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## MUSLIMS IN POST-COMMUNIST BULGARIA

Janice Broun<sup>1</sup>

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Western attention to Bulgaria's substantial Muslim Turkish community was briefly aroused in 1984-85 when reports seeped out of a brutal campaign to assimilate it and force its members to change to Slav 'Christian' names - ironic, in a communist state responsible for the deaths and persecution of hundreds of Christians. In 1989, it was again in the news when Todor Zhivkov's government expelled 370,000 Turks, a move which aroused widespread protests and helped prompt the resistance which led to the regime's eventual collapse.

Around 152,000 Turks returned and the community set about restoring the structures of its former life and undoing the damage that four decades of communism had done to it. The Communist Party had, admittedly, improved educational and social conditions in the main Muslim areas which are in the north east and south of the country, but the aim of this policy had been to ensure a secularised elite which could be integrated within a socialist and increasingly nationalistic Bulgarian nation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it suppressed religious identification. Only around 100 of its 2300 mosques had been left open, and they were barred to all but elderly men (women habitually pray at home). The property of "Waqf" (charitable foundations) was confiscated. The closure of the madrassah in Sofia and all Muslim high schools for four decades left the younger generation bereft of any systematic instruction. Only a few token muftis, carefully selected by the security services, had received such training as was necessary to enable them to provide a veneer of normality and fulfill basic duties - and also to monitor the activities of their co-religionists. Chief mufti Nedim Gendzhev, for

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<sup>1</sup>This is a shortened version of my article, "Rehabilitation and Recovery: Bulgaria's Muslim Communities", *Religion, State and Society*, Vol 35 number 2 June 2007, p.105, which should be consulted if greater detail is required.

<sup>2</sup> Ina Merdjanova, "Uneasy Tolerance: Interreligious Relations in Bulgaria after the Fall of Communism," *Religion, State and Society*, Vol.35, No 2, 2007, p97.

instance, had worked in the interior ministry for years before being sent to Syria for six months to brush up his knowledge of Islam. These people could hardly be regarded as representing the genuine feelings of their community. In a survey in 1985 55 per cent of Turks declared that they were religious, compared with 25 per cent of ethnic Bulgarians - an impressive proportion, considering the worsening persecution.<sup>3</sup> In the same year that the Chief mufti and regional muftiate (with one exception) signed a public declaration that Islam enjoyed complete freedom, the speaking of Turkish in public and the wearing of distinctive Muslim clothes, and participation in Muslim rites of passage were banned. Graveyards too were uprooted, Muslim names effaced.

Nevertheless, basic religious practises had been so sapped that even after persecution ceased in 1995 and though between thirty and forty-one percent claimed to pray regularly, only 1.9 per cent of young men attended Friday prayers, most of the fifteen to twenty percent who did being elderly or peasants.

### **Movement for Rights and Freedom**

Muslims had played a key role in the democratic opposition to bring down communism and soon formed their own political party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which has been represented in every Assembly since 1990. However, under their leader Akhmed Dogan, the most astute of post-communist politicians in Bulgaria, they were careful to avoid identification with any extremist Islamist or pan-Turkic elements, which were almost non-existent anyway. Although the MRF has ensured that Muslim rehabilitation and interests are addressed, it is secular and open to anyone.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP - the re-cycled communists), which dominated the 1990-91 and 1992-97 governments, tried unsuccessfully to have it banned in 1992. Its policies have been moderating and sensible. It was generally supported by the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) governments of 1991-92 and 1997-2001. It became a coalition partner in the returned king Simeon

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<sup>3</sup> W Hopkin, "From religious identity to ethnic mobilisation: the Turks of Bulgaria before, under and since Communism," in H Poulton and S. Taji-faruki, (eds), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, (London, Hurst), pp54-82, quoted by Merdjanova.

Sakskoburggoski's government, (the Simeon II National Movement, SIINM) from 2001-05. When that fell, like the previous UDF government, unable to live up to people's expectations of a real economic recovery and an end to rampant corruption, it switched to help prop up the BSP party which only had 31 percent of the votes and again became a coalition party. Such pragmatic maneuvers did not endear the MRF to the Bulgarian population. A more valid criticism of the MRF might be its failure to represent the interests of the non-Turkish Muslim groups.

### **Growth of Hostility**

According to the 2001 census, Muslims constituted 12.2 percent of the population, numbering 967,000, but of these 371,000 were Roma, Bulgaria's most impoverished, marginalised and victimised community, who gravitate towards adopting the faith of the community they live nearest to and whose religious allegiance is, with rare exceptions, cosmetic. They and the Slavophone Muslims of the Rhodope mountain region in south western Bulgaria, nicknamed derogatively "Pomaks", but denied self-identification in censuses, tend to switch identities so as to minimise antagonising the communities which surround them. More realistic estimates are that there are 700,000 to 800,000 Roma, 600,000 to 700,000 Turks, and 200,000 to 270,000 Pomaks.

The survival and resilience of the Muslim community gives rise to conflicting emotions among the predominantly, though normally nominal, Orthodox Bulgarians. Some, including most of those who are near neighbours, regard them positively, respecting them as more honest, hardworking and reliable than themselves, though they have no wish to intermarry. But a significant element (about a fifth) of ethnic Bulgarians, spread fairly evenly over the social strata, now regard Turks and Roma as alien. Partially this attitude reflects their fear that eventually they will be swamped because of the higher Muslim birthrate in a country which has the lowest one in Europe. The population has declined from over nine million at its highest, and the estimates are that its current eight million could by 2050 have shrunk to 5.2 million. Only sixty percent of these would be "genuine" Bulgarians. It is these fears, allied to

those of an escalation of fundamentalism, which are being exploited by various nationalist parties, in particular by Ataka (Attack), a fascist party which suddenly surfaced with the impassioned xenophobic rhetoric of its leader Volen Siderov in the 2005 elections and, to the horror of human rights groups such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, gained 21 seats in the Assembly with eight percent of the votes. The US Ambassador found its rhetoric reminiscent of that employed in the early 1990s in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is ironic that in 2006 MRF supporters voted en masse for the re-election as president of the moderate BSP candidate, Georgi Parvanov, to keep Siderov out.

In actual fact the Turkish birthrate is also falling, in line with the overall trend (Roma excepted). This reflects the long running economic and educational decline, and the impoverishment of the main Turkish regions due to the collapse of the tobacco market since 1990. Also Muslims, like other Bulgarians, are increasingly seeking work elsewhere.

### **Inter Religious Relations and Minority Rights**

During his visit to Turkey in 1997 UDF President Petur Stoyanov apologised for the persecution of Bulgarian Turks during the communist era. Partly thanks to MRF pressure, but also aware of Bulgaria's forthcoming candidacy for the European Community, the UDF government established a National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues to research and address the problems of the several national minorities. It did not prove particularly effective.

Meanwhile the Muslim community was, throughout the post-communist period, subjected to scrutiny for alleged links with fundamentalist foundations abroad. The BSP mouthpiece daily 'Duma' frequently referred to Bulgaria's Turks as "Turkey's fifth column." One particularly unfortunate incident took place on the eve of an officially sponsored International Islamic Conference visit in 1997 when Plovdiv police brutally broke up a peaceful seminar in the Rhodope region, confiscated study books and expelled two instructors. State officials, the Board of Religious Affairs, the Muslim establishment and people in general fear that foreign foundations might exercise what

they would regard as a negative influence on local Muslims, luring them into practices associated with extremist groups, and even, after the atrocities of September 11, plant terrorist nests on their land. Sensible muftis had warned against them and some villages had even chased out extremist foreign preachers. It must be admitted that Bulgaria's Muslims - some Pomak communities excepted - are not noted for their fervour.

Rites of passage are properly observed, but most Muslims do not fast during Ramadhan. Many eat pork and alcoholism is as common as among "Christians". Traditionally, a general atmosphere of tolerance has prevailed; most mixed rural communities had good neighbourly relations and enjoyed sharing each other's feasts. During one of the bitterest periods of the Orthodox schism in 2005 Ustina's majority Muslim community even publicised and protested against what they regarded as the unjust sacking of the local Orthodox priest Fr. Georgi Koshinov by his Metropolitan Arseniy, who eventually re-instated him. A Trialogue Group involving Christians, Muslims and Jews was established in 2001 after Sir Sigmund Sternberg's visit. Muslims were among the enthusiastic crowds in Plovdiv welcoming Pope John Paul in 2002. The Orthodox and Muslim establishments respect each other but the Muslims felt insulted, and joined in demonstrations with Catholics, Protestants and members of the alternative Orthodox synod outside the Assembly in 2002 to protest against the new, controversial Law of Confessions, which granted special status to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and required all other confessions to register with the Sofia Court. The Assembly had already twice overlooked a draft proposed by the MRF, which specified separation of church and state and forbade all state interference in religious institutions. This would have been very acceptable to other minority groups as well as to international religious rights standards and the appalling scenes in Orthodox churches in 2005 would have been avoided.

### **Divisions within the Muslim Community**

A major issue in post-communist societies has been that of removing former agents of the regimes, notably of compromised clergy collaborators, and replacing them

with people with 'clean' records. In Bulgaria the 1992 UDF government, pushed by reformists, actually intervened to remove such elements. Unfortunately it did this so insensitively in both the Orthodox and Muslim establishments as to leave them rent for years by schisms which are even now not completely resolved. Successive governments did not learn their lesson and continued to interfere. The duration of the split within the Muslim community owes much to Gendzhev's adversarial and authoritative personality. According to Ali Eminov, author of *Turkish and other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria* (London, Hurst and Co. 1997) it has been in Gendzhev's interests to keep the community divided as long as possible through either controlling the leadership or challenging successful contenders by court actions.

Neither schism has been motivated by doctrinal matters. Most Muslims are Hannafi Sunni. The Shia minority, 7.7 per cent, the Turkish speaking Alevi, is practically confined to tightly knit endogamous impoverished villages where ancient syncretic practises associated with Sufi orders are preserved. They guard shrines, 'tekke' traditionally also venerated by Christians and even non believers. Nowadays anthropologists seek to help them preserve their colourful customs. They do not face discrimination unlike their fellow Alevi in Turkey. Only one specific group, 400 Ahmadis, have recently run into difficulties about registration, as required by the Law of Confessions, probably because the Pakistani government has banned them! Such tension over the nature of Islam in Bulgaria as exists lies in whether to follow the path of traditional tolerant Balkan Islam or welcome Arab foundations with their alien brand of faith, practises and over-generous subsidies.

Both schisms, at root, were power struggles to control material assets. The chief muftiate could hold properties with exceptional profit potential and access the Arab subsidies. The Muslim schism was perhaps not as damaging to its community's faith as the Orthodox schism, which alienated many people who were sympathetic to the persecuted church and ready to return to a genuinely revived and reformed one, but who switched to the more vibrant evangelical churches or lost interest in religion altogether. Nevertheless some towns and villages have become divided, with muftis and imans shifting from side to side and rival groups refusing to worship in each

others mosques. The key mover in consistently opposing Gendzhev has been the MRF. Most believers were on its side and approved of the initial UDF government action in 1992 which removed Gendzhev and his associate muftis from office. Though he claims to have responded to community needs, by organising the *haj*, re-opening schools and the madrassah, building 62 mosques, providing the first *Qurans* in Bulgarian - a best seller, though too hastily translated to be entirely accurate - he had confessed to having been an agent and was widely discredited. When he and his faction were rehabilitated by the BSP government in 1994 he did not dare put his name forward for chief mufti. His faction became discredited by its recourse to dubious methods including violence against its opponents, suspicions that it had diverted charitable endowments to its own coffers, and replacing of madrassah staff, such as the respected well-educated elderly rector Ibrahim Yalamov, by unqualified people. So alarmed were some Muslims that they feared another assimilation campaign was in the offing.

In 1995 mainstream Muslims organised an extraordinary National Conference and elected as chief mufti Fikri Safi Khasan, a reformist who had MRF approval and was keen on purging communist elements. In 1997 the MRF allied with the UDF to topple the BSP government which had brought the country to the brink of collapse. In the autumn another National Conference met, urged government leaders to refrain from further interference in their community's internal affairs, banned any former communists or their agents from future leadership roles and elected the young Mustafa Alish Khadzi as chief mufti.

Unhappily, its claim to have resolved the schism was premature. September 11 heightened the profile of the Muslim community. At successive annual national conferences other MRF candidates succeeded Khadzi. Internal squabbles continued, escalating again in 2003 as Gendzhev took the populist line by accusing chief mufti Selim Mekhmet of fostering fundamentalist foundations from abroad and the MRF of manipulating elections. Mekhmet was replaced by Khasan. The situation deteriorated again. Contestants frequently had recourse to the courts, culminating in 2005 in contradictory decisions by the Supreme Court and the Sofia Court - responsible under the 2002 Law of Confessions for registering religious bodies. In 2006 another National

Conference (though with considerable dissent) confirmed Khadzi, probably the most constructive, well-qualified and balanced of the candidates. Gendzhev again accused the MRF of controlling elections and contested the election. However, his past caught up with him; he was accused of embezzlement, the illegal transfer of a large sum from the chief mufti's office to his son's private foundation. Typically in a country prey to appalling corruption and failure to enforce the law against criminals, he has not been brought to trial.

### **Religious Education**

Because of the economic crisis and the BSP government's hostility towards Muslims in general and the MRF in particular, the systematic, adequately funded re-establishment of religious education had to wait for the UDF government's second rapprochement with Turkey, which followed its victory in the 1997 elections. In an interesting move promoted by the Bulgarian Muslim religious establishment, in 1998 the Bulgarian Board of Religious Affairs and the Diyanet, its Turkish equivalent, signed a protocol to protect Bulgarian Muslims. The Diyanet, which promotes a moderate and modernising brand of Islam within Turkey, undertook the responsibility for funding and vetting staff appointments for the Sofia madrassah and three high schools, providing 5000 *Qurans* and basic textbooks and training 100 students at a summer school to teach *Quran* study in villages. This was in line with the agreement between the Turkish and Bulgarian presidents in 1999 that the Bulgarian authorities would strive to stall the activities of Muslim fundamentalists. However, teaching Islam in schools as an elective option, which three quarters of Muslims wanted, had to wait until 2000, three years after the Bulgarian Orthodox Church gained that right, and then it was only in Bulgarian, and had to be funded by the chief mufti's office until, belatedly, the Ministry of Education took over the funding in 2004. Muslim university and high school students are now keener to identify themselves by their dress - despite opposition in some schools from formerly communist staff who espouse nationalism. However, the take up of extra mural study courses in basic Islam has been much lower than expected. Turkish high school children are taught in Bulgarian, except or three

hours Turkish a week. Since they also have to study Russian and a west European language, in practice few have the time or energy left to study Arabic! The Sofia madrassah, like its Orthodox Christian equivalent, maintains a conservative, traditional line. The brain drain of the brightest young folk has affected Muslims just as it has Bulgarians.

Eminov regards education as the key to the proper rehabilitation of Bulgaria's Muslims. The reconciliation and unification of its feuding elements may have to wait for an entire new cadre of leaders to be trained, people ready to put the well being of the Muslim community ahead of self interest. That, he regrets, could take a generation or more.

### **Escalation of Tension**

In the aftermath of September 11 and the war in Iraq (which was backed by the MRF) Muslims found themselves in an invidious position. US Embassy officials started scrutinising any communities which aroused suspicions of extremism. Khaskovo's mufti Faik Khadzhimurad pointedly complained that the state's failure to return *waqf* properties left Muslims susceptible to donations from various foundations - 'some of them not the best ones'. A major concern of his community has been the restitution of property confiscated during communism, which has lagged behind other confessions. At a local level many imans, like their counterpart Orthodox village priests, struggle to live not much above starvation level. The state has been unwilling to return as well as unable to afford to renovate certain historically significant mosques. In 2004 the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged Simeon to provide official protection for mosques, just as the Turkish government does.

Chief mufti Mekhmet met Patriarch Maksim to emphasise that Muslims and Christians were united in their determination to stem the invasion of potentially harmful sects. The following January Mekhmet attended the world peace pilgrimage to Assisi with the chief muftis of Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina to re-affirm their traditional Balkan acceptance of pluralism and amicable co-existence with other confessions. Unhappily, this tolerance does not apply to Muslim relations with

Evangelicals. Those who work in Muslim areas are regarded and resented as proselytisers. Some have been given short shrift and failed to get redress for injuries suffered. MRF local councillors often show their hostility by refusing to lease them public halls. There is also widespread unease among Muslims about the Orthodox St. John the Forerunner Movement, founded by a Pomak priest, Fr. Boyan Saraev, in 1991. Its specific aim is to bring back Pomaks, popularly believed by Bulgarians to be descendents of Christians forcibly converted by the Turks, to their 'original' faith. Becoming Orthodox is also a convenient way to move up in society. The Orthodox Holy Synod disapproves of the movement because it could upset the long established balance between faiths in Bulgaria.

In line with the (widely unpopular) government support of US policy in Iraq, Mekhmet was sent to the USA in 2003 to meet official Muslim representatives there. Former UDF prime minister Ivan Kostov, who was manifesting increasingly populist and anti-Islamic tendencies and had created a new party, warned of Bulgaria's danger of being exposed to terrorist attacks as a result of its one-sided government policy. Gendzhev, and his allies too, jumped on the anti-terrorist, anti-Saudi Arabia bandwagon. Surnitsa, a village remote in the Rhodope mountains among the Pomak community, was twice subject to official and press visits, in 2001 and 2004 because they claimed that its college principal was a Wahhabi who 'harboured a terrorist nest.' The investigators found that the college was licensed by the Supreme Muslim Council, taught the more liberal type of Sunni Islam which it favoured, and that in six years only one student had gone to stay abroad. Local people expressed their concern that adverse publicity could upset the delicate balance of inter-ethnic relations and the tourist industry. Khadzi, at that time rector of the Sofia madrassah, accused Gendzhev of playing with fire. Allegations that extremist teachers are active in schools have become more common. During the renewed leadership disputes insinuations that rivals are linked with terrorists have become the stock in trade, which has done little to improve the public image of Muslims. The press, in particular Ataka's *Monitor*, continue to stoke the fires, as in February 2007 when the Security Service quite unjustifiably detained four members and closed two websites of the Sofia office of the Union of Muslims in

Bulgaria following allegations that it had links with Wahabis and with a Jordanian expelled six years previously, was funded from abroad, and urged jihad. All these accusations were discovered to be unfounded. The union's purpose was to counter extremism and wage jihad against evil in their souls. An inflammatory article in *Monitor* was taken up by other papers, claiming that Bulgaria was functioning as a regional headquarters of terror, thanks to the political protection of the MRF, BSP and SIINM.<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, some Bulgarian Turks were among those arrested in 2005 in Germany after a failed terrorist attack there but these were completely unrepresentative. It is among some younger Pomaks, a marginalised group, that there have been indications of a serious attempt to emulate the stricter Arab-style Islam, but the numbers involved are small and they do not have the approval of their elders!

It is unfortunate that events outside Bulgaria have exacerbated (and will continue to do so) relations between Muslims and the Bulgarian majority, since their peaceful co-existence for well over a century in independent Bulgaria provides a valuable model in a Europe whose nations are now having to cope with significant Muslim minorities. Muslims helped bring about the downfall of communism and have since made a considerable joint contribution to national recovery and to the stability of Bulgaria's political scene. They were also responsible for the formulation of guidelines to govern relations between the state and religious confessions which were acceptable to other minority religions and which had they been adopted would have greatly improved Bulgaria's international human rights standing. It is to be hoped that the majority of Bulgarians will acknowledge the considerable achievements of their Muslim minority and not, as some regrettably do, choose to remain unaware of it.

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<sup>4</sup> "Yet another 'Islamic Threat' Scare", Emil Cohen. *Obektiv*, April 2007, [www.bghelsinki.org](http://www.bghelsinki.org)

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