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Religious Tolerance and Inclusion:
A Model for Multi-Ethnic States?

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan is the second most ethnically and culturally diverse nation among the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and belongs to the most heterogeneous countries on these categories worldwide. In 2010, the Kazakhs accounted for 65% of the population, the Russians 25.9%, and the remainder being spread among Germans, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Tatars, Kyrgyz, Uyghurs, Belorussians, Koreans, Dungans and other ethnic groups. Hosting nearly 140 different ethnic groups, Kazakhstan is, in many ways, a microcosm of the Eurasian continent as a whole.

Religious pluralism is equally pronounced. Forty-five different religious confessions and 17 religious groups are represented in Kazakhstan, which puts it on par with such poly-religious countries as India and the USA. In 2010, Kazakh citizens practiced their faith in 2,229 mosques, 258 Orthodox churches, 93 Catholic churches, 27 synagogues, more than 500 Protestant churches, and assemblies for more esoteric religions. In the 2009 Census, 70% of Kazakhstan’s population identified themselves as Muslim and 26% Christians, which corresponds roughly with the share of Europeans and Central Asians in Kazakhstan’s polity.

A Muslim-majority yet secular state, Kazakhstan has maintained since independence in 1991 that this diversity is a resource and not an Achilles heel, if managed responsibly. Thus, President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s nation-building has aimed at a civic (as opposed to ethnic) nation in which minorities are empowered and encouraged to retain both their own minority identities while also embracing a civic Kazakhstan identity.

This civic Kazakhstan identity has served the country well during its first 23 years of independence since it has largely been free of ethnic or religious strife. While the U.S. State Department in 2006 dubbed Kazakhstan “a leader among former Soviet Union republics in advancing religious tolerance and respect for the rights of religious minorities,” Kazakhstan, as other countries, must counter extremism to safeguard the country’s secular constitution and security of its citizens. Striking the balance between freedoms and security is difficult for any country and is almost certain to draw criticism among some that evaluate policy at a distance and are not held

3 See the measurements of the Pew Forum http://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/
responsible for the consequences.

This paper examines the sources of Kazakhstan’s ethnic and religious tolerance, the policy of religious inclusion, the sponsoring of inter-faith dialogues, and challenges to the civic nation. It concludes by asking to what extent Kazakhstan could serve as a model for other countries in the promotion of ethnic and religious tolerance.

Silk Road to Syncretism: The Sources of Kazakhstan’s Ethnic Diversity and Civic Nation

Kazakhstan’s cultural mosaic and tolerance owes to its peculiar history. During the Tsarist Empire’s colonisation in the 19th Century, more than a million settlers from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus came to the territories comprising modern day Kazakhstan. In the late 1920s and 1930s, Soviet collectivisation and industrialisation prompted the migration of an additional 1.4 million Europeans. In total, around 800,000 Germans, 185,000 Koreans, 102,000 Polish, 507,000 North Caucasians, and sizeable numbers of Crimean Tatars, Turks, Greeks, and Kalmyk were deported to Kazakhstan under Stalin. Known in the Soviet era as the “People’s Friendship Lab”, Kazakhstan was a melting pot of the Soviet Union’s ethnicities and, to some degree, a testing ground for its nationalities policy.

Forced deportations and colonisation added to Kazakhstan’s ethnic and religious diversity, yet multiculturalism in the Kazakh steppes is not a 19th or 20th Century phenomenon. Throughout history, Kazakhstan has been a meeting point of cultures, religions and civilisations, resulting both from trade, transcontinental movements, and conquests. The Great Silk Road, which cuts through the south of the country, served as a channel for cultural, spiritual and scientific exchange for more than a millennium, beginning with the Chinese Han Dynasty’s trade in silk in 200 BC. The Silk Road infused all world religions (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) into the territories comprising modern Kazakhstan, which melded with local beliefs and traditional faiths (e.g. the Tengri cult, Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mitraism).

Those ancient Kazakh and Central Asian rulers that were open to external influences and cultures, assimilated the best they had to offer, and synthesised them with indigenous traditions, were typically also those that presided over thriving civilisations. This insight compelled several pioneering Kazakh 19th and early 20th Century philosophers – Shokan Ualikhanov, Abai, Shakarim, Mashkhar-Jusup Kopeilyu, and others - to pen tracts on the benefits that arose from the region’s role as a bridge between the East and West. “Members of diverse societies and communities who live side by side with each other and work together,” Abai wrote more than a century ago “pick up the best qualities from each other and achieve high grounds of morality and goodness”.

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Perhaps this came naturally to the Kazakhs given the nomadic lifestyle’s traditional openness to new cultural elements. This nomadic and heterogeneous social basis, both a cause and a consequence of cultural exchanges, destined Kazakhstan to syncretism as opposed to narrow uncompromising religious beliefs, and a tradition of peaceful coexistence between different cultures, ethnicities, and religions.

The Kazakh People and the Civic Nation

This historical legacy has informed Kazakhstan’s present policies. Rather than pursuing a “nationalising nationalism”, privileging ethnic Kazakhs and assimilating the whole population into a Kazakh linguistic and cultural identity, Kazakhstan’s leadership has sought to embrace non-Kazakh nationalities. The antecedent of this policy is found, in part, also in the USSR’s “affirmative action” policies which, along with the Soviet promotion of universal literacy, stands out as one of the more positive features left behind in the territories that it ruled.

Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s book *In the Stream of History* explained this inclusionary policy as the need to form, not a Kazakh super-ethnic identity, but a Kazakh people in a civil and political entity. The “Doctrine of National Unity”, published in 2009, further reassures the leadership’s preference for a civic rather than ethnic model of development.

In total, there are more than 300 media outlets for minority languages and the government supports newspapers, magazines, TV and radio shows in this sphere. There are 2,067 mixed languages schools, 90 schools teaching entirely in ethnic languages, and around 200 ethnic Sunday schools assembling representatives of more than 30 different ethnic groups. Kazakhstan’s Uighur, German and Korean theatres are all one of a kind in the post-Soviet space, and in the 2000s their financing increased five-fold.

The Uighurs, a Muslim Turkic population originating in Eastern China, serve as an example of Kazakhstan’s commitment to empower minority cultures: 60 Kazakh schools teach in the Uighur language, of which fifteen are Uighur schools and 31 mixed, totalling a student body of 21,000 and Uighur faculties have been established at the Zharkend and Issyk pedagogical institutes. Similar minority protection is provided by the national newspaper *Uighur Avazy*, the Uighur Theatre of Drama and Musical Comedy touched upon above, and the department of Uighur literature in the Union of Kazakhstan’s writers.

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The political component and outward symbol of Kazakhstan’s civic nation is the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. Launched in 1995, the Assembly unites 23 national and more than 470 regional ethnic-cultural organisations in a pyramid-shaped structure extending from the national down to the village level. Seats in the Almaty Assembly, for instance, have been reserved for the Chairmen of the Tatar, Dungan, Greek, Ukrainian, Russian, Azeri, Kalmyk, Polish, Hungarian, and Karelo-Finn Cultural Centres, to mention but a few. Headed by President Nazarbayev, the Assembly gives all ethnic groups a voice in the political system, ensures the protection of rights and freedoms of citizens regardless of their nationality, supports national cultural centres throughout the country to preserve and revive ethnic minority cultures, and provides facilities for forums such as cultural festivals and Houses of Friendship.

In May 2007, the Kazakh Parliament adopted several constitutional amendments which further empowered the Assembly. The number of deputies in the national parliament was increased to 107, of whom 9 are elected by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, increasing both the mandate of this body and representation for ethnic groups. Similar provisions were made for the councils at lower levels of government, whose structures mirror that of the national Assembly.

At the same time, it bears emphasising that there is nothing inevitable in the choice to pursue a civic, as opposed to an ethnic nation, and employ diversity as an instrument of progress. The choice of a “nationalising nationalism” was open to the Kazakh leadership after independence, but it opted for ethnic inclusion rather than exclusion. A similar policy was pursued in the interrelated, yet distinct, area of religious policy.

**Kazakhstan’s Religious Mosaic: Tolerance and Inclusion**

One of the first steps the Kazakh leadership took after independence was to restore religious rights, which had been suppressed in the Soviet period. The Kazakh Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and the Law on Religion enacted shortly thereafter creates a favourable environment for religious organisations. The number of religious organisations today exceeds 3,400 and a modern day unity has been fostered between Muslims, Christians, and other faiths. This unity traces in part to the syncretic nature of Kazakhstan’s religions.

The majority of Kazakhstan’s Muslims are Sunni and belong to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which is characterised by a high degree of tolerance towards other religions and faiths. The pluralistic Sufi orientation, whose founder Hodja Ahmad Yassawi is buried in the southern Kazakh city of Turkestan, is also well entrenched. Like a river that goes underground only to emerge at a more distant shore, the traditional tolerance and Hanafi/Sufi orientation of Kazakhstan’s Muslims

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survived the repressive Soviet period nearly intact and emerged with renewed vigour in the post-Soviet era.

Whereas only a dozen mosques were in place in Kazakhstan a quarter of a century ago, there are today more than 2,400. Among the most spectacular are the capital’s Nur-Astana mosque completed in 2005, built by a Turkish company and designed by a Lebanese architect to house almost 7,000 worshippers at Friday services. President Nazarbayev has personally sponsored the construction of mosques and co-founded, among others, Almaty’s Egyptian Islamic University.  

Other faiths have registered equal growth. For example, the number of Orthodox churches has quadrupled since independence, and in 2003 the Russian Orthodox Church had more than 220 parishes in Kazakhstan, up from 62 in 1989. The construction of the Nur-Astana mosque has its analogue in the recently inaugurated Uspensk Cathedral in Astana. It is the largest Orthodox Cathedral to date in Central Asia and was built with financial support from the government and local businesses.

Since independence, the Jewish community has formed the All-Kazakhstan Jewish Congress and have opened cultural centres, Sunday schools, day care centres, as well as synagogues. Kazakhstan is the only country with Muslim majority in the world where ten synagogues were opened in the span of only three years.

Churches and seminaries for the 300,000 Kazakhs that profess Catholicism have more than doubled since 1991, including a hundred Catholic monastic congregations. The Catholics in Kazakhstan are principally Poles, Germans, and Lithuanians but priests from Poland, Italy, Germany, America, Korea, Switzerland, and other places preside over Catholic groups.

The Lutherans, composed mainly of Germans, comprise about 100 communities spread over the Evangelical Church; the Lutheran Brotherhood; and the followers of the Synod of Missouri. The Synod disseminates religious literature in German, English, Kazakh, Russian and other languages.

The most numerous among the Pentecostalists are the Evangelical Christians in the Apostolic Spirit which operate primarily in Karaganda and Almaty. These two cities together with Shymkent also host communities of the Korean Pentecostal Church Sun Bok Ym. The Buddhists are likewise primarily concentrated in Almaty, uniting the ethnic groups of Buriats, Mongols, and Kalmyks for whom Buddhism is a traditional religion, and the more esoteric Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Order, founded in Japan early in the 20th century.

24 Ibid.
Even if ethnicity and religion are analytically distinct, religious tolerance and the civic nation are, in practice, two sides of the same coin. Religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined, often overlapping and mutually reinforcing one another. The civic nation is contingent on religious tolerance and vice versa: in the absence of a civic nation, ethnic conflicts could potentially erupt and spill over to religious ones; without religious tolerance, the civic nation would be under siege since religious grievances could easily take on ethnic proportions.

Thus, beyond merely providing an environment amicable to religious and ethnic groups, Kazakhstan has sought to sponsor dialogues between representatives in each of these spheres. The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan was referred to above, bringing together ethnic groups. The equivalent in the religious domain is the sponsoring of inter-faith dialogues, both domestic and international.

**Inter-Faith Forums: The “World's Missing Assembly”**

Inter-faith dialogues appear essential in view of the religious clashes and conflicts occurring worldwide - in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and beyond. But few universal initiatives existed until Kazakhstan began convening and pioneering international conferences on the matter, which laid the groundwork for the World Public Forum’s subsequent Dialogue of Civilizations, launched in 2003.

Kazakhstan’s initiative built on several years of similar domestic endeavours. For example, in 2000 Almaty held three conferences on the topic “Dialogue of Confessions Is Vital”, co-organised by the Otan Party and the Arabic-Turkic Centre *Spirituality, Culture, Economics*, and attended by the Christian Orthodox clergy, representatives of some of the Protestant churches, and Muslim clerics. Similar conferences have also been regularly convened in other regional centres.

In 2002, this format was launched on the international stage. In October of that year, Kazakhstan’s imams hosted rabbis from 28 European and Asian countries, which included meetings between the chief mufti of Kazakhstan and the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, E.Bakshi-Doron. Later, in February 2003, an International Conference of Peace and Accord took place in Almaty attended by the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik presidents; the state minister of Turkey Mehmet Aydin, a presidential advisor of Afghanistan Yahia Marufi; Azerbaijan’s Foreign Minister Vilaiat Guliev; members of the Muslim, Christian Orthodox and Judaic clergy; and prominent Jewish representatives from the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2003, Kazakhstan hosted the 1st Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which paved the way for the UN General Assembly’s adoption in 2004 of a Resolution on Promotion of Interreligious Dialogue.

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
In 2006, Kazakhstan held the 2nd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which coincided with the inauguration of the new Palace of Peace and Concord. A pyramid-shaped building in the centre of Astana, it contains a national Museum of Culture, accommodations for different religions (including Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and other faiths), an opera house, and a research centre for Kazakhstan’s ethnic groups. The building aspires to become a global centre for religious understanding and non-violence and is a symbol of the links between religious and ethnic harmony, beginning in Kazakhstan itself. The 3rd and 4th Congress were organised in Astana in 2009 and 2012 respectively.

Added to these initiatives should be Kazakhstan’s promotion of a similar ethos within the framework of the OSCE. During its OSCE chairmanship in 2010, Kazakhstan hosted at the same Palace of Peace and Concord an OSCE conference on “Tolerance and Non-Discrimination”, proposed the establishment of a Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Centre in Central Asia, and worked intensely for the creation of an OSCE High Commissioner for Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Religious Dialogue.

Balancing Freedoms: Extremism and Challenges to the Civic Nation

Kazakhstan’s civic nation, religious freedom, and inter-faith dialogues attest to its commitment to tolerance, domestically and internationally. Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief, said as much when he in 2014 remarked: “Interreligious relations have been very peaceful in this country. There have been no violent pressures to this day, which is an accomplishment achieved by the people of Kazakhstan.”

During the first years of independence, Kazakhstan authorities retained a very liberal attitude to religious groups. But in Kazakhstan, just as elsewhere, there are forces that do not desire a civic and secular state and conspire to overthrow this order. Over time, especially in the mid-2000s, some religious sects and groups emerged in Kazakhstan whose values and policies directly contradicted law and national values of Kazakhstan. Representatives of some religious denominations, for example, sought to keep their children from attending secular school. The Constitution allows for freedom of religion but it does not permit religions to play a political role and bans organisations that seek to stimulate racial, political or religious discord.

To curb the growing presence of extremist forces, notably Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Tabligh Jamaat, Kazakhstan in 2000 set up a Council for Contacts with Religious Associations. This was followed up in 2005 with the passing of a national security law requiring religious communities to register with the authorities. In September 2011, following a suicide bombing in the Aktobe offices of the National Security Committee, Kazakhstan revised the regulations of religious associations with the new Law “On Religious Activities and Religious Associations”.

29 Trofimov, Op. Cit.
Kazakhstan was subjected to some criticism for passing this law. The criticism was expected since most countries that curtail the freedom of citizens to protect that very freedom are inevitably criticised in some quarters – the most recent example being the NSA’s worldwide monitoring of the Internet. That Kazakhstan’s restrictions were imposed at a very high level of existing religious freedoms, as the USA State Department attests to, were, however, all but absent in journalistic reports on the matter.

The UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, dating back to 1948, states that everyone has the right to “life, liberty and security of person.” Yet liberty and personal security sometimes conflict, especially in the religious or ideological domain where security of one’s person may be threatened by violent fundamentalist groups that are themselves intolerant of religious freedoms. In any civilised society that believes in the rule of law, such groups should be resisted by all lawful means. Indeed, Kazakhstan’s Senate passed the law “On Religious Activities and Religious Associations” precisely so as to grant law enforcement the tools necessary to maintain the peace.

Moreover, this piece of legislation – which was duly circulated to the OSCE prior to adoption – is not the only measure Kazakhstan has taken to target extremism. In 2013, for instance, an Internet portal (“E-Islam”) went online as part of an effort to promote moderate Islamic thought. A “114 Hotline” was also opened, tasked with counselling people of extremist leanings, and it is the first of its kind in the CIS area.

**Conclusion – A Model for Multi-Ethnic States?**

Having summarised Kazakhstan’s policy in the sphere of ethnic and religious tolerance, let us conclude by returning to the question posed at the outset: to what extent could Kazakhstan serve as a model for other multi-ethnic states?

At the very least, it is evident that Kazakhstan has been able to combine one of the most multi-ethnic and religiously diverse populations in the world with domestic peace, stability, and tolerance. This is no mean feat, but Kazakhstan has arguably gone beyond this. Its civic nation is “more than the sum of its parts” in the sense that diversity, and policies promoting this diversity, has propelled Kazakhs to even greater levels of tolerance. In other words, those multi-ethnic states contemplating or pursuing a “nationalising nationalism” and majority-minority domination as a generator of centripetal force, should look to the Kazakh example to find a more sustainable and equitable model.

Another related lesson is that xenophobia is the first casualty when diversity is the norm and the core of identity. In that respect, the EU’s problem is not multiculturalism but a failure of some European governments to embrace it and make it part of a greater European identity. As the far-right advances on the European

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continent, EU leaders may favourably look to Kazakhstan and its initiatives as a model to state-building at a European level.

The Kazakhstan government has invested time and effort to sponsor domestic and international faith dialogues, assure representation of the country’s numerous ethnic groups through the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, and emphasise the civic orientation of the country’s nation-building. This, too, is a lesson for other states. Tolerance may not necessarily be generated automatically, instead requiring pro-active policies that grease its wheels.

Finally, any responsible government must address the question of the limits to religious freedoms when religious groups espouse violence and disseminate these ideas. To protect secularism and religious freedoms, the state must both channel such elements into productive dialogue, in which extremist values are moderated, and protect its citizens from their destructive influence. It must also have the courage to devise and implement policies that may not be popular among some, but which work for the greater good of all. Kazakhstan’s relentless pursuit of a civic nation and religious freedom combined with steadfast policies towards those that want to undermine these values is, perhaps, the model that other multi-ethnic states can - and should - gainfully emulate.
ABOUT THE ECFA

Central Asia is a region larger than Western Europe and contains five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Blessed with some of the richest and most diverse resources anywhere in the world, over the last twenty years the region has shown its commitment to become a reliable, long-term partner of the West.

Kazakhstan is Central Asia’s engine for economic growth, and the Government of Kazakhstan has taken the lead in developing relations with the European Union. In its commitment to the process of deepening political and economic relations with the European Union, Kazakhstan is participating in the establishment of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA), which is a new and dynamic think tank working at the heart of the European Union.

The first Honorary President of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs is H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs has been modelled on the Council on Foreign Relations in the US, the United Kingdom’s Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House and the EU’s own European Council on Foreign Relations. It is envisaged that over time, the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs will become a valuable and independent source of high-quality research, publications and information that will keep Europe fully abreast of the fast-changing development of the Central Asian region. This is a work-in-progress, and it will require dedication and commitment from the ECFA’s team of researchers and writers.

The grant for the establishment costs and first-year programme of the ECFA has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The ECFA and its staff are grateful for this generous donation and thank the MFA. It is envisaged that, as with similar institutions in other countries, governments in the region as well as corporate sponsors and private individuals will over the longer-term join the funding base of the ECFA.

A list of upcoming publications can be found here. The formal launch of the ECFA is currently planned for November 2014, by which time we anticipate the establishment of a distinguished Advisory Council. The Director, Rauan Kenzhekhanuly, will provide regular news updates on the region in his Blog, and you can subscribe here to receive all news updates as well as the ECFA’s regular newsletters and bulletins.

Important Disclaimer: Please note that the views expressed in our Occasional Papers series do not represent the views of its Honorary President H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, or the views of any of the members of the Advisory Council of the ECFA. The purpose of the Papers is to create debate and discussion on the important developments occurring in Central Asia. They are designed to encourage further open discussion and debate, in which the views of all parties are to be encouraged.