

“Provocation” for the Indiana University Roundtable on Post-Communism 2008: Islam and Post-Communism

Provocation is authored by Gardner Bovington (Central Eurasian Studies, IU)

Socialist regimes repressed religion and persecuted religious practitioners, often with considerable brutality. The official reason for such behavior was that Marx had castigated religion as an opiate of the masses that sapped revolutionary force and distorted people's worldviews. Socialist party-states shared a second less obvious motivation: religious belief threatened their control of meaning-production, and religious institutions challenged their monopoly on organization. What is more, despite the heady early talk of socialist internationalism, communist officials feared that cross-border religious ties could divide the loyalties of citizens or open the way to foreign subversion. Every one of these concerns motivated the treatment of Islam and Muslims by socialist states.

Early in the history of these socialist states outside observers feared that the governments and parties there had eliminated all religious practice within their borders. Later it emerged that each had sanctioned some form of official Islam that included state appointed mullahs, carefully vetted sermons, and strict limitations on sites and forms of practice. Still later scholars reported the widespread existence of unofficial or "parallel Islam," practiced beyond the reach of the state and often in explicit opposition to official Islam.

After the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and following the advent of Dengist reforms in China, there was a dramatic resurgence of Islamic practice in these states. This resurgence prompts several questions:

How have the previous tensions between official and parallel Islam affected post-socialist practice?

Have Muslims returned to pre-revolutionary religious practices and beliefs?

Or are we now witnessing the spread of forms of Islamic belief and practice without historical precedent in those regions, particularly fundamentalist (e.g. Salafi, Wahhabi) and Islamist variants?

Finally, how have post-socialist states' policies governing religion affected their Muslim communities?