Book Discussion

Bagila Bukharbayeva, *The Vanishing Generation: Faith and Uprisingin Modern Uzbekistan* (Indiana University Press, 2019)

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Seeking Justice and Healing

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Bagila Bukharbayeva's *The Vanishing Generation: Faith and Uprising in Modern Uzbekistan* follows the trajectory of Islamic dissidence and opposition under the rule of Uzbekistan's dictatorial leader, Islam Karimov, from the latter days of the Soviet Union through Karimov's death in 2016, with a particular focus on telling the stories of those individuals and communities who were caught up in the Karimov regime's increasingly repressive approach to those who dared espouse dissenting views—especially views informed by their Islamic faith.

It is a truly superb book, essential reading for anyone seeking a better understanding of the late- and post-Soviet history of Uzbekistan, the debates over religious authority and legitimacy that accompanied it, and the massive human rights abuses that followed. That it should be so is hardly surprising: Bukharbayeva is an experienced and highly skilled journalist who grew up in Uzbekistan and knows the issues about which she writes from both a professional and a personal perspective. This is reflected in her keen attention to detail and the enormous empathy she shows to those whose stories she tells.

It is this empathy, in particular, that informs the first of Bukharbayeva's three goals in writing the book: to achieve justice for those who have suffered. It is empathy, she says, that led her "to go back to their stories and those of other victims of Karimov's fight against 'religious radicalism,' trace their journeys, and clear their names" by telling "a narrative that every human being can relate to, a narrative that will show real people behind the terrible but cold and face- less statistics of human rights abuses." (xiv) Without their stories being told, she goes on, "the real depth and magnitude of what the Uzbeks as a nation

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went through under Karimov's regime might never be realized and comprehended, the victims might never be rehabilitated, and Uzbek society might never learn lessons from the atrocities perpetrated during his rule" (XIV–XV).

Second, Bukharbayeva sees her work as a challenge to Islamophobic narratives—worldwide, not only in Karimov's Uzbekistan—that do "little or nothing to separate Islam as a faith and spiritual practice from Islamism— various ideologies of hatred and violence that use Islam as a fake moral prop" (XV). Finally, Bukharbayeva views her work as an act of healing, a way of addressing the traumas that she herself has experienced as a journalist covering human rights violations in the country and the wider, collective trauma that years of unrestrained state-sponsored violence have inflicted. Other works in recent years have dealt with the rise of religiosity in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, and there is no shortage of documentation of human rights abuses, yet I can think of no other text that combines these two themes into a narrative that is as arresting and compelling as Bukharbayeva's, nor that so effectively foregrounds the lived experiences of those involved.

The value of Bukharbayeva's book lies across many fields. First, it offers a concise, highly accessible insight into the enormously complex historical and political context of religious dissent under Karimov. Thus, her book takes the reader through the brief but vibrant period of relative pluralism, which saw the rise of dissident voices within the Islamic community of Uzbekistan; their collisions first with the state-backed religious establishment and then with the state itself; the rise of independent, alternative authority figures, ideologies, and movements; and the subsequent authoritarian turn: the purges of religious structures, the crackdowns (including disappearances, mass arrests, and torture) following violence in Namangan and bombings in Tashkent, the creation of the dreaded Zhaslyq prison, and the Andijan uprising and its bloody aftermath. All of this would in itself make the book an indispensable source, but what makes it truly unique is the way in which these events are deftly interwoven with the lives of individuals, in particular three siblings— "Zukhra," "Rukhitdin," and "Usmon"—and Zukhra's husband, "Farrukh," all of whom Bukharbayeva knows personally. Each of these individuals became actively involved in Islamic dissident communities, and all of them paid terrible prices: torture and imprisonment for Rukhitdin, impoverishment and exile for Usmon, and Farrukh's disappearance without a trace, leaving Zukhra alone in caring for their son. Their stories are not the only ones—Bukharbayeva's narrative includes interviews with religious leaders and their followers, prisoners and their relatives, exiles and refugees—but they serve as important points of reference, concrete examples of how each turn in the downward spiral of repression has indelibly impacted individual lives.

Additionally, Bukharbayeva brings in her own experience as a journalist, including an account of her visit to the notorious Zhaslyq prison camp, which offers a chilling portrayal of the degrading and dehumanizing influence that Karimov's repressive mechanisms exerted on victims and perpetrators alike. In the book's emotional climax, Bukharbayeva describes in vivid detail her visit to the city of Andijan just as government forces were responding to an armed uprising and subsequent demonstrations led by a local religious group, the Akromia, with indiscriminate force, slaughtering hundreds of unarmed civilians. Her account perfectly captures the confusion and horror of that moment, and of the repression that followed.

It is perhaps the very fact that Bukharbayeva is so effective at telling these stories, and amplifying these voices, that leaves one wanting to hear more—in particular, the voices of women. This is not to say that these are absent: Zukhra, after all, is one of the book's main protagonists, and her account of the suffering that Farrukh's disappearance has inflicted on her family is among the book's most compelling moments. Yet what is missing is a sense of how women understood their own place in the dissident religious communities and what motivated them to make the kinds of choices their male counterparts did. Granted, the focus of Bukharbayeva's work is on the stories of those who were most directly affected by the Karimov regime's suppression of dissent, but some greater insight into how women participated in the debates over the place of religion in society, and their role in creating and popularizing alternative visions, would have made this book's contribution to our understanding of religious dissent in Uzbekistan all the more significant.

A second, related point concerns Bukharbayeva's ascription of motivation to some of her subjects. Bukharbayeva writes eloquently of her protagonists' embrace of Islam as a model for a just society, explaining, for example, that the Akromia ideology represented "an attempt to escape and create an alternative to the soulless, hopeless, and grim reality of Karimov's Uzbekistan," and that her protagonist Usmon's turn to religion came from "a rejection of Soviet ideology and out of his dissatisfaction with the moral and spiritual state of Uzbek society" (214). This is a very important point, and seems implicitly borne out by the case studies Bukharbayeva provides, but she herself acknowledges that it was "not always eloquently articulated" by those whom she interviewed, and here, too, more direct insight into how key individuals made the choice to turn to alternative models of religious authority and legitimacy would be welcome. (Bukharbayeva, for instance, states that "no one could say exactly when or why" (10) her protagonist Rukhitdin turned to religion—granted, at the time of writing, Rukhitdin had already been arrested and was not in a position to speak freely for himself on such matters.)

None of this in any way detracts from what is a truly extraordinary work, nor does it obscure the book's central message: that "Uzbekistan's postindependence story … is not a story about Islamic radicalism," but instead "a story about an inhumane, tyrannical regime" (210). That story, however, is not yet over. Since the death of Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan has been ruled by a regime that has at least the stated goals of reform, liberalization, and greater openness, both internally and to the outside world. It is to be hoped that the new regime will facilitate the kind of justice and accountability for past crimes that Bukharbayeva's groundbreaking work so eloquently and power- fully demands.

Myth-Seeking and Repression in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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"Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood!" So read a famed banner carried through Red Square by young Soviet athletes on the eve of the Great Purges of the late 1930s. Though sometimes ironized and referenced in jokes, invoking one's "happy Soviet childhood" became part of the national mythology in all parts of the USSR in subsequent decades and, indeed, survived the USSR's dissolution in 1991. For Bagila Bukharbayeva and many of her contemporaries growing up in Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1980s, that myth was still very much alive. No less than for myself a decade earlier and 4,000 kilometers to the northwest, being a Soviet child meant living in a peaceful, progressive society committed to social justice, ethnic integration, and internationalism. Coming of age meant confronting the reality of the Soviet system, with its daily humiliations, economic inefficiency, ideological indoctrination, and heavy-handed officialdom. But it also meant trying to make sense of the gap between reality and myth. When the USSR suddenly ceased to exist at the end of 1991—nowhere more unexpectedly than in Central Asia—the resulting vacuum of meaning produced disorientation, and then efforts to fill the vacuum by recovering elements of a previously forbidden past, one often colored by elements of both Soviet myth and Soviet reality. Whereas for many Uzbeks the recovery from political trauma and search for identity entailed turning to religion, Bukhabayeva's path was secular: the realization of Gorbachev's late- Soviet quest for openness and truth-telling led her to complete a journalism

degree and, later, to become a reporter for the Associated Press. It is in the latter capacity that she collected most of the material for this book.

Vanishing Generation is the story of the cohort of young Uzbeks who rediscovered Islam as they were becoming adults in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and of their resulting confrontation with the regime of President Islam Karimov (1938–2016). It is a deeply personal account, centering on the family of Zukhra Fakhrutdinova, Bukharbayeva's childhood friend in Tashkent, before broadening out to encompass leading figures in various Uzbek Islamist movements of the 1990s and 2000s. Like Zukhra's brother Rukhitdin, these individuals turned to the Qur'an, *hadith*, and the study of Arabic as a means of reacquainting themselves with the faith of their ancestors and raising the level of morality and social responsibility among the populace and state officials. Bukharbayeva's aim is to recover and preserve these individuals' narratives of spiritual discovery in conditions of extreme cultural and epistemological disorientation, as well as their subsequent brutalization and silencing at the hands of a regime that sought to paint them as extremists in an attempt to legitimize its own desperate clinging to power. While many of the young preachers Bukharabyeva writes about did take advantage of opening borders to study in the Middle East, their own testimony repeatedly stresses the formative character of their communist education in the USSR and their striving for a just society without divorce, crime, or unemployment.

Some, in resonance with Gorbachev-era reformers, voiced a preference for democracy. Even Akrom Yuldoshev, the jailed leader of the Andijan uprising in 2005, whose Birodarlar organization Bukharbayeva describes as rigidly hierarchical and cultlike, was driven by a marriage of Marxist notions of justice with vaguely Islamic conceptions of socially conscious business. To all this, the regime responded with unsubstantiated charges that dissident preachers and their followers were Wahhabis who sought a violent seizure of power under the influence of jihadist organizations like the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Afghan Taliban. Through prolonged harassment by the SNB (the Uzbek security services), abuse and torture at the notorious Zhaslyq prison, and ultimately the massacre of mostly unarmed pro- testers in Andijan, the regime demonstrated open disdain for its citizens and their rights. The brutality visited on Islamic dissenters by the regime was not, Bukharbayeva argues, a response to their supposed fanaticism, but was instead driven by Karimov's need to feel secure. Over time, she emphasizes, a more tolerant and open system could have processed and digested even radical foreign ideas; the true extremism was a product of the regime's own imperative to rule by fear and cling to power at all costs.

Bukharbayeva's primary objective is to bear witness to the vanishing generation: on a larger scale, all those who were robbed of their aspiration to reimagine their (Muslim *and* Soviet) past, and on a smaller scale, those who were literally "disappeared" from the streets of Uzbek, Kazakh, and European cities, never to be heard from again. Their stories, filled with suffering and betrayal (both by their government, which extracted false confessions for political gain, and, frequently, by their families and friends, who sought to preserve their livelihoods or the lives of other family members by implicating their nearest and dearest in terrorism during interrogations and in courts) are told with compassion, and often compiled at great personal risk: Bukharbayeva interviewed inmates at Zhaslyk under the watchful eye of the torturers and faced sniper fire while covering the events in Andijan.

Vanishing Generation is not intended to be a political treatise with an ideological agenda. Yet dealing as it does with the fallout of political disintegration and the interaction of people constructing a political ideology with a ruling regime, it is inevitably couched in a political framework and will doubtless be read by people seeking policy prescriptions. The framework that is intimated in the book is an individualist one: Karimov's style of rule was not, Bukharbayeva avers, a product of the Soviet system, because other post-Soviet states followed very different nation-building trajectories; it was, rather, the consequence of his own decisions. For Karimov, she indicates, state terror was an end in itself—just as it had been for Stalin.

Yet attempting to understand the geopolitical, economic, and cultural constraints on Karimov's rule would in no way exculpate the crimes he perpetrated. As recently argued by Stephen Kotkin, the main driver of Stalin's collectivization and purges in the 1930s was the very real fear of war with Germany.1 Analogously, Karimov found himself as the ruler of independent Uzbekistan in the wake of the new Russian rulers' sudden severing of links to Moscow for their own selfish political purposes. The parallel implosion of Marxist-Leninist ideology, whatever its merits, left a moral void that abruptly began to be filled by long-suppressed and sometimes outright alien ideas. It may be true, as Bukharbayeva contends, that jihadism lacked a strong social base in Uzbekistan and that its transmission from Afghanistan was unlikely. Nevertheless, the French political theorist Olivier Roy, whom she cites in support of this claim, has been arguing that Islamism is an ideology without a future since the 1990s.2 Whether or not he proves to be correct in the longer term, it has not visibly weakened in the last 30 years. Moreover, as outlined by

1 Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941* (New York: Penguin, 2017).
2 Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

presidential policy advisor S. Frederick Starr, U.S. plans to turn Afghanistan into the regional hub of South-Central Asia during early phases of the War on Terror must have caused extreme anxiety in Tashkent.3

The facts that Karimov was shouted down and forced to kneel by the Islom Lashkarlari group while on his first presidential campaign in 1990, and subsequently faced an assassination attempt during the Tashkent bombings in 1999 and an armed uprising in Andijan six years later, further illustrate the difficulties any ruler would have had in holding Central Asia's most populous state (and one with contested borders in the Ferghana Valley) together. Bukharbayeva is certainly correct in claiming that the laxer rule of Karimov's successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev constitutes an improvement. Yet the conditions faced by Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan after a quarter-century of independence are markedly different from those faced by his predecessor in the 1990s. The late president, too, belonged to the vanishing generation.

A "Purer" and "Truer" Islam

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It is generally recognized that Uzbekistan's first post-independence president, Islam Karimov, was a dictator. At the same time, however, there seems to be a persistent myth that his strongman rule saved Uzbekistan, if not from being completely taken over by radical Islamists, then at least from serious problems with them, as well as general political instability and unrest.

In *The Vanishing Generation*, I attempted to show whom, what, and how Karimov fought. I appreciate Michael Hall and Boris Stremlin's comments and insights on the issues raised in the book. I accept Hall's point that the book might benefit from a stronger female voice/angle, which would add another important dimension and another level of insight to the entire story.

My original design for the book was more female-centric than the final version, though I would not claim that this was out of a conscious choice to

3 S. Frederick Starr, "A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and its Neighbors," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, 2005, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005_starr_a-greater-central-asia-partnership.pdf, accessed February 19, 2021.

offer a strong female perspective. The first draft centered around Zukhra's personal diary, which she started on the day her husband Farrukh went missing in June 2004.

In the diary, Zukhra described her search—day after day—for her missing husband, the harassment she suffered at the hands of the authorities, and her daily emotional and material struggles. The diary also included her notes on faith, including moments of doubt, as well as discussing what was going on within her family during those difficult times, including moments when she resented and questioned the choices made by her brothers and husband, which eventually landed the entire family in trouble with the authorities. It was unique material that, I knew at once, would make the whole book worthwhile no matter what other information I was able to get. My initial draft included sizable entries from Zukhra's diary before every chapter. I wanted her voice to be the central voice of the book. However, when I found a publisher, Zukhra withdrew her permission for me to use her diary. It was a big blow, but I respect and understand her decision. Zukhra and I eventually agreed that I would use some factual information from the diary, and a few quotes here and there, provided they are not too intimate and do not have the potential to cause her any trouble with the authorities.

While researching Akromia (Birodarlar), the group behind the 2005 Andijan uprising, I made a concerted effort to learn the stories of the group's female members. I thought I would have a better chance of establishing relations of trust with women and that this would help me learn important details about the life within the group.

One of the female Akromia members gave me, in private conversations, exactly such insightful details. She agreed to provide a full personal account of her experience with Akromia in writing (anonymously but for the record): from the day she was recruited to the uprising and thereafter. But she never kept her promise, and after unsuccessfully chasing her for a few years (she never said that she had changed her mind and no longer wished to provide such an account), I had to give up. In the end, I had to make do with the information on Akromia that I managed to get from other sources.

I think these two examples of my failure to share the female side of the story reflect that many Uzbeks still do not feel free enough to speak out. Undoubtedly, there is a need for more effort on the part of researchers to help them tell their stories.

I also accept Hall's second point that he would have liked more of "a direct insight" into how the key figures in the book came to choose alternative Islamic teachings and authority. For me, this was one of the main questions of the whole story, and I put it to every person I interviewed.

The answers I received did not always satisfy me. But in most cases I refrained from pushing and probing further. I had to bear in mind that most of my interviewees were official terror suspects, or linked to such. Karimov was still alive at the time of my research, and most of my interviewees were understandably careful about sharing information about how they came to be involved with one or another Islamic/Islamist group, underground preacher, and so on.

My own answer to the question of why Uzbek Muslims, just coming out of "Soviet isolation," found the "new" Islamist groups and ideologies so attractive is that they completely distrusted the Soviet Islamic clergy. Anything different from "Soviet Islam" was therefore seen as "purer" and "truer."

As ordinary Uzbeks were facing the challenge of finding their bearings in a new post-Soviet reality, so too was President Karimov. Along these lines, I appreciate Stremlin's invitation to discuss the political pressures that Karimov faced when he suddenly found himself the leader of a new nation. Stremlin fairly points out that Stalin's policy of internal terror was to a certain extent—and particularly in the 1930s—driven by the fear of looming war with Germany, as well as by the Soviet system's competition with the West more generally: there was a need to industrialize rapidly, to produce weapons, and to build some kind of an economy. And Stalin, in a way, achieved those goals.

A similar argument has in recent years been deployed by pro-Kremlin historians to portray Stalin as "an efficient manager." Summarizing the comparison of Karimov with Stalin, I would say that there are two main things that come to mind when the latter is mentioned: the relentless political purges and the personality cult around him. I think these two things go hand in hand: I would argue that the primary goal behind the mass repressions was to terrorize the nation into "love" of Stalin.

Returning to Karimov, in my view, his 26-year rule proves that he simply was not fit either intellectually or psychologically to address any of the issues he faced as national leader. He left the Uzbek economy at the mercy of robber barons, among them his own daughters; mafia figures and high-level security; police; and prosecutors. Citizens were left to their own devices. On other issues, he only ever responded with one of two knee-jerk reactions: suppression (in response to internal dissent, whether real or imagined) and isolation (in response to all external geopolitical threats). Karimov feared the Kremlin's reestablishment of political control, so he stayed away from the post-Soviet military, political, and economic groupings created by Russia (the Collective Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union). He isolated Uzbekistan even from its Central Asian neighbors.

Karimov's personal face-off with Islamist protesters in Namangan in 1991 and the Tajik civil war that broke out in 1992 definitely gave him a serious

fright. And I would not deny that had there been too little control, Uzbekistan might have seen more instability and unrest in the post-Soviet period. We can see that the region's "island of democracy," Kyrgyzstan, is in a state of almost permanent political instability; the 2010 ethnic violence in the south, following the overthrow of the second government, was terrifying.

But in my view, it is beyond doubt that Karimov's regime far exceeded the level of control that would have been reasonable to help him address the issues he faced as national leader. His regime did not merely control citizens, but rather terrorized them. The main idea behind Karimov's narrow-minded, knee-jerk "solutions" to the challenges he faced was to ensure that nothing— whether from within or without—could undermine his personal positionin power.

Stremlin also mentions Frederick Starr's argument that Karimov was anxious about the U.S. plans after 9/11 to turn Afghanistan into a regional military hub. Obviously, Karimov strongly resented any Western pressure for democratization or human rights, but when it comes to "the Global War on Terror," he benefited both politically and materially. As early as November 2001, Karimov allowed U.S. troops to use the Khanabad airbase in the Uzbek south, close to the Afghan border. The U.S., in return, softened its criticism of the Karimov regime. Karimov's participation in the "War on Terror" also served as indirect justification of his internal campaign against "religious extremism." When in 2005 the U.S. government (after a certain pause) criticized Karimov's massacre of the Andijan uprising, he did not hesitate to kick U.S. troops out ofthe country.

I would also like to comment on Stremlin's remark that even though Olivier Roy, whom I cite in my book, argues that Islamism as an ideology has no future, it "has not visibly weakened in the last 30 years." Islamism clearly has no future, especially its violent forms. Terrorism is by definition self-destructive, nihilistic, and anarchical—it is about isolated, individual acts of violence and does not offer anything beyond that. As militant groups, Islamists can only succeed in overrunning and controlling temporarily stateless territories or places where the state is very weak. For obvious reasons, they will never be able to create a viable state.

In my view, Islamism is in essence a form of chauvinism, xenophobia, and supremacism—a division of the world into "us" and "them." When we ask why Islamism is not abating, therefore, we must really ask why all forms and expressions of chauvinism, xenophobia, and supremacism are not abating around the world.