

# **Socialism and Islam- Reflections on the Centennial of the October Revolution**

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The implications of the outcomes of the October Revolution vis-à-vis the colonized world continue to hunt the praxis of Marxism and Decoloniality. The debates between Dabashi, Nigam and Mignolo on the one hand, and Žižek, Zabala and Marder, on the other -are perhaps most illustrative of the impasse of contemporary leftist politics. For Dabashi, the historic epistemologies engendered by coloniality have long exhausted their purpose to capture the realities of present-day European and non-European subjects alike, particularly those of Muslim colonized subjects charting present and future geographies of belonging.

The centennial of the October Revolution is a fitting time to reflect on the tense and uneasy relationship between Socialism and Islam, both in their ideological contours and as lived experiences. In the long century of Socialist experimentation, Muslims transformed and transmuted Islamic practices with and within Socialism – they did not simply become secular, as is often assumed in a binary exclusive process of being either Socialist or Muslim.

From the establishment of the Central Commissariat of Muslim Affairs (MUSKOM) in 1918 in Kazan, to the Islamic delegations of Socialist Albania visiting Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1950s, to Islamic thought fueling decolonization struggles in Africa and Asia during the Cold War and the Black Power movement in the United States, to Sufi Socialist poetry- the entwined histories of Muslims and Socialism are complex and largely understudied.

Turning to the history of solidarity between the two- both ideologically and as lived experiences, rather than emphasizing their differences, remains an important task for the Left today. Though limited, the following histories displace the master-narrative of domination and assimilation that has come to define Muslim life under Socialism, turning attention towards Muslim agency in the building of Socialist societies and thought.

## **Muslims and the October Revolution**

Colonized by the Russian Empire and subjected to second-class citizen status, most Muslims within Romanov domains welcomed the October Revolution. In Kazan, newspapers like *Süz*, *Il*, and *Ang* published calls on the Russian Muslims to join the revolution and be on the right side of history. In Tatarstan and other Tatar populated parts of Russia, the *Wäisi* movement proved to be a key ally of the Soviet government in soliciting support for the Revolution among the Muslims of Russia, who at the time constituted 10% of the population.

Mullanur Waxitov and Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev would unite various warring factions into the Central Muslim Commissariat (MUSKOM), an autonomous nationalist Communist movement that fought on the side of the Red Army in the Russian civil war. On the Eastern Siberian front, half of the Red Army division was Muslim; the fifth division of the Red Army was made up to 70% of Muslim forces.

For many Marxist Muslims, the October Revolution came soon to be perceived as Russian hegemony clothed in new ideology. Their hopes of a decolonized future proved impossible in the hands of a metropolitan proletariat that would replicate imperial hierarchies.

Whether with the approval of the central committee or not, Bolshevik cells and allied worker militias in the Russian borderlands undertook violent raids on Muslim cities from Akmolinsk to Simferopol, burning Kokand and massacring its entire Muslim population. Meanwhile, in Tashkent, the chair of the Congress of Soviets argued that it was impossible to admit Muslims to the supreme organs of the Communist party, since as Muslims they did not possess any proletarian organizations.

The Bolshevik refusal to recognize Muslims as proletarians worthy of carrying out the revolutionary struggle, posed a problem for Sultan-Galiev for whom the colonized Muslim masses, regardless of class- with the exception of feudal landowners- were all proletarian. Arguing that the true emancipatory potential of Socialism would only come to full fruition if waged by the colonized people, the unification of Muslim masses into an autonomous Communist movement would eventually confront the neocolonialism of the Bolsheviks.

By the early 1920s, the dissent by Muslims, who had given full support to the cause of the Revolution, was seen a threat to the newly established dictatorship of the proletariat. Musa Jarullah Bigi, another outspoken supporter of the Revolution was arrested and eventually exiled; Sultan-Galiev executed.

In the rest of the Muslim world, noted Islamic scholars like Rashid Rida were sympathetic to the Revolution and the emergence of Socialism as a form of anti-imperialism.

Anti-colonial movements around the colonized world saw hope in the new Soviet government.

The Committee for the Defense of Kosovo for instance, headed by the noted Albanian imam Kadri Prishtina, approached the Comintern through Barjam Curri who in December 1921 told the Soviet minister in Vienna that the Albanian people awaited impatiently the determination of their frontiers with the firm conviction that Soviet Russia would be able to determine the boundaries of Europe, especially in the Balkans, in a just manner. As the Soviet leadership sided with Yugoslavia, it replicated its internal politics of continuation of imperial constellations under the pretext of the Socialist International.

As the Russian civil war came to an end and the Soviet state solidified, the imperial project of colonization of Muslim-populated areas was replaced by demands an uncompromising transformation of Muslims into the new socialist man. Reports on the

conditions of Muslims inside the Soviet Union compromised the standing of the Socialist International as well as the Soviet Union as a viable unifying idea against colonialism both within and beyond the Muslim world.

## **Non-Alignment and Socialist Globalization**

Meanwhile, in the Socialist block, the transformation of what once seemed an auspicious alliance between Socialism and Islam took several turns after WWII. Albania and Yugoslavia are exemplary of this deterioration of relations.

In Albania, one of the most visible figures of the anti-fascist struggle during World War II was the Bektashi Baba Faja Martaneshi, a Sufi socialist who did not see a contradiction but a collusion in his fight for social justice informed by both Islam and Socialism. Erased in later atheist Albanian socialist historiography of the anti-fascist struggle, Martaneshi remains largely forgotten today.

In the Yugoslav anti-fascist struggle, the 16th Muslim brigade, led by Salim Ćerić and Muhidin Begić, played a key role in the liberation of Sarajevo from the fascist occupation. Nurija Pozderac, a member of the Yugoslav Muslim Organization, joined Tito's partisans, becoming the vice-president of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia and died fighting Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia's entry into the non-aligned community and its split from the Warsaw Pact after WWII created opportunities for hundreds of Yugoslav Muslims to travel extensively throughout the recently decolonized countries of Africa and the Middle East. Their stories of designing architecture, building roads, hospitals and transferring knowledge in Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or Iran servicing Yugoslavia's non-aligned ambitions have been well documented; their engagements in building new Muslim communities, publishing journals and participating in the international debates of the time await careful study.

Although Yugoslavia was frequently considered a model for its ability to not only accommodate but build from its religious diversity, the country's Muslims saw its international self-positioning as hypocritical given the rampant inequalities they experienced at home, work and in the public space.

Islamic scholars, ranging from religious to secular, had no singular form of engaging with Marxism or expressing their interpretations and practices of Islam under Socialist regimes.

For Muslim citizens, the engagement with the state, the system and issues of faith varied throughout Socialist countries. For the Muslims in Kashgar in China as for those in Kosovo in Yugoslavia, questions of ethnic rights at times overdetermined religious freedom. For Roma Muslims in socialist Bulgaria, questions of race and class were inseparable from those of faith.

Recent interest in Socialist globalization has also tended to ignore the role of Islam in connecting the peripheries through concepts of solidarity shared by both Islamic and Socialist teachings. Albania is an instructive case. Despite criminalizing religion in

1968 and claiming to be the first atheist country in the world, Enver Hoxha's Albania engaged- fueled by Chinese money- in reviving relationships with Third World Muslim countries established decades earlier during the time as a colony of the Ottoman Empire. During the Iranian revolution, officials of the party sided with Khomeini, recognizing the anti-colonial struggle of the Islamic Republic as a just cause.

## **Marxism and Decolonial Islam**

In Cold War Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Marxist and Decolonial Islam were at time inseparable in the strategies of anti-colonial struggle, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne has recently shown for Senegal, Syria, Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia.

Nowhere was this intersection of Islam, Marxism and decolonization more visible than in Iran and Pakistan. Iranian intellectuals like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ali Shariati would influence an entire generation of decolonial Islamic thought, exemplified by the works of Hamid Dabashi, Houria Bouteldja, Selman Sayyid, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Hisham Aidi, among others. In Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto went on to establish the Pakistan's People's Party with the following set of slogans: "Islam is our Religion; Democracy is our Politics; Socialism is our Economy; Power Lies with the People."

Perhaps the most significant of all the intersections, however, remains Islam in the Black Power struggle in the United States. The Muslim resistance to imperialism came to occupy a central position in the imagination of the Black Radical movement in the 1950 and beyond. It allowed generations of Black intellectuals, artists and activists to build a counterpoint to the Christian dominated discourse of the Civil Rights movement. Most importantly, it empowered the movement to resist the relegation of Blacks to a marginalized national minority, and instead understand itself as part of a global majority plugged into vast communities of resistance.

Malcom X's exposure to the works of Abdul Rahman Hassan Azzam and experience on the hajj allowed him to address Muslim communities and the Socialist Workers Party alike, a political history summarized brilliantly by Sohail Daulatzai in *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* and by Sherman Jackson in *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*.

## **Socialist and Post-Socialist Registers of Violence**

Late socialist projects of violence in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Chechnia have left a lasting mark on Muslim communities and have given way to a master narrative of oppression and violence above all.

The more recent tendency in post-socialist spaces has been at times to blindly recover the Socialist past in the wake of three decades of interpreting everything under Socialism as bleak.

Caught in the quagmire of responding to the pressure to separate socialist ideals from being tainted by association with twentieth century totalitarianism, and trying to lodge

critique against the catastrophes of neoliberalism, this nostalgic reading of Socialism is dangerous as it tends to erase the manifold ways Socialist states marginalized communities, Muslim communities being one example among many, in which racialized realities are subsumed under class. A true Socialist act of solidarity would be to confront those instances rather than elide or ignore them.

Socialist futures will remain in distant horizons without understanding the colonized subjects, for whom the Socialist past offered little hope. This would require serious willingness to what George Ciccariello-Maher calls “decolonizing dialectics.” This, as much as anything, suggests a great start to rethink the divisions between Socialism and Islam.

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