all faiths so long as they don't get political. He claims to be a Muslim himself but is known to be typical of the semi-detached home-grown variety. "We Kazakhs view Islam as a lofty ideal," he says, "symbolically enabling us to pay our respects to our ancestry and to our rich Muslim culture." Such anodyne declarations are reminiscent of an old line about religion in my home country, which goes: "Cricket is a game invented by the English who not being a spiritual people needed something to give themselves a concept of eternity."

Nazarbayev may or may not be interested in the concept of eternity, but he is certainly committed to the concept of keeping Islamic fundamentalism on the other side of his borders. He has three methods of doing this. One is wary vigilance by the Kazakhstani equivalent of the KGB. The second is action by the courts under the Law of Religion. The third is the political promotion of religious pluralism and mutual toleration.

No one is going to admit how much mosque-watching and preacher-listening goes on inside Kazakhstan. But when Nazarbayev believes there is a threat to his country from Islamic extremists (particularly by terrorist splinter groups coming in from neighboring Uzbekistan), he does his best to throw them out. The law backs such action. Last year at least five people were jailed by the courts

for religious troublemaking. To show a multi-faith approach to this smack of firm government, the defendants included one Jehovah's Witness and one Hare Krishna monk. This is political window-dressing. The only troublemakers who cause problems are the same Islamic hard-liners who call the

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Above the parapet, Nazarbayev has made himself an Asian proclaimer of multi-faith moderation. One of the biggest buildings in his showpiece capital is a 100-meter-high pyramid called the Palace of Peace and Concord. It is said to be "the center of the global interconfessional dialogue," the site of a biannual junket for leaders of world religions. Cynics might say that it is a hospitable way of handing out air tickets and hotel suites to a long list of muftis, rabbis and bishops, ayatollahs, and so on. However, it does have a useful symbolism inside Kazakhstan, where the multinational nature of the population (114 ethnic groups and rising) has spawned more than 40 religions.

With such variety it helps to have as big a tent as the great steppe. Its wide open spaces exude their own unique spirituality of nature, beauty, seasons, stars, and endless horizons that seem to stretch beyond earth's boundaries. This view from the steppe has somehow given the government of Kazakhstan a sure touch when it comes to defusing the extremes of faith. Who would have thought that political autocracy and religious tolerance could be such good bedfellows in the 21st century? ❁

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