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An International Appraisal

of

Muhabbatsho Qobilov's PhD Dissertation: Influence (*Ta'sir*) of World Civilizations on Tajikistan's Cultural-Political Code (*Ramzi Farhangi-Siyosi*).

Appraiser: Dr. Sarfaroz Niyozov, Associate Professor of Comparative, International Education, Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development, University of Toronto, Canada.

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Dear Examination Committee,

I have had the honor of reading the PhD dissertation and the extended summary (avtoreferat) of Mr. Muhabbatsho Qobilov. This dissertation has been developed in the Department of the International Relations of the Faculty of International Relations of the State National University of Tajikistan, under the supervision of Professor Nuriddinov Raimali Shabozovich. The public defense of the dissertation is scheduled for May 14, 2021 at the State National University, Dushanbe. Below is my appraisal of the dissertation.

Qobilov Muhabbatsho has undertaken a very ambitious project on a critically important and contested theme of how Tajikistan's cultural-political code is shaped and can be progressively developed, as it has been historically and currently interacting with some global-level discourses. These global civilizations (or one might, following Foucault, call them discourses) include western modernity, Islamic, Russian, and Soviet. The topic of national consciousness and identity and their formation are critically vital to post-Soviet nations, including those in Central Asia, such as Tajikistan. Indeed, the challenge of building a nation state is critical in post-colonial countries around the world, right from South Africa to Central Asia to Latin America and even Europe, where new states are emerging as a result of the collapse of empires and unions and where the emerging states are trying to forge narratives that would unite their ethnically, linguistically, religiously diverse population and carve place for themselves within the new,



globalized world. This task of the nation building is existentially challenged by the forces, trends, and discourses of globalization and the discourse of clash vs dialog of civilizations that have been put forward in some political corners of the world. To that end, the key problematique (problematika) of this dissertation project, as well as its hypothesis, are highly relevant and important not just for Tajikistan, but Central Asia a whole, as the region's new countries are forming inclusive tolerant national ideologies and identities. Muhabbatsho Qobilov shows a strong, comparative, and nuanced intellectual grasp of the problem, civilizational perspectives, challenges and how Tajikistan should constructively learn from them and move forward.

In doing so, Qobilov takes a panoramic view with a large scope, engaging 4 major civilizational and cultural discourses (western, Islamic, Russian/Soviet, and indigenous/Aryan) and shows an impressive analytic maturity and balance in describing and examining the key features of these civilizations, and what Tajikistan scholars, and political and education policy makers can do about them. He meticulously describes each of the forces, describes their interaction with contemporary Tajik national culture, identifies the positive and challenging aspects of these interactions across space and history and draws valuable implications for policy, cultural and educational programs. Muhabbatsho treads a fine line between not falling into essentialist description and also not relativizing these civilizational frameworks. His framework of engagement, as I can see is critical-constructive: he suggests engaging each of these civilizations as socio-historical constructs, identifying and taking their positive aspects and leaving those that might be problematic for social and national cohesion and the progressive development of Tajikistan.

Qobilov's selection of the idea of cultural-political code, and his engagement with it as a heuristic tool is another aspect of the relevance as well as the innovativeness of his project. The concept of cultural code is contested, as Qobilov shows via his analysis of its various conceptualizations (e.g., Kasserer, Rappaille and so on), but is taken up by political and cultural elites in the Eurasian context, as a new heuristic and strategic concept of engagement between globalization, nationalism, tribalism and other centrifugal and centripetal forces. Qobilov starts by addressing the concepts of civilization and cultural code and sets the stage for further critical engagement, which will place him in the forefront of academic, geopolitical and strategic discussions in the country and region in future. Qobilov also makes some pertinent suggestions for policy, programmatic and research areas, beginning from political and extending



to cultural, academic and educational themes. In sum, the dissertation shows Qobilov's promising analytical potential, and I believe he will become a leading scholar in this strategic area in near future.

To that end, I suggest the dissertation be accepted as successful in the partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy for the specialization of International Relations.

At the same time, there is a number of areas that needs improvement and consideration so as to enable the thesis and its author reach their full potential:

1. The first issue is about the scope of the study: In its current shape, the scope is too broad. Surely, this breadth is helpful for providing, what one might say a panoramic mapping of the context/field and setting a good foundation for general knowledge to build upon. It would, however, perhaps have been more helpful, if Qobilov had selected one civilization as a case study and analyzed its interaction with Tajik cultural code in depth, considering all possible factors. Such depth would have provided more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the particular civilization under question and of its interaction with the Tajik cultural code. To be fair, the author uses a number of theoretical frameworks such as of civilizations (e.g., clash vs dialog), democratic deliberation, global polity, and globalization and uses their insights in the analysis. In his take on these frameworks, Qobilov takes us through a succinct journey into these theories and their key scholars, and presents their key ideas and insights in a clear, concise and balanced way. However, as I said, while on the one hand this is appreciated, on the other, it creates a sense of breadth rather than depth and risks overgeneralization and essentialism along with loss of nuanced and detailed understanding.
2. Related to the above is the question about research methodology. Muhabbatsho does explain the 6 sources of the scholarly literature and 4 sources of policy, documents, periodical and online documents materials, as well as the key tasks of his dissertation. However, a few questions remain unresolved:
 - 2.1 First, a clear articulation of the key and subordinate questions is needed. From what I guess the research question might sound like the following: *how can an encounter between Tajik culture and major world civilizations be engaged to the benefit of Tajikistan's articulation of its unique national and cultural identity.* Regretfully, because the key research question is not articulated clearly, the project at times, drifts in its focus and sharpness.



- 2.2. Second, there is a lack of clarity of data analysis. In other words, how did Qobilov analyze the data from so many sources, how did he construct / devise / identify the subthemes and major themes; and how did he connect these themes with each other, and link them to the study's key tasks and questions, and the existing discourses on civilizational encounters? Addressing these issues would have helped Qobilov to more clearly define his focus and contribution to the existing research in this field;
- 2.3. The third issue with the methodology is a lack of what we might call field work, i.e., collecting new data beyond the existing research, especially Russian and Tajik scholarship and beyond the policy documents and media reports. Going beyond the published research and knowledge through field work is a critical element of the doctoral studies, because it can be a unique source of producing new knowledge. For example, Qobilov could have had what is called *expert interview and survey field work*, where he could have surveyed and interviewed in depth a number of key experts and cultural workers on Tajik, Russian, Islamic and Western and Indigenous cultures/civilizations and asked their views about how can the interaction between Tajik and non-Tajik cultures and civilizations be arranged to the benefit of Tajikistan's national, cultural, social and educational development. Or, Qobilov could have taken a multi-site, cross-case ethnographic study of what Tajik citizens think of the influence/ impact of the global civilizations on their thought and daily practices. Such ethnographic qualitative study would have produced thick description with unique nuances, showing the *real influence (impact, ta'sir)*, if one can say so. It is important to acknowledge that just formulating policies, laws, and regulations, or writing journalist and scholarly articles is not sufficient to make strong claims about the influence (*ta'sir*) of the key global civilizations on Tajik cultural code. In fact, such as field -based study would have also refined and enriched the current definitions of Tajik cultural code.
- 2.4. Lastly, in terms of methodology, it would have been important to know about Qobilov's personal -practical rationale behind choosing this topic. In other words, why did Qobilov select this theme and these 4 civilizational encounters and not others? What are his personal-professional motivations and goals? Have these been achieved through this research?



In sum, this methodological aspect, in my view, is the most serious missing point of the dissertation. My recommendation, therefore, is that in the near future, Qobilov builds on his current research methodology and supplement it with field work with clearly articulated questions and a sample from strong cultural, educational experts and common citizens to produce new knowledge in the area. He has covered a lot of ground, and building on this, a mixed method field-based study seems a logically appropriate next step in Qobilov's scholarly journey.

3. At a more theoretical-methodological level, another important suggestion for Mr. Qobilov is the need to consider post-colonial and decolonization perspectives in his analysis. The field of cultural studies, after the prominent work of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Farid Alatas, Walter D. Mignolo, Boaventura Santos and other post-colonial scholars, has taken a *paradigmatic turn* toward decolonization and indigenization as an approach to global-local or East -West encounters. Using key concepts from these theories would have helped the author to more robustly engage with the used sources, but more importantly, chart the promising future for Tajikistan's development of enhancing its unique cultural identity.
4. Another curiosity question is about why Qobilov did not include the interaction between Chinese and Tajik cultural and civilizational spheres in any way in his otherwise panoramic thesis project. Let's recall that Huntington, to whom Qobilov refers at the start of his thesis, considers Confucian or larger Chinese civilization as one of the major rising forces in the future global geopolitics. Given the rise of China, its tremendously rich cultural and civilizational histories, and potentials, as well as and its geographic proximity to and economic investment in Tajikistan, the necessity of such engagement does not need further elaboration.
5. Lastly, Qobilov needs to perhaps draw implications for education at school, at least upper secondary school level. At this stage, his educational implications mention Higher Education and suggest offering of a course of civilization studies. This might be important, but also is problematic for three reasons:
 - 5.1 The current education curriculum at Tajik universities is oversaturated with courses that focus on particular subject areas and themes. Can, therefore, a more cross -curriculum approach on the themes of culture, civilizational encounters be proposed, instead of a specific course on civilizations. In other words, can the theme of civilizational encounter be included in courses such as philosophy, sociology, culturology, and political economy?



5.2 While higher education is valuable for a sophisticated theme such as civilizational interactions and cultural code, it is important to note that only a small percentage of students in Tajikistan and Central Asia go for higher education. To that end, could the theme of civilizational encounters be included in the general education school curriculum?

5.3 Critically, while the themes of and information about culture, cultural code and civilizations are important, *more important is what skills and capacities need to be developed in Tajik students and educators at school and university levels to analytically -constructively engage with these various cultural, religious, and other concepts?* In my view, the development of critical and analytical thinking skills in each individual citizen of Tajikistan is important and urgent to assess the pros and cons of the various civilizations at individual, community, and national levels. This study and theme have a great potential to contribute to developing such critical -constructive or analytical skills in Tajik young citizens.

Summing up, I would like to reiterate that Mr. Muhabbatsho Qobilov has carried out a strong work on a particularly important theme, that is of strategic importance for the country and its scholarship. Qobilov has done this work with a good sense of quality, organization, intellectual maturity, and balance. His dissertation creates a sense of confidence in Qobilov's potential to join the rank of intellectual and educators whose work will have strategic significance to Tajik nation and Central Asian region. It is work to build upon for the future scholarly work in this area, as Tajikistan charts its future into a competitive globalized society.

With best regards and wishes,

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