

Whither Kazakhstan?

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (May 2022)



Fort Karabutak, Kazakhstan, Taras Shevchenko, 1848-49

My second international teaching post was in Kazakhstan, from 2014 to 2016. Barely twenty years independent from Soviet rule, most people I came across, although Muslim, held secular views. Soviet ideology had left its mark but the country was changing. There were those taking a serious interest in their newly rediscovered heritage and huge mosques were being built around the country. Such people were keen to assert they were Muslims to any Westerner they could find; an act I could only discern as provocative—why would I want to know? Especially as most locals did not deem it an appropriate topic for discussion.

However, most Kazakhstanis (ethnic Kazakh, Russian or otherwise) are genuinely secular; a legacy of Soviet rule and education, as is the all-pervasive drinking of vodka, which can make it unsafe to be on city streets after dark if you are clearly a foreigner (you're bound to be wealthier than the vast majority of Kazakhstanis and so fair game to be mugged), and the discarded vodka bottles one comes across even in the most unlikely of places (on the steppe and in the mountains). Aside from this, the harsh nomadic lifestyle of relatively recent times and the values that underpin it have resulted in what one travel writer described as a 'pugilistic culture' where fists fly easily and fighting is a sign of manliness, not to be criticized but admired.

The ugly Soviet blocks still dominated Kazakh skylines, though these were fast being overtaken by the burgeoning tenement blocks springing up as more people moved from the countryside to the city, especially in the country's main city, Almaty. Largely built with the expertise of Turkish civil engineers, who have recognized a plethora of large building project opportunities in Central Asia, these blocks go up quickly and without much concern for safety.

Kazakhstan, with its post-Soviet era discovered wealth in natural resources, also has its share of modern, swanky buildings, from luxury shopping malls and the showcase city of Nur-Sultan (formerly, and probably to be again, Astana) to the private mansions of the country's nouveau riche, who live a life of luxury much the same as millionaires do all over the world; in sharp contrast to the majority of the population struggling to make ends meet. This elite spirit the majority of their wealth out of the country to Dubai, Europe and North America. The country is, basically, a kleptocracy.

In terms of natural beauty, Kazakhstan has lakes, mountains, desert and steppe in abundance but being the ninth largest country in the world (stretching from China and into Europe) with very little infrastructure, and the fact these

attractions are widely dispersed, makes it difficult to get to them. On the positive side, if you do get to them, they are largely unspoiled. There is no mass tourism here, yet.

My favourite past-time in Kazakhstan was hiking in the mountains. I joined a local group of hiking enthusiasts who would arrange hikes into the mountains around Almaty almost every weekend. Most spoke no, or very little, English but through the intercession of those who spoke it well, or the use of much amusing motioning and sign language, I was able to communicate with most members of the group.

It became clear to me over those two years that most people were not interested in religion gaining a hold beyond private, personal concerns. Indeed, only one person ever brought up religion on one of the hikes, asserting his pride in being Muslim, but nobody was interested in engaging with him. We were there to enjoy the beauty of Kazakhstan's natural landscape. More often, when locals confided their views on religion they expressed concern and fear that the increasing, although still relatively low, number of religiously minded people might at some point, in the not so distant future, introduce similar religiously inspired problems to the country that had plagued other Muslim countries.

The only time I did discuss religion at any length was with a couple of Europeans (one British, the other Swiss), who were in Kazakhstan as English language instructors. We met on a weekend hiking trip around the Kolsai and Kaindy lakes (absolutely stunning places of natural beauty to the east of Almaty). The conversation had begun the evening before but proved short lived. I had asked some locals sharing the same guesthouse whether they thought Russian, as the main language of instruction, government and law would, now Kazakhstan was an independent country, be eventually replaced with Kazakh. They became uncomfortable and did not wish to discuss the topic, with one member of the group saying such questions were what started wars. It was clearly a sensitive subject. Later

conversations with other people revealed many felt there would be civil war at the time of the country's independence (1991) and Russian withdrawal, given that ethnic Russians at that time constituted around 50% of the population.

The following day, whilst hiking through pristine pine forest to Lake Kaindy, the European couple approached me and made small talk as we hiked. They brought up the previous evening's conversation and how they were glad Kazakhstan had not experienced similar troubles to other ex-Soviet countries. They seemed oblivious to a recent spate of shootings in Aktobe and Almaty but it was always difficult to get much information about such incidents. The initial, official line was that they were gang related or due to disgruntlement with local politicians but many at the time were saying it was really about displeasure with the central government.

Less than five years earlier, police had opened fire on protestors demanding better working conditions, in what has become known as the Zhanaozen massacre, and further human rights violations followed. Tony Blair, in his capacity as consultant to the Kazakh government, advised on damage limitation and how to deal with scrutiny from Western media and human rights organizations in the wake of the incident. It is no coincidence that the mass protests and disturbances which attained worldwide news coverage in January 2022, started here. The government eventually made official statements that the Aktobe and Almaty shootings were linked to Islamic fundamentalism.

We drifted from discussing the current affairs of Kazakhstan to its ethnic make-up and issues around identity and religion. Given the prominence of Islamic terrorism and debates around the nature of Islam in the media at that time they seemed very eager to discuss these topics, as they found the whole subject of Islam interesting, although admitted they knew very little about the religion itself. Asked if I thought the religion preached violence I replied I thought parts of it did, only to

be met with objections before I could explain further. The Brit made his excuses and went off in search of another of their colleagues. When I asked his Swiss colleague if she had ever read the Koran, she replied that she hadn't but objected to any claims Islam might not be a peaceful religion; taking a moral standpoint but dismissing the need to acquaint herself with what she was defending.

In 2021, I had the opportunity to return to Kazakhstan. What was more noticeable, this time, was the presence of religion. Increasingly, younger people (those under the age of forty; the majority of whom had never experienced Soviet rule or, if they had, only as children) were embracing an Islamic identity. I became more aware of people's references to 'their' religion, people observing the act of fasting (in the month of Ramadan or otherwise), more men sporting Islamic beards (with the top lip shaved—according to Mohamed's recommendation) and an increase in mosque building. This was coupled with what was clearly a huge and insurmountable gap between rich and poor—the gap really is vast, with most people struggling to earn a decent wage but yet having the swanky, brash wealth of the nouveau riche paraded in front of their eyes in the form of luxury cars, designer brands, plush shopping malls, Swiss style chalets and mini palaces springing up around Almaty.

Gaining a higher education, in the hope of improving one's prospects, was increasingly being recognized as not necessarily a way out. There is very high graduate unemployment and, without connections, qualifications count for almost nothing. There seem to be no viable options for improving one's material conditions. Kazakhstanis are aware of their country's huge wealth, in the form of energy reserves, but are also fed a host of conspiracy theories, of Western governments and organizations plundering this wealth for their own benefit with no regard for the locals.

On top of this, Kazakhstanis almost universally believe their mathematical and scientific educational standards are far higher than those of the West, with the wealthy who send their children to international schools often complaining the math is too easy and expressing concerns their children, attending such schools, are behind their peers in local schools. A very high emphasis is placed on math and those that can afford it will spend much money on private tutors, in order to give their child that 'edge' through one to one lessons after school. In reality, the resultant 'higher' level of math is almost without exception a parrot fashion, rote type learning where children are brilliant at solving familiar sums and equations and are far more diligent in this regard than most Western educated children but have next to no understanding of applying any of their 'knowledge.' They struggle to problem-solve or use their knowledge in real life contexts.

Consequently, Kazakhstan's academic performance across all areas in international testing comparisons falls well below the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development average. Given that job prospects in a country which has so much wealth are poor, education standards are deceptive and the fantastically wealthy prioritize their own corrupt hold over the country's natural resources, rather than develop the economy with a view to increasing living standards for all, it is no wonder people are seeking alternative forms of solace.

In the Soviet era, with the denigration of religious practice and ardent promotion of secularism, this was manifested in Soviet 'equality,' where the state was responsible for employing and taking care of its citizens. The result was low living standards (in comparison to the West) for all. The country has since, in theory, removed its Soviet shackles, including any social safety net. The state no longer makes pretence of providing for its citizens. But attitudes and cultures usually take longer to change than governments. Soviet-type thinking still exists amongst many. You must be a

number in the system and do as you are told even if it makes no sense; not that you would ever raise any questions.

To express frustration at antiquated, nonsensical and useless, inefficient practices only attracts raised eyebrows. You keep your head down and get on with it. The Soviet mentality is not dead but alive and kicking. But this Soviet 'thinking' provides no identity and in the absence of other comforts, material or psychological, it seems people are 'rediscovering' their 'Islamic heritage.'

Whether the shootings and incidents referred to earlier really were linked to Islamic fundamentalism, or were conveniently labelled so, the lack of faith in people's material conditions improving, amidst so much wealth, and the feeling that the elites, vis-a-vis politicians, are spiriting the country's wealth away with scant regard for the rest of its citizens is combining to produce an increasingly dejected population. Concomitant with the lack of material wealth and prospects is an increasing inability to identify with the country's elite, who live fairy tale lifestyles and seem to be sharing in the benefits of 'Western' or Russian privilege. The result is pushing many into the arms of Islam for consolation.

This increasing alienation and frustration can only lead to eventual unrest (such as the large-scale violence that erupted on many of the country's streets at the beginning of this year) and fundamentalism as an outlet. Kazakhstan may not have experienced the major Islamic fundamentalist upheavals seen in other Central Asian countries, yet, but where will the perception of being alienated from an elite and lack of future prospects lead? If the elites are seen as 'other' and linked to Russia and the West, where will the have-nots turn? Rediscovering an Islamic identity can only merge with frustration, over current injustices, to produce fundamentalist opposition to, and ultimately violence against, those in power.

Thus far, the more worrying elements of Islamic belief are not easily discernible. Some of my colleagues were interested in being 'good people' by following the precepts of Islam. One of these was my Teaching Assistant (in her late twenties) who engaged me in conversation on this topic just as Ramadan was starting. I explained my atheism by using the Epictetan argument of the presence of suffering. Having heard it for the first time, the logic of this argument clearly got her thinking but what I think truly disturbed her was my highlighting of Koranic passages contrary to scientific knowledge and others advocating violence and discrimination against non-Muslims.

She refused to believe such passages existed, at which point I asked how she knew what 'her religion' espoused. Had she ever read the Koran in a language she could understand? And was she aware of the argument of abrogation? Where later, violent, passages of the Koran overturned earlier, peaceful, passages. She admitted she hadn't read the Koran but refused to believe violent passages existed. I suggested she use her phone to do an internet search for chapter 9, which she did. As she read it, a look of horror came over her face and the conversation ended.

Sometime later, I asked again if she had obtained a copy of the Koran that she could read in a language she understood. She said that she did not want to think about "uncomfortable things." This is a phenomenon Sam Harris and Brigitte Gabriel have highlighted. Whilst most Muslims ignore such *uncomfortable things*, non-Muslims suffer the consequences of a religion they do not adhere to.

Only Islam, of the three Abrahamic faiths, has rules for how non-believers should behave or be treated; it is not a question of leaving people to their faith because this particular faith has rules for everyone. If you are not a believer, your inferiority must be made clear and sustained through social norms. Most victims of Islamic fundamentalist

intolerance are actually Muslims but that is not the same as most Muslims being its victims (unless you consider religion mass delusion); and so the silent majority continue to disregard the problem.

The secularism professed by most Kazakhs is the result of Soviet influence following a relatively late embracing of Islam, devoid of Tengrism and other non-Islamic elements, by most of the population. This late adoption of a more 'orthodox' form of Islam meant Kazakhstan was not exposed to radicalism engendered by earlier movements. In addition, the country's discovery of huge oil and gas reserves since independence has not left it exposed to radicalizing influences in the guise of aid and development from radical-Islam-exporting countries. But the precarious hand to mouth existence of most Kazakhs, as well as the tropes of Western companies and countries 'stealing' the country's wealth, whilst the elite lap it up in luxury with regular jaunts to Dubai, Western Europe, the USA and the Maldives precludes any affinity with the rich West and post-Soviet oligarchs; especially given the latter's response to the protests of January 2022. The mushrooming of mosques, men sporting Islamic beards, more people fasting for Ramadan, and an increasing search for a sense of belonging or identity amongst the younger generation (that the country's rulers cannot provide) all point to a renewed embracing of Islam, in opposition to Western or Russian influence.

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Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in countries across the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain. He has had articles published in *BBC History*, *History Today* and other small circulation magazines and newspapers. Born to Greek

Cypriot immigrants to the UK, having Armenian relatives, appearing South Asian, having a Turkish partner and growing up in a very ethnically diverse area of London have conspired to provide him with experiences not only encountering prejudice but also of being able to recognize it in various claims, regardless of the colour, ethnicity, creed or gender of those espousing them.

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