

Professor develops framework to test how governments use religion in rhetoric

May 27 2016, by George Diepenbrock

A University of Kansas researcher has developed a framework to analyze how governments can use religion in different ways to legitimize their own power.

"Religion has been used as a source of unity and peace but also a source of war and conflict, and toward uniting diverse groups within a state or highlighting differences," said Mariya Omelicheva, associate professor of political science. "But in the end, [religion](#), like ideology, just provides this raw material for those who are in power or who are challenging or seeking power to legitimize their claims to it. Because power is so ubiquitous and so pervasive, any materials out there can be ignited."

Omelicheva published the framework in her study "Islam and power legitimation: Instrumentalisation of religion in Central Asian States," which will appear in the journal *Contemporary Politics*. She researched speeches by government leaders in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and news articles in non-U.S. newspapers and wire services, all from 1992 to 2015.

She found that authoritarian leaders Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Uzbek President Islam Karimov generally would employ different interpretations of Islam to benefit their own goals, in particular national-building aims to strengthen their own grips on power.

Omelicheva identified four presentations used by the governments to "frame" Islam through their public statements and actions: traditional,

official, radical or foreign, and moderate or modern.

In the image of "traditional" Islam, for example, both leaders attempted to frame the religion as an important part of each country's history. However, this representation also allowed Uzbek and Kazakh leaders to institutionalize state control and formalize government interference in religious affairs, she said.

"It's used specifically to create a sense of national unity, so it's part of a nation-building campaign," Omelicheva said.

Both governments used the discourse of Islamist danger to characterize those groups, which Islamic beliefs did not directly align with the loose official interpretations of Islam and the governments' own policies.

However, both governments also claimed that these threatening varieties of Islam are alien to traditional and modern Islam espoused by the Central Asian Muslims.

"This framing of Islam as radical and foreign has been used as a way of stomping opposition and justifying use of non-democratic measure," she said. "This is something that's very, very prevalent across the globe. When religion is instrumentalized, governments are free to use political responses that are consistent with the selected interpretation."

For example, the framing of Islam as imminently dangerous—also known as "securitization" of religion—opens a possibility for governments to employ extraordinary responses in the name of national security and revoke certain civil liberties, Omelicheva said. However, outside of the context of this type of threat, those policies would likely have little support in a democratic society.

"A lot of people accept these types of policies and don't question this

very trivialized and oversimplified portrayal of diverse and complex phenomena, such as religion, as uniformly dangerous," she said. "There are all sorts of repercussions to this kind of rhetoric."

Omelicheva said her framework on how governments rhetorically speak of religion could be expanded beyond Central Asia and Islam.

"In the end, because religion is not like a table or a desk or a building," Omelicheva said, "it is only recognizable and understandable through the language of discourse. Subsequently, religions are open to different interpretations and are often subject to instrumentalization."

Provided by University of Kansas

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