

RELIGIOUS STUDIES



UDC 94(470.67)



Original article



<https://doi.org/10.23947/2414-1143-2024-10-2-34-40>

Ismail Berdiyev and the Development of the North Caucasian Muslim Ummah in the Late 20th and the First Quarter of the 21st Century

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Abstract

Introduction. Religious, in particular Islamic, spiritual leaders play an important role in modern socio-political processes in Russia. In this regard, the figure of interest for the researcher is the chairman of the Coordination Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus, Mufti of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev, who took an active part in religious processes from the late 1980s to the present day.

Materials and methods. The source base for this study consists of documents from Soviet and party bodies of the Karachay-Cherkess Autonomous Region (KChAO), documents from officials in charge of the religious sphere in the region, as well as press materials. In addition to the basic principles of science, objectivity and historicism, the author used historical-systemic and historical-chronological methods.

Results. This article, using the example of Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev, shows that Soviet state-confessional policy, despite the declared atheistic dominant, was distinguished by flexibility and pragmatism. One of the far-sighted decisions was the training of professional Muslim clergy. The consequence of this decision was the formation of a professional corps of spiritual elite, which was able to withstand the threat of religious radicalism and direct the process of religious revival in a constructive direction.

Discussion and conclusion. A special feature of this study is the study of the formation of the personality of a major religious figure in the context of political processes taking place in our country and in the international arena. The results of the study are of interest both to researchers dealing with the problems of state-confessional relations in the Soviet and modern periods, and to government bodies implementing state policy in the religious sphere.

Keywords: state-confessional relations, Islam, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, Coordination Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus, Ismail Berdiyev

For citation. Kratova N.V. Ismail Berdiyev and the development of the North Caucasian Muslim Ummah in the late 20th and the first quarter of the 21st century. *Scientific Almanac of the Black Sea Countries*. 2024;10(2):34–40. <https://doi.org/10.23947/2414-1143-2024-10-2-34-40>

Научная статья

Исмаил Бердиев и развитие Северо-Кавказской мусульманской уммы в конце XX – первой четверти XXI века

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Аннотация

Введение. Важную роль в современных общественно политических процессах России играют религиозные, в частности, исламские духовные лидеры. В этом отношении интерес для исследователя представляет фи-

гура председателя Координационного центра мусульман Северного Кавказа муфтия Карачаево-Черкесской республики Исмаила-хаджи Бердиева, принимавшего активное участие в религиозных процессах, начиная с конца 1980-х гг. и по нынешний день.

Материалы и методы. Источниковую базу исследования составляют документы советских и партийных органов Карачаево-Черкесской автономной области (КЧАО), документы должностных лиц, курирующих религиозную сферу в регионе, а также материалы прессы. Помимо базовых принципов научности, объективности и историзма, автором применялись историко-системный и историко-хронологический методы.

Результаты исследования. На примере Исмаила-хаджи Бердиева показано, что советская государственно-конфессиональная политика, несмотря на декларируемую атеистическую доминанту, отличалась гибкостью и прагматизмом. Одним из дальновидных решений стала подготовка профессиональных кадров мусульманского духовенства. Последствием этого решения стало формирование профессионального корпуса духовной элиты, оказавшейся способной противостоять угрозе религиозного радикализма и направить процесс религиозного возрождения в конструктивное русло.

Обсуждение и заключение. Особенностью настоящего исследования является изучение формирования личности крупного религиозного деятеля в контексте политических процессов, протекавших в нашей стране и на международной арене. Результаты исследования представляют интерес как для исследователей, занимающихся проблемами государственно-конфессиональных отношений в советский и современный период, так и государственных органов, осуществляющих реализацию государственной политики в религиозной сфере.

Ключевые слова: государственно-конфессиональные отношения, ислам, Духовное управление мусульман Карачаево-Черкесии и Ставрополя, Духовное управление мусульман Карачаево-Черкесской Республики, Координационный центр мусульман Северного Кавказа, Исмаил Бердиев

Для цитирования. Кратова Н.В. Исмаил Бердиев и развитие Северо-Кавказской мусульманской уммы в конце XX – первой четверти XXI века. *Научный альманах стран Причерноморья*. 2024;10(2):34–40. <https://doi.org/10.23947/2414-1143-2024-10-2-34-40>

Introduction. Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev has been at the head of the Muslim Ummah of Karachay-Cherkessia and the North Caucasus for many years. Today he is one of the most authoritative religious leaders in Russia, whose opinion is listened to at the highest level. However, such a significant figure did not emerge overnight; his formation as a major spiritual authority took place over many years. In this article we will examine the process of Ismail Berdiyev's formation as a leader of the Muslim Ummah in the context of changing state-confessional politics.

Materials and methods. The sources were materials from the funds of the State Archive of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, the author's personal archive, as well as publications in the media. First of all, we are talking about the documents of the Soviet and party bodies of the Karachay-Cherkess Autonomous Oblast (KCAO) and materials of officials supervising the religious sphere in the region. The methodological arsenal used by the author corresponds to the objectives of this study. In addition to the basic principles of science, objectivity and historicism, the author used historical-systemic and historical-chronological methods.

Results. The beginning of Ismail Berdiyev's religious career was closely connected with serious cataclysms in the international arena, which influenced the internal political course of the Soviet state and such a component of it as state-confessional, in particular, state-Islamic policy. It is about the Islamic Revolution in Iran between 1978 and 1979. Soviet-Afghan War, which began in 1979. Superimposed on internal socio-economic circumstances, a direct consequence of these factors was a surge of religious and nationalist sentiments in the Central Asian and Transcaucasian regions of the Soviet Union.

The reaction was the adoption of a set of measures aimed at strengthening control over the religious sphere. A number of resolutions of central and regional party and Soviet bodies were adopted. Local authorities were recommended to streamline the network of Muslim associations, limit and then stop the activities of unregistered Muslim worshipers, and stop pilgrimages to holy places [1].

In Karachay-Cherkessia, the party and Soviet bodies deployed extensive work to eliminate shortcomings in ideological and educational work [2, 3, 4]. During 1981–1982. In the Karachay-Cherkess Autonomous Oblast, serious work was done to regularize the network of Muslim communities. As a result, by early 1983. in the region there were 19 registered Muslim religious societies, 64 efendi and muezzin and 224 Quran readers, the actual religious activity amounted to 580 people [5, p. 17]. However, the level of training of imams remained extremely low. The local commissioner of the Council

for Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers frankly stated that “they do not know the content of the Koran, they do not preach in mosques, except when they read fatwas of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus or minutes of meetings of the clergy in the region”. The low educational level of the registered clergy made them an easy target for criticism by the discontented, primarily by the suspended “self-appointed” efendi who lost income from conducting rituals. This led to conflicts that required the intervention of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus [6, p. 15].

In such a situation, it is not surprising that the authorities came to the conclusion that it was necessary to train young imams who would have sufficient theological knowledge and at the same time understand and share the political course of the Soviet state. The Miri-Arab madrasa in Uzbekistan was training such specialists at that time.

Opened shortly after the end of the war in October 1945 the madrasa fulfilled the important task of training a new Soviet cleric who knew Arabic, but at the same time had a good knowledge of the Russian language and was oriented in modern domestic and international politics. The internal regulations of the madrasah emphasized that students of madrasa should always remember that they were students of the great Soviet state and should follow the Soviet principles of morality, not to indulge in fanaticism, to have the behavior of a Soviet citizen [7, p. 62].

Students from Karachay-Cherkessia began to be sent to study at the Bukhara madrasa in 1980. In 1982 there were already 4 people studying here. Ismail Berdiev was among them. He came from a large peasant family. Having returned with his parents from deportation, he lived in the village of Pervomayskoye, Malokarachayevsky district, graduated from school and agricultural college. He had served in the army, worked in a taxi park, a district factory.

Ismail was not afraid of work, he took prizes at competitions of wool shearers. He never thought about a spiritual path. However, life changed when his mother heard that recruitment was underway to study at the legendary Miri-Arab madrasa in Bukhara. Of course, it seemed unrealistic: The madrasa enrolled children from religious families who knew at least the basics of Islam and the basics of the Arabic language. Ismail understood this, but yielding to his mother's insistence, he secured the recommendation of the local imam and went to Bukhara to feast on Islamic science.

According to the stories of Ismail-Hadji himself, it was very difficult in the madrasa. He had to learn Arabic and the basics of Islam from scratch. Comrades helped. Together with Ismail Berdiyev, Abulkerim Bayramukov, Abubekir Kurdjiev, Ismail Bostanov, Rasul Bidjiev studied at the madrasa. It was they who later became the heads of the Islamic Ummah of Karachay-Cherkessia and did a lot for the revival of Islam in the region [8].

After graduating from the madrasa in 1988, Ismail continued his studies at the Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam al-Bukhari. However, he graduated from the institute in 1992 already in absentia, as extraordinary events were rapidly developing in his home country, which required the return of students to their homeland.

Perestroika launched many destructive processes. From the beginning of 1989, the situation in the Muslim community also began to heat up. In Tashkent, Central Asian Mufti Shamsuddin Babakhanov was ousted in February after numerous rallies. And in May, actions were held in the Dagestani town of Buynaksk to oust the North Caucasus Mufti Mahmud Gekkiev [9]. Under such conditions, the creation of independent regional spiritual centers – Qaziyats – was initiated [10]. This could have isolated the extremists and prevented the protests from spreading to all regions of the North Caucasus.

Ismail Berdiyev, the young imam of the Uchkeken mosque, who had just returned from Tashkent, also took part in the preparatory activities for the founding congress. September 28, 1989 a meeting of Muslims of Stavropol Krai was held in the aul of Psyzh, at which Ismail Berdiyev made a keynote speech and announced the actual dissolution of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus, and the intention to form a Qaziyat of Muslims of Stavropol Krai on the rights of the Spiritual Center was proclaimed.

The I Constituent Congress of Muslims of the KCAO and Stavropol Krai was held on January 24, 1990. 65 delegates from 24 of the 26 mosques participated in the Congress. The assembly hall of the Karachai-Cherkess Regional Executive Committee was provided for the congress. Vladimir Khubiev, chairman of the regional executive committee, personally made a welcome speech. By a majority of votes (35 against 24) the delegates of the congress elected Ismail Berdiev as a qadi [11].

On the day of the congress, the newspaper “Stavropolskaya Pravda” published a lengthy interview with Ismail Berdiyev [12], and after the congress it published a detailed report on its results with an appendix of the adopted address [13].

On 17 April 1990, at a meeting with his colleagues, the heads of the newly established spiritual centres, Ismail Berdiyev showed wisdom and foresight, calling on them to abandon mutual reproaches and try to strengthen unity in faith. “I am in favour of religious issues to be solved by the council of qadis, and economically to live each Qaziyat separately” [14, p. 22]. One could say that this phrase put an end to the Soviet period in the development of the North Caucasus

Muslim community and opened a new, very difficult stage when Ismail-Hadji and his colleagues had to solve very difficult and by no means only theological problems.

In 1990–1991, Ismail Aliyevich underwent training at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, strengthening his theological authority. On 6 March 1991, the Second Extraordinary Congress was held, at which the Spiritual Centre was transformed into the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Stavropol Krai on the rights of the Muftiate, and the rank of Ismail Berdiyev was accordingly raised to Mufti.

Subsequently, Ismail Berdiyev's authority as Mufti of Muslims of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol was extended at the IV (1996), VI (2001) and VII (2006) congresses. March 16, 2011 after the establishment of an independent Spiritual Board of Muslims of Stavropol Krai at the VIII report-election congress, the Muftiyat was transformed into the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Karachay-Cherkess Republic. Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev was unanimously elected its mufti. The powers in this position were extended at the IX (2016) and X (2021) Congresses of Muslims of KCR.

The Third Extraordinary Congress, which took place on December 11, 1991, was a test of the strength of the Spiritual Directorate and its mufti. The young republic was shaken by rallies, national republics were proclaimed one after another. Particularly notable was the Islamic Revival Party, under whose wing radicalised youth united. Since November 17, an indefinite rally has been organized in Karachayevsk, the building of the city and district administration has been seized, and the so-called Congress of Karachay Muslims. Now three dozen young radicals, together with their leader Muhammad Bidzhiev, showed up at the congress of Muslims of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol.

The unanimously adopted resolution of the congress categorically condemned the actions of the Islamic Revival Party. It has been said: "The Congress declares that any attempts by political forces to use the buildings of mosques, madrasas, the authority of clergy and religious societies for the purposes of political struggle are condemned by the Congress as contrary to the norms of the Shariah and not worthy of a Muslim". The participation of clerics in political parties was recognized as undesirable [15].

The extraordinary V Congress of Muslims of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol was quite revealing. It was held at the end of the turbulent year 1999, when the socio-political situation in the republic and inter-ethnic relations were aggravated after the election of the head of the region. The congress was in fact the first event to bring together representatives of all peoples practicing Islam. After Ismail Berdiyev's speech, the congress adopted a statement that said: "Religion should not be mixed with politics. Politics changes, religion is eternal. In our society torn by political passions, only the mosque and the church open their doors to all people, regardless of their nationality and political affiliations. ...However, only by maintaining political neutrality can the clergy fulfill their direct duties of teaching people eternal truths. Only on condition of non-involvement in the activities of political associations will religious organizations have the moral right to act as arbitrators in the resolution of disputes and conflicts arising in society". The delegates of the Congress called on the Head and Government of the KCR, political parties and public movements "to do everything possible to preserve peace in our republic, to prevent the fire of interethnic discord, for the good of our children to stretch out their hands to each other and solve all problems at the negotiating table" [16].

Eight years have passed since the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus was dissolved and Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev announced a new formula for the existence of the Caucasian Muslim ummah ("each Qaziyat should live separately"). Much has been accomplished in that time. The Soviet Union collapsed, a wave of sovereignty parades took place, and religious and political extremism blossomed. In such difficult conditions, an unprecedented decision was made to recreate an organization uniting the Muslims of the North Caucasus. On August 17, 1998, the Coordination Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus was formed. Its founders are the muftis of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol, Adygea and Krasnodar Krai. Later the spiritual administrations of Kalmykia and Stavropol Krai joined it. The Muftiyats that formed it did not lose their independence, but the new structure made it possible to convey the common opinion of the Muslims of the macro-region on important issues. December 21, 2000 CCMNC was registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. Magomed-Khadji Albogachiev, Mufti of the Republic of Ingushetia, was elected Chairman of the Center. April 17, 2003 Ismail Aliyevich Berdiyev, Mufti of Muslims of Karachay-Cherkessia and Stavropol, was elected Chairman.

As chairman of the Coordination Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus, Ismail Aliyevich became a member of the Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations under the President of the Russian Federation, the Presidium of the Interreligious Council of Russia, the Commission on Religious Associations under the Government of the Russian Federation.

Ismail Berdiyev and his associates have done a tremendous amount of work over the years of ruling the regional Ummah, forming a successfully functioning structure of the Muftiyat, training Muslim clergy, building harmonious relations with the leadership of the country and the region, with the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional Russian confessions. Thanks to his efforts it was possible to use the peacemaking potential of Islam to strengthen peace and friendship in the North Caucasus and to defeat religious extremism.

Ismail Berdiyev has amazing foresight and political wisdom, giving very accurate assessments of the most complex political problems. He was one of the first opinion leaders to speak frankly about the Special Military Operation. Back in March 2022, almost immediately after the start of the Special Military Operation in his interview with the newspaper “Day of the Republic” Ismail-Hadji stated that “the special operation is a necessity. At the same time, the one who says that war is good is not a good person. But realising what has been happening in Ukraine, all Russian Muslims fully support the president”. Assessing the position of Islamic states, Ismail-Hadji noted that “the Muslims of the world understand that only Russia can oppose American expansion, so they respect and support both our country and the president. Therefore, there will be no isolation of Russia. Russia is needed, there is nowhere without it. We have the Almighty’s help. As it is sung in the Anthem, we are indeed, – God’s guarded Motherland” [17].

Ismail Berdiyev has many Russian and foreign awards, including the Egyptian Order of Merit, the Azerbaijani Order of Friendship, the Order of Akhmat Kadyrov, and federal awards: the Gratitude of the President of the Russian Federation, the Order of Friendship, the Order of Honour, the Order of Merit for the Fatherland, IV degree.

Discussion and conclusion. Thus, we can see that the Soviet state-confessional policy, despite the declared atheistic dominance, was characterized by flexibility and pragmatism. One of the far-sighted decisions was the training of professional Muslim clergy. The consequence of this decision was the formation of a professional corps of spiritual elite, which was able to withstand the threat of religious radicalism and direct the process of religious revival in a constructive direction. Currently, Russian religious leaders are actively involved in strengthening traditional spiritual, moral and civic values. Ismail-Hadji Berdiyev is a vivid representative of the modern Russian Islamic elite.

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Received 05.04.2024

Revised 20.04.2024

Accepted 22.04.2024

Conflict of interest statement

The author does not have any conflict of interest.

The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

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Поступила в редакцию 05.04.2024

Поступила после рецензирования 20.04.2024

Принята к публикации 22.04.2024

Конфликт интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов

Автор прочитал и одобрил окончательный вариант рукописи.