

Kathleen Collins, University of Minnesota

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Islamic Revivalism and Political Attitudes in Uzbekistan

Abstract

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political philosophers and social scientists have predicted the decline of religion and the rise of secularism and rationalism in both culture and politics. Is religion, and in particular Islam, in fact in decline? And if it is not, what if any role does Islamic faith and values play in shaping political attitudes and politics? Will Islam and Islamic leaders likely foster or undermine support for democracy? This paper speaks to these debates by looking at the development of religion and views about religion and politics in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Using data from in-depth qualitative interviews with a cross-section of social elites, the paper explores these attitudes in a way that previous quantitative or journalistic studies have not done. The paper argues that during the past fifteen years of its independence, Uzbekistan has experienced a dramatic revival of the Islamic faith. To some extent that religious revivalism has also fed the growth of some political Islamist ideas among ordinary people, who increasingly see Islam as a just solution to the injustices and illegitimacy of the current political regime. Such attitudes, however, have not yet translated into significant support for political Islamist opposition parties or movements.