Tajikistan: Ismaili Resurgence

Members of a minority faith punch above their weight as their spiritual leader is also a major aid donor.

The Ismailis of Tajikistan, a religious minority concentrated in the eastern mountains, have come a long way since Soviet times, when they were afraid even to have a picture of their spiritual leader the Aga Khan on display at home.

The Soviet authorities were hostile to religion in general, but took a peculiarly strong dislike to Ismailism, originally a branch of Shia Islam, even though it preaches tolerance rather than jihad. As a result believers were forced to practice their faith in secret for decades.

Shirin Sarkorova, who lives in the village of Khuf in the Badakhshan region, still treasures the photograph of the current Aga Khan’s grandfather, which she kept hidden away in a chest for almost 40 years.

The sudden collapse of Communism meant that the Ismailis were able to practice their faith freely, and even meet their leader. In return, the Aga Khan Foundation, AKF, invested large sums of money to help their remote mountain communities survive and develop.

However, much of AKF’s activity took place away from the view of many Tajiks simply because the Pamir plateau is almost another world, perched on the Afghan border with China and Pakistan not too far away.

Now perhaps for the first time, the Sunni majority of Tajikistan will come face to face with the Aga Khan’s engagement with the country. Two months ago, the foundation stone was laid for an Ismaili centre similar to those established in other parts of the world.

The 20 US dollar million project is scheduled for completion in just two years, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the present Aga Khan’s elevation to the position of Imam. The plan is to hire hundreds of unemployed Tajiks to do the construction work.

The Ismailis differ from the ethnic Tajiks culturally as well as religiously, speaking languages only distantly related to Tajik, a form of Persian.

In this part of the world, the Ismaili faith is also strong in adjacent mountainous areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ismailis believe that members of the Aga Khan lineage are the true Imams or heirs of the Prophet Muhammed. They split with the main Shia community over a succession issue in the eighth century.

The Aga Khan is thus of central importance to his followers, and many elderly Ismailis are grateful that they have lived long enough to see him in the flesh. The Aga Khan’s first visit to Badakhshan was in 1995.

Said Sharipov is warden of a jamaat-khana, the prayer house that takes the place of a mosque for Ismailis, in the Rushan district. “My grandfather told me about our Imam. I have seen him,” he told IWPR.
Unlike other Muslims, Ismailis pray twice a day, and the clergy consists of the khalifa (literally “caliph”) who looks after one or two villages.

The Imam has brought his followers in Tajikistan a lot more than a spiritual renaissance, since the Aga Khan Development Network of which the foundation is part is an international development agency working in areas as diverse as healthcare and culture. Many Badakhshanis credit him with saving them from starvation after the collapse of Soviet economics and infrastructure, and in the ensuing civil war.

“Without him, I can’t imagine how we would have lived. He builds schools. Children are given food every day. And look how many Pamiris are studying abroad,” said Sharipov.

“This veneration for our Imam is not surprising,” said sociologist Sayora Ashrapova. “Of course, the Aga Khan Foundation has provided invaluable aid for the revival of the region. It is very good.... especially in winter, when road from Dushanbe to [main Badakhshan town] Khorog is closed and the region is virtually cut off from the rest of the country for months on end.

“Life is tough. For all their industriousness, the people of the Pamir cannot do without outside help.”

From early humanitarian aid starting in 1993, the AKF has progressed to more sophisticated grassroots development programmes that had already been tried-and-tested in similar mountainous parts of northern Pakistan.

“Over 12 years of work, it may amount to millions of dollars,” said Hakim Feerasta, AKF head in Tajikistan.

“Along with humanitarian aid, we began agricultural reforms. Our main objective is to make people less dependent on aid, and give them an opportunity to develop their own business. Currently around 80 pc of residents of the Pamirs provide for themselves.”

Along with the Ismaili centre, the other big scheme at the moment is to open an international university in the Badakhshan provincial centre Khorog. Japanese postmodernist architect Arata Isozaki has been chosen to design the campus - one of three in Central Asia, the other two being located in non-Ismaili Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan.

The university is intended to focus on educating people from poor mountainous areas in the wider region as far as Turkey and China, and the construction project is being hailed as futuristic. In an area where power cuts mean people rarely watch TV or listen to the radio, communications will be by email and satellite link.

Feerasta makes the point that AKF assistance is targeted at everyone, not just the Ismailis. AKF has branched out to run projects in other areas of Tajikistan where there are no Ismailis and most people are Sunni Tajiks.

The AKF is still closely identified with Badakhshan. One official with the central government in Dushanbe acknowledged that in the eastern Pamirs, “the Ismaili leader carries a lot more weight than the central authorities do in the shape of Badakhshan regional head Alimamad Niyozmamadov”.
Among other Tajiks the Ismailis are regarded as belonging to a slightly different world – culturally and spiritually as well as geographically.

The construction of an Ismaili centre in the capital has met by residents with a guarded response rather than outright hostility.

“Members of other faiths create schism in society. Look how many ethnic Tajiks have adopted other religions,” said Dushanbe resident Izatulla, clearly referring to the activities of proselytising Christian groups. “For me, the Ismailis aren’t really proper Muslims.”

Many Sunni clerics are wary of a group they consider schismatic from a theological point of view.

“I have to say many Muslim clerics are not happy with the idea of building an Ismaili centre,” said a religious official in Dushanbe who asked not to be named.

He said there were some Ismailis attending the Islamic University in Dushanbe, but they kept their beliefs to themselves, “and we try to turn a blind eye to them – we do not tolerate members of sects in the mosques”.

One urban resident said he did not agree with the Ismailis' liberal attitudes.

“They really are different from us,” said Dushanbe resident Maksud Shukurov. “Many families clearly practice total equality between men and women. For example, they sit down at the table together when they have guests – even men who are strangers.... Personally I don’t like such freedom for women.”

But apart from the new centre in Dushanbe, the focus of Ismaili life will remain far away from such objections, up in the Pamir mountains, where the main aim is to carve out an existence in this harsh environment.

“Life has got very difficult since the Soviet Union collapsed,” said Asilbegim, a neighbour of Shirin Sarkorova in Khuf. “Sometimes I look over at Afghan Badakhshan. You can see it across the Panj river. We’re becoming like them. But we have been saved by our Imam.”

Shirin Azizmamadova is the pseudonym of an independent journalist in Dushanbe.

Location: Central Asia  
China  
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