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How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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How Muslims View Democracy:
Evidence from Central Asia

The Arabic word "Islam" refers to submission to the will of God, but there is much disagreement within Islam about what that will is. Since September 11, 2001, there has been much debate in the West about whether Islamic and Western values are inherently in conflict, and especially whether Islam is inherently hostile to democracy. Nor are Americans and West Europeans alone in worrying about religious conflict. Recurrent conflicts in Chechnya have encouraged Islamophobia in Russia, where about 10 percent of the population is Muslim.

In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington adopts an "essentialist" position: "Whatever their political or religious opinions," he writes, "Muslims agree that a basic difference exists between their culture and Western culture." Huntington also seems to suggest that this "basic difference" will lead to a violent clash with Western civilization: "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam."¹

The implications of a civilizational conflict between the West and Islam are profoundly disturbing, since the world's Muslim population is an estimated one billion, and states where the majority of the population is Muslim extend from Indonesia and Pakistan through the Middle East to the Atlantic shores of Africa. Moreover, several hundred million Muslims compose sizeable minorities in multicultural states from India and China through the Russian Federation and Israel to France, Britain and, increasingly, the United States.

Muslims have never agreed about the essence of their religion, and **[End Page 102]** political and religious differences in the contemporary Muslim world demonstrate that Muslims do *not* think alike: "To say that someone is Muslim," Daniel Brumberg writes, "tells us little regarding that person's views on politics."²

Most of the Muslim world has been resistant to public opinion surveys, the standard way of finding out about what people think about politics. In some countries, such surveys are forbidden, and in more traditional Muslim societies the status of women makes it very difficult to interview half the population. This essay draws on sample surveys of public opinion in two predominantly Muslim countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These post-Soviet countries have distinctive histories that make them different from Muslim countries in the Middle East or South Asia. But since predominantly Muslim societies are very diverse, no single one of them—whether Turkey or Indonesia or Saudi Arabia—can represent the whole of Islam.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are thousands of miles east of the fault line that Huntington draws between Western and Orthodox Christianity. Each is geographically much closer to Afghanistan than to Mecca or to Moscow. The historical roots of Kazakhstan go back half a millennium to the settlement of previously nomadic hordes in territory between China and Russia. The contemporary Kazakh state has been described as "an accidental country" in which clan networks remain the only semi-effective institutions.³ The territory now known as Kyrgyzstan was occupied by nomadic tribes up until the arrival of Soviet institutions. Mountains divide it into distinct regions connected with neighboring areas in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and northwestern China, respectively. Kazakhstan is rich in energy resources and fertile land, while Kyrgyzstan is not.

The object of this essay is to determine, first, what proportion of Muslims in Central Asia are in fact strongly committed to their faith; second, whether Muslims are more or less pro- or anti-democratic in their attitudes than the Russian Orthodox citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; and finally, whether the differences among

them tend to reflect their degree of religious commitment or, alternatively, such social and economic factors as income, education, and age.

Modernization Soviet-Style

Formal integration into the USSR brought to the historic populations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Soviet-style modernization. This included a big rise in education, and the ideological and administrative apparatus of a communist party-state. A consequence of Soviet rule was the introduction of a new secular faith that Huntington ignores—that is, the displacement of both...

HOW MUSLIMS VIEW DEMOCRACY: EVIDENCE FROM CENTRAL ASIA

Richard Rose

*Richard Rose founded the New Europe Barometer in 1991 to monitor mass response to transformation in the postcommunist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (details at www.cspp.strath.ac.uk). His latest book is *Elections without Order: Russia's Challenge to Vladimir Putin* (with Neil Munro, 2002). He is director of the Centre for the Study of Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.*

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