

The Politics of Islam and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Central Asia

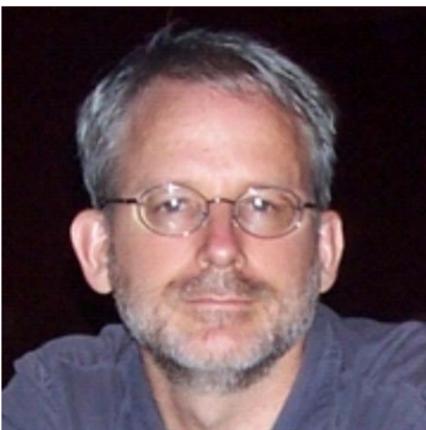
John Schoeberlein

Director, Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus
Harvard University

July 1, 2010, From 5pm to 6:30 pm

10-301, 3F Building 10, Sophia University

Abstract: Seventy years of Soviet rule in Central Asia had put the region on the track toward state structures defined in terms of nations. Not only had there not previously been an Uzbekistan or a Tajikistan, but there had not even been an Uzbek or a Tajik nation in the sense in which they are now understood. Yet now such concepts and institutions have become unquestioned features of the political landscape. Soviet atheism also established a firm legacy of strictly state-enforced secularism. While post-Soviet states have been keen to bolster their legitimacy by claiming the nationalist cause and subsuming within that a notion of Islam as part of national heritage, it has not been so easy to nationalize Islam as it had been to nationalize the state. Today, a wide array of notions of new roles for Islam are in contention in Central Asian societies, often at odds with the secular vision of society held by most elites, who view Islam as a potentially dangerous and retrograde social force. Meanwhile, Central Asian states have made some attempts to harness the legitimizing potential of Islam, claiming a symbolic association with it in ways that increasingly go beyond the limited vision of Islam as national heritage, while at the same time introducing steadily more restrictive laws on religion and other measures to rein it in. The result is a political arena fraught with tensions -- both between state and society and even between the secular and the Islamizing impulses of states.



John Schoeberlein is Director of the Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus at Harvard University, which he was instrumental in founding in 1993. The program coordinates activities at Harvard related to the study of Central Asia/Eurasia, extending from the Crimea and Caucasus to the Volga Basin, Mongolia, Western China, Afghanistan and the former Soviet Central Asian republics. His research focuses on identity, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, and community organization among the Islamic peoples of Central Eurasia. He has conducted a total of over six years of anthropological field research in various parts of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and other parts of the former Soviet Union. He received his Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Harvard University. He has taught courses in the anthropology, history and politics of the region at Harvard University since 1993.

His current research topics include the changing role of Islam in Central Eurasia including issues related to radical Islamism, secular and religious orientations, the politics of culture and national ideology, the impact of national state formation on identity in Central Asia, the impact of economic "reforms" on pastoralism communities, and the changing role of Russian culture in Post-Soviet contexts.

Lecture in English. No prior registration required.