IIAS Report and Publications

IIAS seminar report: International seminar: transnational religious and ideological influences in modern Central and Inner Asia

Regensburg, Germany
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In the context of the three-year IAS programme 'Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context', which is sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (New York), IAS co-organised a seminar that discussed socio-political processes and practices in Central and Inner Asia. The theme of the seminar was that global and local processes are intersecting with global ideological trends. Particular emphasis was put on the question how the global processes influence current nation-building policies, social identities and people's loyalties. The seminar, supported by the International Unit for Central and Inner Asian Studies, focused on a previous meeting, 'Knowledge production and heritage in and on Central and Inner Asia', which was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on 5-6 August 2014.

The intensive debates of the seminar highlighted some significant aspects of the transnational religious and ideological influences in modern Central and Inner Asia. One of these, not surprisingly, was the importance of the particular historical background of the pertinent country or region. The relationship for much of the twentieth century between Islam and the Soviet Union in Central Asia, whereby the Soviet leaders often tried to pacify the Muslim clergy, was very different from the generally very hostile attitude of the Mongolian communist government vis-à-vis Buddhism. Another aspect that was discussed at length was that of foreign influence, or at least international contacts. Mongolia was again taken as a very telling case study. After the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Buddhism, though regarded as part of Mongolian culture by many, was very dependent on foreign support. The Indian ambassador to Mongolia played an important role, and so did the Dalai Lama. There was, however, local opposition. Buddhism in Mongolia was and is closely linked to Tibetan Buddhism. On a governmental level, the close links with Tibetan Buddhism, and in particular the Dalai Lama, were regarded as perhaps hostile towards the Chinese government. But also ideologically, many Mongolian Buddhists preferred a more 'Mongolian' form of Buddhism. This wish for a more 'local' form of a global religion was also discussed in relation to Central Asia, where some governments try to regard and develop Islam as part of the, as it was called in one of the papers, 'genetic blueprint' of the state. Islam is being regarded as part of local 'folklore', and in some parts of Central Asia the government consequently supports traditional forms of Islam, rather than the fundamentalist forms so dominant in the world of Islam today. Whether or not these policies will prove successful remains unknown, but they conform to some of the issues also discussed at the 2014 seminar in Ulaanbaatar, namely the opposition in Central and Inner Asia between, on the one hand, a government-led push for nation-building and ethnno-nationalistic symbolism, and on the other, the enormous expansion of globalisation.

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