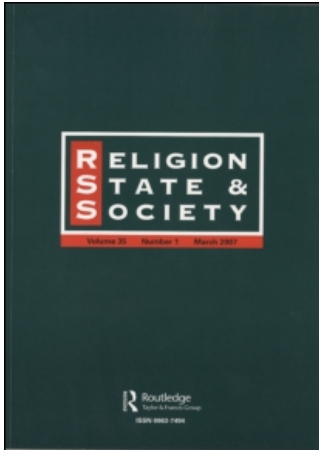


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Rehabilitation and Recovery: Bulgaria's Muslim Communities

JANICE BROWN

Introduction

In precommunist independent Bulgaria Muslims had been neglected and marginalised and had felt alienated, but had been left free to practise their religion and culture. Paradoxically, communist rule, following Moscow directives, brought considerable improvements to their communities through funding to eliminate illiteracy and even, until the early 1970s, funding to foster Turkish-language education and media and to encourage the development of a secular elite. Because this policy was accompanied by an aggressive campaign to eradicate their distinctive religious beliefs and practices, however, it had only a limited effect. They proved far firmer in their faith than the nominally Orthodox majority. The government, increasingly nationalist, became doubtful of their loyalty to the Bulgarian state and also alarmed by their higher fertility. It reversed its policy, with programmes of forced assimilation, generally termed the Revival Process (*Vǎzrazhdane*), first of the Roma and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks),¹ and then, in 1984–85, of the Turks. This 'Revival Process' involved the suppression of their basic normal religious and cultural life. The final excesses of Todor Zhivkov's campaign, with the expulsion of 370,000 Turks in 1989, which aroused alarm even within government circles, prompted the resistance that helped to bring about the collapse of the communist regime. By then, 40 years of increasingly harsh and effective persecution of religion, with the closure of all but around 100 of the 2300 mosques and of all educational institutions, and the confiscation of Qurans and religious texts, had led to an overall deterioration of knowledge of key beliefs and practices, and of the content and sources of the Five Pillars of Wisdom. Few people believed Islam could recover from the onslaught. What is more, in stark contrast with fellow-Muslims in neighbouring Yugoslavia, Bulgaria's Muslims had been completely isolated from contacts with the Islamic world.

Yet as around 152,000 of the expelled Turks returned, mosques filled again and communities enthusiastically set about restoring derelict mosques and building new ones. Their leaders are proud of the Muslims' greater commitment to their faith, compared with that of the Orthodox majority (though it should be noted that many essentially non-religious persons are classified as Orthodox by default). In 1993, 86 per cent of Turks considered themselves 'religious', as compared with about 12 per cent of the population as a whole.

In stark contrast to postcommunist former Yugoslavia Bulgaria has been spared interethnic and religious violence. Relations between the Bulgarian majority and Turks are relatively cordial and civil. Their peaceful coexistence stems in part from the separation of religious communities under the old Ottoman *millet* system and the fact that on the whole they still live apart. The Turks are concentrated in towns and villages in the north-east and south-east. Their contribution to national life remains positive. Bulgarians themselves admit that Turks work harder and are more honest and reliable than themselves; however, they do not want their children to marry them! Among most educated Bulgarians there is general recognition of the Turks as an integral part of the nation's culture, and, as such, in the opinion of James Hopkins, formerly a Scottish church worker in Bulgaria who has lectured at the Evangelical Logos Institute, they are accepted in a way that Bulgarian Evangelical Christians are not. The mass expulsion in 1989, however, had the effect of severing close links that had been formed between classmates at school and university in the cities and larger towns because many of the refugees have never returned.

The same widespread acceptance does not apply to the Pomaks. The resurgence of the Revival Process, as indicated by proponents of the Act for the Protection of the Nation in 1998 (when it was rejected by the Assembly), and the crusade launched in 1993 by Boyan Saruev (a police officer under the communists who became an Orthodox priest) with his St John the Forerunner Movement, reawakened tensions within the fragile Pomak community which is concentrated in the Rhodope mountains. The Revival Process has played on fears that the Bulgarian nation is threatened with extinction. The Muslim birth rate has long been far higher than the Bulgarian; since 1989 the total national birth rate has fallen steadily, reaching an all-time low of 8.2 births per year per thousand population by 2003. This is due not only to a high rate of abortion but also to emigration, with half a million young Bulgarians (including Muslims) expressing their conviction that they have no future in a poverty-stricken country. Muslim birth rates, inflated by the even more prolific Roma, are still high – up to 14.7 per thousand in the main Turkish region, Kărdzhali, in the south-east. However, objective scrutiny of trends indicates that Muslim birth rates too are dropping. According to the 1992 census Muslims constituted 13.1 per cent of the population. Turks, numbering 812,067, accounted for 75.3 per cent of Muslims; Bulgarians (142,938) 13.5 per cent; Roma (12,923) 1.5 per cent and others (Karachani (Vlachs) and Tatars) (10,398), 1 per cent. The accuracy of these figures is doubtful, however; they still reflect the fact that many Roma claim to be Turks to avoid social stigma and also Muslim fears of identification as such (Georgieva, 1994). The number of Roma could have been as high as 300,000; that of Pomaks 268,000. The 2001 census, when democracy had become more firmly established, showed the percentage of Muslims as 12.2 per cent of the total population, at 967,000. This census left declarations of ethnicity, mother tongue and religion voluntary. Turks had dropped to 747,000 and Roma, many of whom had undoubtedly identified themselves as Turks previously, had risen to 371,000 (Trud, 2002). Pomaks have been denied the option of identifying themselves as such in both the 1992 and 2001 censuses, whose designers reflect a common perception and hope that they would all eventually be reintegrated into the Bulgarian nation. The most recent estimate of total number of Muslims (provided by the Greek Helsinki Group in 1999) is 1,110,295.

In this article I trace the problems associated with the rehabilitation and recovery of Islam in Bulgaria. As Muslims have sought reintegration within mainstream political and social life, they have also encountered delays, obstacles and some degree of open

opposition, especially from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the heir of the Communist Party. I assess the role played by the predominantly Muslim political party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) (*Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi*), during this process. I examine the response of government and community in the face of the escalation of Muslim fundamentalism in the wider world which fed anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic xenophobia within Bulgaria even before the events of 11 September 2001. I examine how these events and the arrival of numerous Islamic organisations from abroad have heightened the profile of the mainstream Islamic community, despite its moderate and tolerant character, in both the domestic and the international spheres. I trace the acrid disputes over leadership which have led to schism, still unresolved, which has embittered relations within the Muslim community, from top to local level. I discuss parallels with the other major religious community, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which has likewise suffered schism.

In this article I cover only Muslim ethnic groups for which religion plays a significant role. Although many Roma identify themselves as Muslim – 39 per cent as against 44 per cent Orthodox Christian – I omit them from this survey. ‘Real’ Muslims despise them. Undoubtedly Bulgaria’s most disadvantaged, poverty-stricken and deliberately victimised group, their religious allegiances sit lightly. Islam is not an integral constituent of their community life. Certain specific features of the formation of Roma religion justify the thesis that it is a cultural bridge thrown down by them in an attempt to achieve equality with the majority population. Normally they adopt the confession of the community in which they live; in an area of mixed faiths they adopt the more prestigious, the more authoritative one (Marushiakova and Popov, 1993, quoted in Bogomilova, 2005; Tomova, 1995, p. 25, quoted in Bogomilova, 2005). Their attempts to achieve integration in this way have not proved successful, however. It should be noted that the only religious groups which have shown genuine concern for their plight, coupled with commitment to converting them, are Evangelical Christian churches and mission bodies, who have set up many vibrant and flourishing congregations. Hopkins, however, suspects that material aid, including cash inducements, offered by some proselytisers may play some part in the readiness of Roma to be converted. Referring to fieldwork she did among Roma in Kyustendil in 2004, Nina Bogomilova notes that the evangelicals give the Roma the feeling that they are accepted on an equal footing and also notes that the medium of lively music and hymn singing appeals to them (Bogomilova, 2005). The Roma merit a survey of their own (Cacanoska, 2004; Djordjevich, 2004; Todorovich, 2004).

Rehabilitation of the Muslim Community

After the initial enthusiasm when communism fell, which could be paralleled to a lesser extent among Orthodox believers, Islamic renewal somewhat lost its impetus. Reopening and reconstruction of mosques that had been closed or converted to other uses lagged behind demand. Muslims suffered from the same problems as Orthodox Christians, being forced to travel long distances to places of worship, especially in urban areas expanded under communism but left bereft of mosques and churches. Shumen, the major Muslim centre, had been reduced from 40 mosques to eight in 1980 and three by 1989. In Sofia even in 1993 the Banya Bashi mosque was the only one open for prayer (Lewis, 1994). The Plovdiv mosque was still being refitted in 1994 (I observed this personally). Nevertheless, by 1995, 945 mosques and 1148 mufti districts were functioning.

The most devout, according to a 1992 survey, were still peasants, the elderly and women, just as they were in communist-era surveys. The younger generation, the prime target for atheist education under the communists, had been largely lost: only 1.9 per cent of 18–29-year-olds worshipped each week. In this they differed little from their nominally Orthodox counterparts. There was an inverse correlation between religiosity and educational attainment. By 1995 numbers attending Friday prayers had declined considerably, to around 15–20 per cent of Muslims, and, as in the past, most were old men. Different surveys produced different results, but between 30 and 41 per cent of Muslims claimed to pray regularly; this probably applied more to women, who traditionally do not attend mosques, and the elderly. The full observance of religious life demanded a discipline for which Bulgarian Muslims, in particular the young, were ill-prepared. Although a madrassah (the theological institute) in Sofia and a high school in Shumen were soon reopened, specific needs for the most basic instruction encountered practical obstacles such as dire shortages of teachers, teaching materials and the money to pay for them. Adequate provision for these had to wait until systematic assistance from Turkey became available from 1998.

Muslims had been so deprived of the possibility of normal religious life that for most of the second half of the twentieth century, when most of their potential community leaders came of age, there were no opportunities for religious training within or outside Bulgaria, in contrast with the situation for Muslims in neighbouring Yugoslavia. Even those who might have been keen to educate themselves had no access to religious texts. Most of the handful of state-approved regional muftis, who received short courses under the aegis of the Board of Religious Affairs, were from the ranks of the security services and/or appointed for their loyalty to the Communist Party and its policies, and only had the most superficial knowledge and understanding of Islam. There were parallels here with the Orthodox establishment, which had been heavily infiltrated by the security services – one teacher in the Orthodox Theological Academy, Aleksandăr Gospodipov, estimated that by 1990 half of his students were agents – but Orthodox institutions for training clergy had never been completely closed. The pettiness and greed exhibited, not least in their power struggles for leadership, by leading muftis who should have provided role-models, alienated many people with Muslim backgrounds who might otherwise have considered returning to their faith (Eminov, 1997; Ilchev, 2000, p. 148, n. 18).

As far as places of worship are concerned, Muslims, with 12.2 per cent of the population and around 1000 mosques, are now actually better provided for than Orthodox Christians, who have about 3800 churches for their 85 per cent. However, because most Muslims live dispersed in villages they need more local places for convenient worship. The Orthodox tend to be concentrated more in towns and their church buildings tend to be larger (CEDIME, 1999).

By 1998 sociologist and chairman of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Krassimir Kanev (Krasimir Kănev) was satisfied that the Turkish community had regained its former status but that its rehabilitation had been damaged by its poverty and the continuing brain-drain of its young. Most Muslims are peasants, even more impoverished than other Bulgarians, the Roma excepted. Usually they are lacking in initiative and local councils are run by poorly educated people who are often susceptible to bribery and nepotism. They are divided regionally. The more prosperous north-easterners think of themselves as easy-going and regard south-easterners with condescension, as fanatical, conservative and devious. Ethnically (though not linguistically, because 98 per cent speak Turkish) there are divergences, as shown in the census figures quoted above.

Nor would Bulgaria's average Muslims win approval from co-religionists in more traditionally Islamic societies. Their most significant ceremonies are Ramadan (though only a minority observe the fast), Bayram and burial rituals. Wearing the veil and abstinence from alcohol and pork are regarded as optional extras. Peasant women still prefer to wear *shalvan* (trousers) and headscarves (Georgieva, 1994). In mixed population areas, however, there is little to distinguish Christians and Muslims in dress or behaviour; both are apt to drink heavily, though Pomaks are an exception to this. Many local imams during the first years of democracy refused to sanction religious burials for Muslims who had not changed their imposed Bulgarian names back to Islamic ones and insisted on removing headstones with photos of the deceased, an Orthodox practice, from Muslim tombs (Ilchev, 2000, p. 248, n. 17). Traditional neighbourliness has resurfaced again in many mixed Muslim-Christian communities, with exchange of gifts at Easter and Bayram, reciprocal visits at holidays and attendances at funerals (Georgieva, 1994, pp. 60–61). Children are not segregated from each other.

One positive feature of Bulgaria's Muslim community is the absence of antagonism towards the Muslim group popularly known as Alevis (Aliani) or as Kazãlbashi, who though Turkish speakers may not be Turkish in origin. According to the 1994 census they numbered over 85,000, or 7.7 per cent of Bulgaria's Muslims. They live in small tightly-knit endogamous village communities each under a *dede* (local leader) in the north-east around Razgrad, Silistra and Ispèrikh and further south, especially around Stara Zagora, Gerlovo and Khaskovo. Some of their *tekke* (convents), particularly Demin Baba *tekke* near Razgrad, became foci for Muslim solidarity in 1989. They are associated with various Sufi brotherhoods, including Bektashi, Naqshbandi and Qadiri, and are syncretic, using such Christian practices as burning candles and drinking wine. They do not worship in mosques or practise the five daily prayers. Because of persecution suffered in the past, at the hands of orthodox Sunnis, and latterly under communism when their colourful musical ritual dances were prohibited and the *tekke* closed and let go to ruin, and today because of lingering Sunni suspicion, they adopt a strategy of concealment. They now have the option of reopening contact with related orders in Turkey, which constitute 10–25 per cent of the Turkish population. There, though still regarded by the Sunni majority as not full Turkish citizens, they are also increasingly mustering up courage to emerge into public life. Interestingly, some of their shrines did in the past attract many Christians too (Eminov, 1997, pp. 72–75; Koinova, 1999; Shkodrova, 2005). The low profile of Bulgaria's Alevis helps protect them against the discrimination and restrictions Alevis suffer in Turkey where in May 2006 the head of the Diyanet, the board for religious affairs which controls all official Muslim life, declared all Alevis *de facto* Sunni. In Turkey they are still regarded by the Sunni majority as not full Turkish citizens (Forum 18, 2006).

Muslim Turks Launch the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

The suppression and expulsion of Turks in 1989 was so blatant that the first post-Zhivkov BSP government under Aleksandãr Lilov had to redress their wrongs visibly. In December 1989 it hurriedly disassociated itself from Zhivkov's Revival Process and restored their full civil rights, including the right to practise their religion freely, reclaim their names and use their language. Bulgarian governments, whether leftist or centre-right, should be given credit, alone among the governments of Balkan nations in the last two decades, for reversing ethnic cleansing and rehabilitating those who had

been wronged – even if the crimes of those who carried out the policy were conveniently swept under the carpet, as was evident when the human rights activist Tatyana Vaksberg addressed the issue in a film in 2000 (see later).

Nevertheless, as Muslims sought reintegration within mainstream political and social life, they also encountered delays, obstacles and some degree of open opposition, especially from the BSP. Even today they still experience occupational discrimination. However, the establishment in 1990 of the MRF, which underlined the distinctive ethnic and religious character of the Turkish part of the population, provoked a substantial rearguard action within the BSP, especially among those who had been involved in the Revival Process and feared the Turks might employ their new political freedom to seek revenge. There were even fears that Bulgaria's Turks might follow the example of Turkish Cypriots and demand a separate territory. A government and cross-party forum including the United Democratic Forces (UDF) and the Social Council of Citizens (*Sotsialna sävet na grazhdani*), representing some 65 groups concerned with problems of minority rights, defused the situation by affirming the principle of equality for all citizens and by banning organisations advocating ethnic separation or autonomy (Bell, 1999, p. 253).

Hostility towards the MRF and the Turkish minority in particular was expressed in the new 1991 constitution and electoral law, which while guaranteeing freedom of religion and separation of church and state, explicitly forbade the formation of political parties based on religious or ethnic grounds. The MRF proceeded to register as an organisation for rights. A BSP appeal to the Constitutional Court to declare MRF participation in the elections unconstitutional was narrowly rejected on 21 April 1992 on the grounds that the MRF was open to support, membership and votes from anyone and stood for basic constitutional values that were entitled to protection. In practice the MRF has remained about 90 per cent Turkish in membership.

Successive UDF governments (1991–92 and 1997–2001) chose to exorcise the ghosts of history, overcoming past tensions and mistrust. They actively furthered a stable and cooperative relationship with Turkey, whose governments regarded Bulgaria as a bridge towards eventual European Union (EU) membership. This benefited the rehabilitation of Islam. Thus as a coalition party in the first UDF government in 1991–92 the MRF was able to use its influence to make a positive contribution to the normalisation of Muslim life. This included, in May 1992, the visit of prime minister Filip Dimitrov (UDF) to Turkey where a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations, Cooperation and Security was signed. As leader of the MRF Akhmed Dogan emphasised, Bulgaria's 'road to Europe passed through the Bosphorus'. In a bilateral treaty in 1992 questions addressed but not resolved had included the restitution of *waqf* properties (see below for details) allocated for the support of mosques and the opening of private Turkish schools in Bulgaria. The Muslim community, like the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, receives only token subsidies from the government and needs its property rents to function properly.

The MRF became, and has maintained its position as, the third most important party. Initially it exerted pressure on the government to deal with the restoration of housing, property and employment to Turks returning from Turkey, all of which provided sound foundations from which normal religious life could be resumed. Though the MRF defends Islam as far as Muslim interests are concerned its ideology is secular. Later, some of its members made the most constructive suggestions for changes to the Law on Confessions. It has in effect become the party of human rights. It has proved itself moderate and restrained, and has never sought any kind of autonomy for the Turkish minority. It has been prepared to cooperate with all the

important political forces in the country, even able to pursue a determining role in coalition politics, thanks to the opportunism of Akhmed Dogan, who founded the MRF in December 1989. He had been a philosophy pupil of Zhelyu Zhelev, leader of the UDF, who became the first president of postcommunist Bulgaria. As a leader of the (illegal) Turkish Liberation Movement during the 1980s Dogan had been imprisoned. He has proved himself the most astute and pragmatic of Bulgaria's new crop of politicians. While left- and right-wingers rose and fell he always managed to keep afloat and in a position to control the balance of power. His personal commitment to Islam, however, is minimal, while his extravagant and flamboyant lifestyle and dubious morality have tarnished his image among a predominantly impoverished community, and together with his switch to supporting the BSP in 1992 in order to bring down the UDF government, when its land reforms and restitution significantly jeopardised the interests of the Turkish minority, lost him the support of many Turks who had suffered from Zhivkov's oppression. The MRF share of the total vote fell from 7.55 per cent in 1991 to 5.44 per cent in 1994. This fall proved only temporary, however, and despite this and occasional defections from within his party he has maintained discipline and in general kept the electorate of the MRF in a monolithic bloc.

In independent Bulgaria there had always been deputies of Turkish and Muslim background, so there was more continuity with the recent past than was at first apparent. In 1997 reopened police files revealed that some MRF leaders including Dogan had been security officers, as, for that matter, had been other leading postcommunist politicians (including, years earlier, another former champion of human rights, the Orthodox priest Khristofer Säbev). This indicated that these compromised MRF leaders were not so much genuine community representatives as political players who were assigned certain roles within the broader context of Bulgaria's political transition (Atanasova, 2004, pp. 391–92). Thus they have been very careful to preclude any Islamist or pan-Turkic ideas, and employ identification with secularist language in their policy statements. They helped Bulgaria to avoid the radicalisation of ethnic politics which bedevilled other South-Eastern European states; nationalism lacked the intensity so evident elsewhere. Also, at the local level, where Bulgarians sometimes found themselves for the first time under Muslim-Turkish local governments, the fact that Bulgarian and Turkish office-holders had to cooperate to address problems set a positive example and allowed the old tradition of neighbourliness to reassert itself (Bell, 1999, p. 262). Dogan claimed that the Bulgarian model of ethnic relations provided the most important alternative to the Bosnian model for resolving ethnic issues in the Balkans (Trud, 1996). A key factor in defusing possible tensions was the diminution of the Turkish community by continuing emigration as it suffered most from Bulgaria's prolonged economic crisis, in particular the dire conditions caused by the collapse of the European tobacco market. It is estimated that 30,000–60,000 left each year, initially, though a number returned, finding Turkey less congenial than they expected (Atanasova, 2004, pp. 364–69).

Leadership Disputes within the Muslim Community

Unfortunately each government, through gross interference in the internal affairs of the two major religious communities, has exacerbated tensions within them and has done nothing to foster reconciliation between factions. This has delayed postcommunist rehabilitation and reintegration of both the Orthodox and Muslim communities and has lessened their impact on society as a whole.

The first UDF government, dominated by anticommunist sentiments, was drawn into what was to prove a protracted and controversial involvement in the life of the two major religions, because a priority for both UDF and MRF was to remove people they regarded as agents infiltrated into the Orthodox and Muslim establishments. Both institutions contained people who were patently incapable of providing the spiritual and moral guidance that their flocks so greatly needed. On 21 February 1992, at MRF instigation, the Board of Religious Affairs appointed by the UDF removed the deeply compromised chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council, Nedim Gendzhev, along with seven regional muftis by declaring their elections illegitimate, though at first they refused to vacate their offices (CEDIME, 1999). This was paralleled by the Board's declaration on 25 May that Patriarch Maksim's election was invalid and by the government's backing of an alternative synod, thus precipitating a protracted schism, though with the majority of Orthodox believers remaining faithful to Maksim and the Holy Synod.

In contrast, in the case of the Muslim community, the Board's proposals won general approval. Gendzhev, who later confessed to being a security officer, had, together with the regional muftis (with the exception of the Kărdzhali mufti (possibly Fikri Sali Khasan)), declared that Muslims enjoyed complete freedom to profess their religion and practise their rites and that all mosques were open, this at the time when western news agencies had got wind of police brutality and closure of mosques during the assimilation campaign of 1984–85. They had defended the Revival Process and denied the assault on Islam that accompanied it, both to representatives of Islamic countries and to their own people. Gendzhev had already worked for the Interior Ministry for years before he was appointed as a mufti, despite his having had no religious training. After six months to brush up his knowledge of Islam in Syria he had been appointed chief mufti in 1988 (Eminov, 1997).

Gendzhev is an authoritarian and adversarial character, far more tenacious in the pursuit of power than was the nominal head of the Orthodox alternative synod, the late Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop. On 19 September 1992 the Islamic National Conference, the highest body in the regulation of Muslim affairs, elected Fikri Sali Khasan as chief mufti, and a new chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council, and adopted a new statute, which was registered with the Board of Religious Affairs together with the new leadership (Corley, 2000). (The Supreme Muslim Council, consisting of the chief mufti and 10 regional muftis, is responsible for administration.) However, the downfall of the UDF government at the end of the year did not mark the end of government interference in Muslim affairs. The MRF retained some influence in the next government, a technocrat coalition (but BSP-dominated) led by the economist Lyuben Berov. It continued to recognise Khasan and the Council. In the December 1994 elections the BSP and associated nationalist groups encouraged Gendzhev to form a political party, the Democratic Party of Justice (*Demokratichna partiya za spravedlivost*), with the same initials in Bulgarian as the MRF. Muslim voters were no fools and the party made little headway. The BSP's real aim was to sow dissension among Turks; its daily (*Duma*) constantly referred to them as the 'Turkish Fifth Column'. Not surprisingly, Bulgarian-Turkish relations entered a relatively cool period after the BSP came to power.

Tensions have long existed within Bulgaria's Muslim community between those favouring affiliation with Turkey and those favouring affiliation with Saudi Arabia. Khasan, most muftis and the traditionally tolerant Turkish community favoured links with Turkey and disapproved of the personally profitable connections which

Gendzhev at that time enjoyed with Saudi Arabia, which they looked askance at as too fundamentalist.

After the definitive BSP victory in December 1994 the Board of Religious Affairs started to reverse its former policy of endorsing reform of the communist-appointed establishment. It found a loophole. The rules and regulations for elections of district muftis, required by the 1992 statute, had not been ready when the muftis were elected in 1992. On these grounds – plus the fact that the community was divided – on 12 January 1995 the Board ordered mayors of municipalities to cancel the registration of muftis legitimately elected in 1992 and replace them with muftis appointed by Gendzhev in 1989 under communist rule! Already in November 1994, Gendzhev had hastily convened another National Conference, where he persuaded some legitimately elected and some illegitimately appointed muftis and many delegates who hardly understood that their presence there was not legitimate to accept a new statute. Gendzhev did not dare put his name forward as chief mufti; that post went to Khadzhi Basri Khadzhishef, a former Labour Corps sergeant, while Gendzhev became chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council, which actually gave him more power than the chief mufti. Plum positions went to his supporters. Unqualified teaching staff, like journalist and BSP activist Ismail Dobrudzhaliev, replaced the Sofia Islamic Institute rector, associate professor Ibrakhim Yalamov, who had been educated at the Islamic school in Shumen in the 1940s before embarking on political studies in Moscow and a long academic career teaching at Sofia University. Some ‘disobedient’ muftis and mosque trustees were dismissed; physical assaults, beatings, armed burglary and thefts of documents were some of the means employed by Gendzhev’s faction, who had at their disposal bank accounts, donations and *waqf* (*vakif*) properties. *Waqfs* were endowments or trusts set up in the past with a grant of land or other income-producing property made by well-to-do individuals or families, intended to support pious foundations with socially beneficial ends, such as mosques and schools (Hadjieva, 1995). Not all the *waqf* properties had been used for their ostensible purpose. Down the centuries, under Ottoman rule, the Muslim leadership diverted substantial property and other sources of wealth to their own personal benefit. As a result they now own a variety of valuable properties throughout the country, consisting of residential, office and commercial buildings, agricultural land and city plots, which should belong to the Muslim community. Because many of these properties are found in highly desirable areas of towns and cities, historically the rents from them have provided a substantial income for the Muslim hierarchy. Control of some of them fell into Gendzhev’s hands when he was chief mufti; he diverted funds enabling him to found a profitable, personally controlled ‘charitable’ organisation.

These actions aroused alarm within the Muslim community. The Turkish news agency ‘Anatolia’ claimed that ‘many members of the Turkish minority were wondering whether the development concerning the muftis was an early sign of a new assimilation campaign against them’ (Christidis, 2005, p. 180).

On 22 February 1995 the Board of Religious Affairs registered the new Muslim Council (Obektiv, 1996). On 27 February Khasan and his staff were forcibly evicted from their offices in Sofia by private security guards led by the triumphant Gendzhev clique in unbecoming scenes strangely reminiscent of the capture of the Orthodox Church’s Holy Synod headquarters by the schismatic synod back in 1992. Khasan’s plea for assistance was rejected on the grounds that the new occupants legitimately represented the Muslim community and his appeal to the Supreme Court was dismissed on procedural grounds. On the pretext of a lack of written rules for the election of regional muftis, the Board for Religious Affairs put pressure on mayors to

replace muftis it deemed *persona non grata* with clerics acceptable to the government and declared the activities of the Supreme Muslim Council illegal. Protests to the government from mainstream Muslims were ignored. The Board even prohibited students from Shumen's *rustie* (high school) to use religious festivals in villages for learning how to officiate at weddings and funerals – an essential part of their training. In 1996 the newly reopened private school near Ruse was closed. There were two Supreme Councils, two chief muftis, parallel regional muftis and parallel local imans. All this suited BSP policy of encouraging factionalism within the community on both religious and political levels (Eminov, 1997). On 5 and 6 March 1995 mainstream Muslims went ahead on their own initiative with an extraordinary National Conference and elected Fikri Sali Khasan as chief mufti. On 25 May rival groups clashed in Khaskovo. In June and September rallies were organised in many towns to protest against what participants regarded as Gendzhev's outrages. The government refused to comply with a subsequent Supreme Court ruling in Khasan's favour in 1996 on the grounds that it had already registered the community's leaders.

In January 1997 Muslims joined in the demonstrations that brought down the discredited BSP government; some MRF had already switched to the UDF, disenchanted by their leadership's previous alliance with the BSP government and justifiable allegations of MRF corruption. Under the new coalition government dominated by the UDF, the first time a non-communist party had won an absolute majority, in which the MRF exerted considerable influence, Muslims took steps to resolve their schism round the conference table. The conference was held on 14 October, the very day on which the Supreme Court definitively decreed that the 1992 statute and Khasan's election were valid (Cohen and Kanev, 1999, pp. 252, 257, 263).

On 23 October the 1362 delegates at a national Islamic conference which was billed as a 'unification' conference unanimously elected a new chief mufti, 35-year-old Mustafa Alish Khadzhi, who had just completed his preliminary studies in Islamic theology in Jordan. Gendzhev and Khasan had agreed not to run – possibly because they felt they could prevail on the younger man to carry out their wishes (Sega, 1997, 24 October). The conference urged government leaders to stop all interference in religious matters, and, pointedly, called on the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church to follow their lead and bring the Orthodox schism to an end. The significance of this was not lost on some Orthodox church members and ought to have administered a salutary rebuke to Patriarch Maksim and Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop, the warring hierarchs. The conference also took a clear stand, unlike the Orthodox *Sabor* (Council) of 1997, voting a new statute banning from leadership roles people connected with the former state security, the Communist Party or the 'Revival Process' (BTA, 1997b).

To safeguard Islam against potentially destabilising proselytising activities on the part of fundamentalist foreigners it stipulated that muftis and imans must be Bulgarian citizens. It reaffirmed the Sunni character of Bulgarian Islam – though Sunni or Shiite identity is of little consequence to Bulgaria's Muslims (Kontinent, 1997). The government approved the conference's resolution, which the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee hailed as the most significant achievement in the field of religious freedom in 1997 (Obektiv, 1998). Khadzhi remained chief mufti until the Islamic Conference in 2000 when he was replaced by another of the younger generation, Selim Mekhmet. Khadzhi continued to add to his administrative and intellectual skills, serving as chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council between 2000 and 2003, then becoming the rector of the Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia while pursuing a doctorate in the sociology of Islam in Turkey, activities which would serve him well later.

According to the scholar Ali Eminov, Khadzhi has proved a most constructive mediator, a voice for moderation and reconciliation within the community, who tries to steer a neutral course in the leadership disputes.

The announcement of unification within the Muslim community proved premature. Khasan, the MRF-approved candidate, accepted the council's leadership decision, but Gendzhev held a press conference protesting against state interference in the election of the unification conference delegates, some of whom he claimed were not imams but mayors and MRF activists (BTA, 1997a). Exactly the same accusation could have been made about the government's attempted manipulation of elections for the Orthodox Council earlier that year when electors unfamiliar to regular church members appeared in some parishes (Broun, 2002, p. 369). Gendzhev's subsequent appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court was rejected on the grounds that his registration as chief mufti was invalid (Y. Grozev, Interview, 11 December 1998, in CEDIME, 1999). His clique did not lose out entirely, however. They had acquired profitable business interests during Gendzhev's second term in office: the running of the *hajj* to Mecca, a profit-making charity, a private school in Gendzhev's village near Ruse and the sale of Turkish-language Qurans (K. Kanev, conversation with the author, 1994). For the time being Gendzhev had sufficient irons in the fire but he was to continue to sow dissension in order to promote his long-term aim, control of the community assets that he and his supporters had appropriated.

Meanwhile Khasan, together with Muslim teacher Ismail Akhmed Chaush, appealed directly to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg against the 1995 BSP government for unlawful and arbitrary interference in the rights of believers and the religious community to govern their own affairs and choose their own leadership. In a judgment with wider implications in providing guidelines for other Council of Europe states bedevilled by competing religious groups, on 26 October 2000 the ECHR decreed that the Bulgarian government had violated Muslim community rights (Corley, 2000).²

Although the decision applied to the former BSP government, it also embarrassed the current UDF government as it could have been applied with equal justice to its intervention in the internal affairs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in May 1992.³ Later, the ECHR criticised Bulgaria for not having provided one branch of the Muslim religious community (i.e. Gendzhev's) with the opportunity to maintain control over at least part of the property that had belonged to the community, even though it recognised that 'undoubtedly Mr Hasan has the support of a significant part of the community's members' (ECHR, 2000, para. 78).

Unfortunately that was not the end of the dispute, nor of costly recourse to various courts. After the tenures of Khadzhi and his successor Selim Mekhmet, at the end of 2003 bitter factional struggles were to break out again, splitting the Muslim community, at the very time when it needed to be solidly united against the spectre of fundamentalism. Neither the MRF nor Gendzhev were prepared to give up. According to informed observers, the arguments were not motivated by any concern for doctrine, but rather by the exceptional profit potential of the chief mufti's properties and the over-generous subsidies that could be reaped from Arab foundations. The parallel with the schism in the Orthodox Church, which also had no doctrinal basis but lay in the struggle to control profitable properties, was only too clear. For the dispute over leadership of the Muslim community was not only a power struggle. It was also an attempt to control the assets and real estate to which the chief mufti's office had access. The income still goes into the coffers of the charity Gendzhev founded and gives him influence and power and perhaps, as eventually in 2006 a court

case was brought against him for embezzlement, considerable personal wealth. According to Ali Eminov (Eminov, 2006), it has clearly been in Gendzhev's interests to try to keep the community divided as long as possible through court actions and other means; the persistence of factionalism serves his personal interests and those of his supporters. He is not the only person aspiring to a leadership position who is to blame for factional strife. Others, too, are more concerned with profit than with promoting what is in the best interests of Islam.

Rehabilitation and Minority Rights

In July 1997 the new (UDF) president Petăr Stoyanov apologised during his visit to Turkey for the mistreatment of Bulgaria's Turkish minority during the communist era. In December the visit of the Turkish prime minister Meset Yilman to Bulgaria, the first official visit by a Turkish president for 18 years, opened a new chapter in bilateral relations, including practical aid from Turkey in the new educational field.

The International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR), a pioneering project funded by various institutions including the Soros Foundation, was set up in Bulgaria in 1992 under Antonina Zhelyazhkova to promote minority rights and provide grants for students of minority origins, including those from remote mountain or border villages in the Rhodope, as well as material help for village or ghetto schools. IMIR's remit was very wide, including not only the sizeable Muslim and Roma communities (to which much attention had to be devoted) but also Bulgarian Catholics, Vlachs and Armenians among others. It fostered debates on problems of teaching them and of providing instruction in their mother tongue. Its member scholars cooperated with other Balkan experts in Bosnia, Belgrade and Turkey, though not so much with Greece, where official recognition of minorities leaves much to be desired.

However, something at government level was needed. This did not come until December 1997, when the newly elected UDF government under Ivan Kostov, partly in response to MRF pressure and anxious too to demonstrate Bulgarian commitment to EU standards on minority rights, took the initiative to try to halt the increasing alienation of ethnic and religious minorities and the continual drain of young people emigrating. It established a National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, including representatives from the Turks, Roma, Karakachani and Tatars, Jews, Vlachs and Armenians. It sought to integrate them into local government structures and mainstream Bulgarian society, including the provision of broadcasts in their own languages, to facilitate their religious life. Seminars were organised. The fractured Pomak community of 268,000 did not consider joining until the next year (Koinova, 1998).

Government measures to halt the alienation of ethnic minorities encountered considerable opposition even within the UDF as well as from nationalist circles, especially from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO). Some observers expressed reservations that the measures were mere window dressing, that they might not prove effective and that they were aimed at reducing the influence of the MRF. The latter, admittedly, had already splintered, with Gyuner Takhir leading an alternative Turkish party, the National Movement for Rights and Freedoms; he took advantage of the revelation of Dogan's former security connections and also exploited regional differences. Dogan's power base lies in the south-east; Takhir's in the north-east. In the long run, however, the MRF maintained its primacy.

The Assembly's adoption in April 2000 of the Bulgarians Resident Outside the Republic of Bulgaria Act posed a potential threat to the survival of Bulgaria's Islamic communities, because it granted Bulgarians living abroad various privileges should they return. These included work permits, financial help, favourable credit terms for resettlement and free lease of land from the state or municipalities. In July the regional governor of Kărdzhali said that some 30,000 Bulgarians from Moldova, Bessarabia and other former Soviet republics would be settled there. Had this been implemented it would have drastically changed the ethno-demographic and religious structure of the area (Obektiv, 2003). Given the appalling poverty of Moldova, emigration to Bulgaria might yet become a reality. Gagauz, a Turkic people who converted to the Orthodox Church, might have added yet another element to a complex interethnic and religious mix. Significantly, Khristo Genchev, a close collaborator of Saruev's, and a key member of the militantly nationalist Nationwide Committee for the Defence of National Interests, was a leading protagonist for resettlement. Up until 2006, however, no appreciable advance had been made in the project, but it is one which might be embraced with favour by *Ataka*, the fascist political party which emerged in 2005.

The Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe is seeking to aid Muslim minorities to integrate into and contribute positively to their respective societies and Europe as a whole. It is taking up such issues as *waqf* restitution and security, and publishes books in non-Arabic languages (Hassan, 2005).

Vaksberg Uncovers the Past

A major controversy flared up in 2000 when Tatyana Vaksberg's film *Tekhnologiya na Zloto (Technology of Evil)*, based on the campaign to change names and forcibly assimilate Turks in 1984–85, was shown on television. This was not the first time a director had resorted to the cinema to drive home a point. To castigate the Turkish community and prepare public opinion for the Revival Process, Zhivkov's government had provided vast resources to leading director Lyudmil Staikov to make *Vreme na Nasilie (A Time of Violence)* which depicted what it claimed was forcible conversion of Pomak communities to Islam in the central Rhodope in the seventeenth century. It was shown in 1988, at a time when the Turkish Philology Department in Sofia University had been closed down, its members discharged and a small army of 'scholars' enlisted to demonstrate that there were no Turks in Bulgaria, only Bulgarians forcibly converted to Islam who were now engaged in the 'natural' return to their native Bulgarian consciousness (Bell, 1999, p. 250).

Vaksberg claimed that her film was the first major examination of the forced assimilation of Turks and that the crimes committed then had been swept under the carpet, even by the MRF. It had become evident, she said, that the procuracy that should have indicted those responsible for the crimes had been in possession of the relevant documents the whole time. When the prosecutor Valeri Părvanov did open his document on the issue he began by accusing the Turks of brutality against Bulgarians five centuries earlier, including forcibly converting them to Islam. His indictment did not condemn the assimilation process; only the forcible means employed. Nor did it rate the mass deportation of Turks in 1989 as a crime – and thus tacitly exonerated those responsible for it. Vaksberg partially blamed the press and society as a whole for their customary habit of tactfully drawing a curtain over their past participation in events in communist times. She deplored the general lack of interest in researching party and interior ministry archives when they were opened to

the public in 1997. Even some historians and journalists, democrats who had defended the Turkish minority in 1989, did not speak out on the topic (Obektiv, 2001).

Vaksberg had aimed to describe the mechanisms of an assault on identity in the hope it would provoke a search for justice, the punishment of the criminals involved and a new understanding of the assimilation process for what it really was – a crime. These goals had only partly been achieved, and the goals of initiating debate about the value of human life and dignity, human rights and the acceptance of the other, not at all. Justice had never been done. Thousands of the perpetrators were still alive, but only one person, Georgi Atanasov, secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee and later prime minister, had been indicted, and that in a closed court. Some 160 articles had appeared urging research on cases of assimilation of other groups – but had avoided the one at issue. Vaksberg regretted that the only books on the forcible assimilation were written by former police officers involved in it, like Boyan Saruev, and then only to exonerate its legality, though he confessed that the force employed led him to abhor all forms of violence. Kanev's survey in the mid-1990s revealed that 60 per cent of Orthodox Bulgarians interviewed had expressed approval of Zhivkov's campaign.

The press, in particular the BSP's *Standart*, seized on the implication that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church had approved of the campaign. Rather than provoking a major confrontation between Orthodox and Muslims or further discrediting Patriarch Maksim, which Bulgarian emigre historian Spas Raikin believes was the intention of those who promoted the publicity, it merely elicited a statement from the politically sophisticated MRF deputies that because the Muslim establishment and most local muftis too had been compelled to support the Revival Process, the involvement of the Orthodox Church was of no great significance.

Vaksberg herself, fearful of being accused of stirring up trouble, said that no one had the right to show her film again until after the parliamentary elections. In conversation with me, Aleksandăr Gospodinov, representing the genuinely democratic minority, said that he approved strongly of the film, which he believed should have been shown all over Bulgaria. It seemed ironic that at this very time Bulgarians were basking in international limelight for the admirable defence of their own Jews by the Orthodox Church and significant sectors of society during the Second World War.

The 2003 MRF party congress decided to sue the Bulgarian state in the Hague for the campaigns to assimilate Roma, Pomaks and Turks during the period from 1962 to 1989. Later MRF deputy Lufti Mestan admitted that none of the three international courts there were competent to rule on the crimes, so the matter was not pursued. This raised some doubts about how serious the MRF really was, or whether this was an exercise in vote-catching publicity (RFE/RL, 2003a).

Gradual Progress in Religious Education

Prior to the communist clampdown the Turkish community had enjoyed considerable autonomy, with local councils and sharia courts and 60 newspapers. Eventually, during the 1990s, books were published again and three Muslim newspapers appeared, published in both Turkish and Bulgarian, but not always regularly. Each focused on different aspects of Muslim doctrine and life and also covered current issues such as the ongoing tensions over the chief mufti, the war in Yugoslavia and relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. One, *Musulmanar*, is published monthly by the chief mufti's office (CEDIME, 1999).

Poverty and the brain drain, in Kanev's opinion, delayed Muslims developing their own television slot and the potential uptake of Turkish in elementary schools. In 2001 only 0.5 per cent of Muslims had higher education qualifications as compared with 8.5 per cent of Christians. Regular religious broadcasts were possible but available only through Bulgarian National Radio's daily hour of Turkish broadcasting, where religious topics were rarely covered. Only on major religious festivals could the chief mufti address believers on national television, and then only after submitting his script to its board of directors (M. Hadji, Interview in CEDIME, 1999; Badran, 2001).

As far as Qurans were concerned, Gendzhev, ever the opportunist, launched the publication of a translation from Turkish into Bulgarian, which though hasty and inaccurate, sold very well (V. Belev, interview in CEDIME, 1999). In 1997 a limited edition of a better translation, direct from Arabic into Bulgarian, was distributed free. There was an almost complete lack of basic textbooks, which foundations abroad were only too eager to donate – plus their own slant on Islam. The first consignment of 5000 Qurans, 20,000 Quran primers and 12,000 theological textbooks from Turkey was tied in with a summer school on Quran study to prepare over 100 students to teach Islam in 115 villages in order to counter the escalation of sects. Missionaries alleged to be fundamentalist were said to be targetting the Blagoevgrad and Sandanski regions in the south where there were significantly larger numbers of Pomaks, who are both more conservative and more susceptible to outside pressure (BTA, 1998; BR, 1999). Religious instruction in state schools was wanted by 69 per cent of Pomaks interviewed and 75 per cent of ethnic Turks; the Orthodox were granted it as an option in 1997–99. Not until the 2000–01 academic year was Islam available as an elective subject. It was taught in 22 cities with substantial Muslim populations to 3215 pupils in 68 secondary schools by 79 teachers (Tsurkoven, 2001). The Ministry of Education and chief mufti initiated, beginning in Sliven, a pilot programme of an optional weekly hour of Islamic education in Turkish in primary schools, using a textbook recommended by the chief mufti (US, 2001). However, on 18 December 2000 the Ministry had undone any progress the community might have expected by a blatantly discriminatory order that all instruction be conducted in Bulgarian. When challenged in the Assembly, the minister replied that the National Education Act stipulated Bulgarian as the official language in kindergartens and schools. This was despite the fact that a number of schools nowadays are allowed to offer lessons and even the syllabus as a whole in foreign (mainly major European) languages. He offered no explanation as to why the state should finance Orthodox teaching but not Islamic, which had to be paid for by the chief mufti's office. The objections may have had some effect. The pilot programme in primary schools proved successful and by 2004 the Ministry, belatedly, took over the responsibility for funding.

The Muslim community benefited from the UDF's success in the 1997 elections with stabilisation and progress. In June 1998 the Bulgarian Muslim establishment managed to persuade both the Turkish Board of Religious Affairs (the *Diyanet*) and the Bulgarian Board to sign a protocol to 'protect' Bulgarian Muslims. When Turkish president Süleyman Demirel visited Bulgaria in March 1999 Stoyanov further pledged that the Bulgarian authorities would strive to stall the activities of Islamic fundamentalists. It was left to the *Diyanet*, which is essentially a state institution rather than a religious one, with the approval of both governments, to finance the maintenance of specifically Muslim institutions, the Sofia madrassah and three new *rustie*, Shumen and Ruse for the north and Momchilgrad for the south, with eight paid Turkish teachers' salaries. At that time neither the Sofia madrassah nor

Momchilgrad even had their own buildings (BTA, 1997b). Sofia Institute rector Yalimov expressed relief that only lecturers and teachers approved by the Diyanet could teach in Bulgarian schools (I. Yalimov, interview in CEDIME, 1999). The Diyanet, which reflects religious aspirations and meets religious needs within Turkey, draws on support from the Nursi movement and similar educational movements that by and large promote a modernising form of Islam, which is compatible with the globalised world of technology (Shankland, 2006). Local donations provided for food and other expenses. The schools, which between them took around 350 pupils, had previously been funded by various foundations abroad, among them (from 1993) Fethullah Gülen, which was now outlawed by the Turkish government.⁴ The chief mufti's office wanted to ensure that the young were protected from any possible 'harmful' influence. These institutions enjoy the same status as the private foreign language schools and include secular subjects as well as more specialised Islamic ones. Ruse also takes girls. By 2003 up to 3000 pupils had been through these schools (Yalimov, interview in CEDIME, 1999). Some Bulgarians, including Bishop Evlogi, rector of Plovdiv Orthodox seminary, while approving Bulgaria's religious tolerance, were apprehensive about the appearance of what they regarded as a plethora of ostentatious new mosques, many with rooms for instruction in their courtyards, built with Iranian or Arab cash (Evlogi, conversation with the author, 11 May 1994).

Kanev, however, felt that fundamentalists would have a hard job arousing the average spiritually tepid Turk, for whom extremism, as well as Arab culture and customs, are alien. Some villages gave incoming foreign preachers short shrift and chased them out. In the long run, Quranic schools have had considerably less impact than was at first thought. According to Bulgarian historian Ivan Ilchev the regimen faced by Turkish children in some villages is extremely grinding. At school for six hours a day, taught in a language not their own (Bulgarian), they also have to study Russian, a Western European language and Turkish for three hours a week. It is little wonder that their initial enthusiasm for attending Quranic schools to learn Arabic was shortlived (Ilchev, 2000, p. 166, n. 19).

By 2003 negotiations between the government, the Board of Religious Affairs and Mohammed Salen, representing the Islamic Development Bank for Bulgaria and Macedonia, resulted in a loan of US\$819,000 to equip Muslim schools and to build an Islamic institute in Bankya and school hostels in Momchilgrad, Shumen, Razgrad and Ispirikh. The fund did not cover maintenance costs (BTA, 2003; Pankov, 2003). Sofia Institute, which had survived on a shoestring, provided for 50–60 students, over half of them part-time. It did not receive state – as opposed to Muslim – recognition of its degrees until 1999. It aimed to train muftis, imams, and, in the case of the female students who constituted one third of its intake, schoolteachers. A student objected to the claims by the Orthodox priest Boyan Saruev that it had plenty of money and luxurious dormitories, stating that students lived modestly and studied from inner conviction. M. Badran, a visiting Egyptian progressive Muslim feminist, found it conservative in its attitude to the possibility of training female muftis. She regretted that its staff's main concern was to integrate in Europe rather than with modern Muslim communities elsewhere (Badran, 2001). Shumen, the country's major Islamic centre, is set in the most densely populated Muslim area with the country's largest mosque, the Tombul Dzhamiya (reopened after years as a museum under communism), a *rustie* with, by 2003, over 200 pupils and a flourishing university whose western-orientated rector welcomes diversity and Muslim and Roma students, whose numbers are growing fast. It was an anomaly that no provision was made for a theological faculty there. Fr Stefanov, an Orthodox priest lecturing there, notes that

many Muslim girl students now demonstrate their identity with headscarves and long grey gowns and that so far, Muslim links gravitate round 'rich Arab countries which gloat in the fact that the MRF is ruling the country and give enormous sums to build mosques and enhance primary education' (Stefanov, 2003). The increasing threat that lack of adequate funding would open the floodgates to other, less irenically minded, foreign foundations has provided the chief mufti's office with a handy lever to exert pressure on the government for more generous subsidies (CEDIME, 1999). The office continues to support summer Quranic education courses.

As in other European countries, the wearing of headscarves in schools where uniform is compulsory became an issue. The Union for Islamic Development and Culture objected when in 2006 in Smolyan's Karl Marx Secondary School for Economics and some other local schools principals made uniform compulsory in order to prevent students from wearing a headscarf or hijab (Novinite, 2006).

The tiny Alevi community had quite other problems. Educated Alevis, together with ethnographers and orientalist like Velen Belev, are deeply concerned to preserve the distinct culture and traditions, which their communities have so far kept secret. Faded documents relating to Sufi groups in old Arabic and Turkish lie in the National Library, most as yet unexamined. Versal Bayram, who established the *Dzhem* foundation, which aims to preserve Alevi culture, points out that because the Alevis have no literature of their own their oral tradition is in danger of being engulfed as most young members leave their poverty-stricken communities to work in urban areas, and they are too busy there to have leisure to return home to learn their faith properly from their elders. There has certainly been a revival of pilgrimages to the Demin Baba *tekke* near Isperekh, a shrine long famous for its healing and protective properties, despite the roads through the forest being so poor that it is almost unreachable. Not only other Muslims but also Christians and even atheists make the journey. Women tie rags around branches and climb onto the stone seeking aid in childbirth; men climb it to seek strength. In the opinion of Albena Shkodrova this small area manifests a fusion of interests and customs which may seem surprising to some but is quite representative of contemporary Bulgaria (Shkodrova, 2005).

Access to prisons was not allowed even for Orthodox priests until 1998. It was formally granted to Muslim clergy only in 2000 (Obektiv, 1999). Vasil Marinov, director of the Ministry of Justice department to ensure prisoners' religious needs, has reported that in Sofia prison the needs of its 80 Muslims – unlike those of some other religious groups – were being adequately met (Marinov, 2005).

Eminov regards education as vital. In his opinion, reconciliation and unification of the Muslim community may have to wait for the education and training of a whole new cadre of Muslim leaders in the reopened institutes, leaders who would put the interests of the Muslim community ahead of self-interest. That, he regrets, could take a generation or more.

The Impact of Unfamiliar Religious Groups

Among the many parallel issues faced by the two major 'established' religious communities, the Orthodox and Muslims, has been that of their attitude towards the sudden influx of unfamiliar, well funded and often unwelcome religious groups, popularly categorised as 'sects'.

As early as 1992–93 the Muslim Brotherhood became the subject of controversy. It was invited to the southern Rhodope region by Smolyan mufti Ali Khairuddin

(later appointed mufti in Sofia). Although it purports to represent charitable foundations for the distribution of aid, many Muslim states had banned it because of its alleged extremism. The February 1994 Law on Persons and the Family, which was aimed primarily at regulating new religious groups perceived as competing with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, was also relevant to Muslims. Established central and regional muftis' offices were fully acceptable to the Board of Religious Affairs, which registered them automatically, but other associations and foundations had to seek re-registration within 3 months. Several, including the International Islamic Relief Organisation (Bulgaria) and the Al-Waqf Al-Islami Foundation were refused (CEDIME report). In 1999 Kanev was satisfied that so far none of the incoming foundations was extremist.

Bulgaria had been blacklisted by the International Islamic Conference since the forcible evictions of 1989. President Stoyanov, the government and diplomats were anxious to dispel the strictures of the Conference, which was to send a delegation to discover whether the rights and freedoms of Muslims were being honoured. On the eve of this visit, on 29 August 1997 a seminar organised by Islamic preachers from Arab countries for Muslims in the eastern Rhodope was held at a holiday camp near Narechenski Bani hot springs. The Plovdiv Regional Directorate for Internal Affairs and police from nearby Asenovgrad, apparently oblivious of the government's intentions, invited local journalists to cover their operation against 'illicit instruction in the Quran'. The police claimed that the gathering was violating an article in the Muslim statutes and brutally broke up a peaceful seminar, confiscated religious books on the pretext that they had been imported without customs validation and expelled two instructors, depriving them of the right to revisit Bulgaria for five years. Their action was completely illegal and aroused widespread condemnation by human rights bodies (Georgiev, 1997).

Although subsequently several preachers, mostly stateless residents in Bulgaria or foreigners, were expelled and books seized, further violence was avoided. The Helsinki Committee and Tolerance Foundation took up the cases of several teachers who claimed to have been unjustly expelled. One expulsion, that of Daruish al-Nashiff, completely ignored the chief mufti's office's declaration that he had full approval from Smolyan district mufti's office and conducted his instruction in complete conformity with the state-registered statutes of Muslims in Bulgaria. The Residence of Aliens in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, 1999, excluded judicial review of expulsion orders motivated by considerations of national security. In response to appeals, the ECHR on various occasions in 1999, 2000 and 2002 declared that the expulsion of aliens violated human rights to religious tolerance and privacy in personal and family life (TF, 2001b). On 8 January 2000 a group of six Islamic preachers, members of the Pakistani Ahmadi sect, were deported, apparently for preaching without permission from either the Bulgarian or the Turkish Board of Religious Affairs. Emil Cohen, chairman of the Tolerance Foundation, pointed out that constitutionally the absence of permits could not justify the expulsion of foreign clergy.

Bulgaria's diverse faiths have, over 600 years, worked out their own system of peaceful coexistence, which the Islamic establishment tries to maintain. It has been represented by chief mufti Mekhmet on the occasion of significant interfaith initiatives such as the Millennium message and Sir Sigmund Sternberg's visit in April 2001 and the subsequent establishment of a Trialogue Group involving Christians, Muslims and Jews. The Kãrdzhali regional mufti condemned Hassan Iavish's *Fundamentals of the Faith*, which was being distributed by emigrants from Arab lands in this densely

populated Turkish region, for fomenting hatred towards Christians. He pointed out that the author used incorrectly translated Quranic quotations which defined Christians as enemies of Islam, when the Quran states just the opposite, that Christians are the closest to the faith.

At local level, relations between Orthodox and Muslims are often cordial. This community solidarity that overrides differences of faith could provide a model for other European countries and Bulgarians often express themselves proud of it. For example, after the minister for agriculture and forestry Mekhmet Dikme had visited and promised to repair Ardino church's leaking roof, the local imam appealed to his flock to help, for they had previously received money from the local Orthodox parish to help restore their mosque.⁵

A particularly significant case was connected with the schism within the Orthodox Church. In the predominantly Muslim village of Ustina near Plovdiv the Orthodox church was built with Muslim money. When in 2004 the supreme prosecutor's office and police officers forcibly expelled followers of the alternative synod from the churches they had been using, Ustina's priest, Fr Georgi Koshinov, was suspended by his metropolitan, Arseni, merely for expressing sympathy for the alternative synod and providing hospitality for their clergy, and was replaced by another priest. Immediately the Muslim mayor and mosque leaders cancelled the Kurban Bayram celebrations scheduled for 20 January 2005 and helped form a citizens' committee in defence of Fr Georgi, publicising the case on cable television and collecting 2000 Muslim signatures to endorse those of 200 Orthodox layfolk in petitioning the metropolitan. Eventually Fr Georgi was restored to his position (Mladenova, 2004–05; Popov, 2005).

During the decade following 1989 sociologists, while noting improvement in ordinary Bulgarian attitudes towards Muslim Turks, deplored the mass media's tendency to emphasise negative features, just as it did with incoming religious groups. *Duma*, the BSP mouthpiece, was particularly blameworthy, referring to them as 'Turkey's fifth column'. The media accuse Pomaks in particular of aiming to fortify the Islamic chain in the Balkans which connects Turkey, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These allegations fly directly in the face of the evidence. The roots of Islamic fundamentalism in the Balkans are not deep; mujaheddin fighters and Al-Qaeda operatives from the Middle East have had very little success in recruiting activists in either Bosnia or Kosovo despite the far greater sufferings their coreligionists have endured there since the 1970s (Gallagher, 2005, p. 145).

The Muslim establishment, state officials and the public are united in their concern that foreign Islamic foundations might exert a negative influence on local Muslims by introducing such practices as veiling women, unfamiliar forms of prayer and intolerance towards other religions. Muftis' offices, however, apparently do not dare go into detail and provide precise information about them; officials cooperate with some foundations while others are left to their own devices. It is very difficult for non-Muslims or even local Muslims to assess their credentials as, for instance, those of the Saudi foundation Al-Waqf Al-Islami, which has been responsible for building several mosques and schools but which is alleged to be linked with elusive organisations connected with Al-Qaeda, about which the establishment has remained tight-lipped (Tavanier, 2005).

This lack of readiness to provide specific guidelines basically stems from widespread lack of competent scholars within a faith community deprived of the most basic theological and spiritual education for 40 years.

A New Start for the Muslim Community under a New Government?

In the June 2001 elections, through its customary adroit switches to support ruling parties, the MRF ensured a voice and influence for the Muslim community by joining the new centre-right government led by Simeon Saksoburggotski's new party, the *Natsionalno Dvizhenie Simeon Vtori* (the Simeon II National Movement (SIINM)), which carried on the reformist line the UDF had started. With a respectable 7.45 per cent of the vote and 21 seats in the 39th National Assembly, the MRF gained for the first time representatives in the cabinet as well as two representatives in each of the 20 standing committees (BTA, 2001a).

On 20 August 2001 prime minister Simeon took the initiative to confer with Mekhmet, who familiarised him with the changes in the life and status of Bulgarian Muslims since 1989, while highlighting unresolved problems needing the executive's intervention. He claimed that his status and that of his office was inadequate in view of the enormous responsibilities and international prestige they enjoyed among the countries of the Islamic world (BTA, 2001b). Specific proposals were made to improve the situation. It was agreed that 'to the best of his abilities Mekhmet will assist the cabinet and pray to Allah for the protection of Bulgaria'. Simeon and Mekhmet together explored ways to raise non-governmental funds, the state of educational institutions, obstacles Muslims encountered in teaching religion in state schools, the restitution of a considerable number of state-appropriated waqf properties, including buildings and rural plots, and the restoration of mosques. Some of these vexed long-term issues had already been debated at the Tolerance Foundation's conference on restitution on 27 July, where it was obvious that, though there was no evidence of discrimination against any particular group, Muslims had lagged behind in the pace of restoration. They had found the state both unwilling to return and unable to maintain adequately some 'cultural monuments', such as the Stara Zagora mosque. In 1996, for instance, the governor of the largely Muslim Khaskovo district had prohibited the building of a mosque in Zhulti Bria, overruling the local municipal council (TF, 2001a). In 2002 many Khaskovo citizens objected in vain to a compulsory levy for a statue of the Mother of God (the patron of the Orthodox Church) on a neighbouring hill. In the same year Muslims in Banite near Smolyan complained that the local council was blocking their application to build a mosque (Obektiv, 2003, p. 16). The next year Muslims were still awaiting the hearing or result of 17 cases of unrestituted property from the state. In 2004, after meeting Dogan and the chief mufti, the Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urged Simeon to provide official protection for mosques just as the Turkish government did. Two historic Ottoman mosques were being put to inappropriate uses as nightclubs (Jafariyaneews, 2004).

New Law on Confessions Provokes Dissent

With the new SIINM government came renewed and heated debate about the revision of the outdated Law on Confessions (Broun, 2004, pp. 236–39). It was the draft bill of Borislav Tsekov, a young Orthodox deputy from the SIINM, which was favoured. In view of the US government's reservations about his proposals (which were also deemed unsatisfactory by the Council of Europe), US embassy officials consulted concerned parties including Muslim leaders with a view to avoiding negative features in the new government's draft (BTA, 2001a). One concession welcome to Muslims in Tsekov's bill was his proposal that although official documents relating to religious

institutions that had to register with Sofia city court (i.e. all except the Orthodox Holy Synod) were to be written in Bulgarian, rituals could be performed in another language. This allowed the Muslim community to use Turkish or Arabic. Muslim representatives were to be included in a proposed new-style Board of Religious Affairs.

As well as maintaining a high profile in initial government consultations, Muslims attended interfaith conferences promoted by Bulgarian human rights groups to formulate alternative drafts. It was the MRF draft prepared by Dogan and Lufti Mestan, submitted to the Assembly on 26 May 2000 during the former UDF government, which had been closest to internationally accepted standards, though at that time it was given short shrift by government commissions that did not even deign to examine it.

When the long-mooted law came up for its first readings in summer 2002 the MRF again put forward its draft, specifying separation of church and state and forbidding all state interference in the life of religious groups, something acceptable to minority religious and human rights groups. It was again rejected and Tsekov's bill, which favoured the Orthodox Church, was chosen. When its proposals were discussed a day before the final reading on 14 December at a European Centre on Jurisprudence conference for religious communities, dissatisfaction was voiced that the law recognised only one Orthodox Church, that of Patriarch Maksim. Although Article 11 specified that it had no greater rights than other faiths, the other denominations were not convinced; Mekhmet warned that Muslims would complain to the Council of Europe – which they did. His community, proud of its accepted status on the Bulgarian scene, felt particularly insulted that like all other minority groups it had to be registered by the Sofia city court in order to function. His stance was somewhat ambiguous. He was overlooking his own office's repeated demands to be given a leading role in relation to well-heeled Islamic foundations from abroad. Yet some of these might be denied registration should the Board of Religious Affairs, representing the government, classify them as potentially dangerous and destabilising. On 15 December Muslims joined Catholics, Evangelicals and representatives of the alternative Orthodox synod in an unprecedented public demonstration outside the Assembly. Tsekov claimed that his bill was intended to counter the activities of sects acting 'against national security and public health'. The implication of a threat posed by Islamic fundamentalists was obvious. He also argued that it would help all the pre-communist communities to regain their property. Despite these assurances, both MRF and UDF deputies refused to vote for it; however, it was duly passed on 20 December (TF, 2002; Corley, 2002). Mekhmet was among religious community leaders consulted by the Parliamentary Association of the Council of Europe's commission the following June.

Increased Tension after 11 September 2001

After 11 September 2001 the perceived threat from fundamentalists assumed a heightened local dimension, accentuated by Bulgaria's closer relations with the USA. This had long-term repercussions on the Muslim community, raising its modest profile but also exposing it to an escalating threat of fundamentalism without and paranoia from non-Muslim Bulgarians within. It came under closer scrutiny from the US Embassy. Ambassador Richard Miles visited the regional centre Khaskovo. Its mufti Faik Khadzhimurad pointedly laid the blame for his community's income deficit on the state's failure to return waqf properties, so that they were forced to accept

donations from various Islamic sources, 'some of them maybe not the best ones', he explained, thus laying the onus for restitution squarely on the new government (TF, 2001c). Hard up or even destitute (like so many Orthodox village priests), many Muslim clergy are forced to turn for help to any charity in order to keep their families alive (Delchev, 2002, p. 15).

Ashim Khadzhiyan, president of the Straight Path for Bulgarian Nationals of Turkish Origin Foundation, caused alarm by alleging that 60 Islamic fundamentalist foundations were active in the country and that Bin Laden's uncle, Shaikh Abdul Komal of Saudi Arabia, had visited Bulgaria prior to 1999 and met some of these. Mekhmet dismissed this as 'pure imagination'.

Gendzhev was only too ready to accuse the chief mufti's office of conniving with extremist tendencies to promote 'illegal' potentially dangerous educational institutes. One of several branded as 'terrorist nests' was a college in Surnitsa, a remote Rhodope mountain village in a predominantly Pomak region. This was quickly taken up by local and then national media after allegations in a Plovdiv paper. When journalists, foreigners included, descended on the village they discovered that the college, which was owned by the Supreme Muslim Council and trained students from all over Bulgaria as imams, was officially licensed and registered by law. They were reassured by meeting students who displayed more zeal for table tennis than for mission. Its director, imam Said Mutlu, though a follower of Wahhabi Islam, maintained that his teachings were in line with the more liberal branch of Sunni Islam taught in Bulgaria and Turkey. Khadzhi, who accompanied the journalists as rector of the Islamic Institute and was described by the *Guardian* journalist as a dignified and gentle character, accused Gendzhev of playing with fire and of putting at risk not only Muslims but all Bulgarians. Local people expressed concern about the damage rumours were already doing to delicate interethnic relations and their local tourist industry (Smith, 2001).

To counteract Gendzhev's and Ashim's assertions, on 6 November Mekhmet initiated a unique meeting, one for which he said he had been longing, with Patriarch Maksim, as part of a wider campaign by Muslim community leaders to convince the public that Osama Bin Laden had no bases in Bulgaria. Both were convinced of the need to cooperate in stemming the invasion of dangerous sects. Property restitution was also discussed and Mekhmet expressed concern about Muslim education in schools. Although any idea of concrete cooperation was premature, they did not rule out possible ventures in the future in the realm of charity. The Tolerance Foundation, judging the meeting as positive, was concerned nevertheless in case the leaders might encourage the government to tighten up measures against the so-called sects and further restrict religious freedom (TF, 2001b).

The chief mufti, together with those of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, attended the Assisi world leaders peace pilgrimage on 24 January 2002 where they emphasised the traditional Balkan Muslim acceptance of pluralism and peaceful coexistence. No Muslim representatives from the Middle East were present (Tablet, 2002). Muslims were among the large crowd welcoming the pope in Plovdiv and his meeting with Mekhmet on 25 May was warm and served to emphasise the distancing of Bulgaria's Muslims from the violence that was rending the Middle East.

The government, very much under MRF influence, put Bulgaria behind the USA in the international dispute about the projected invasion of Iraq. The considerable degree of US government concern to understand and promote moderate Muslim interests in the Balkans coincided with foreign minister Solomon Pasi's deeply felt concern to reassure international opinion that Bulgaria has full civil and religious

freedom. In January 2003 Mekhmet travelled to the USA to meet Islamic experts at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy, which emphasised that diversity should not be destructive. The crisis over Iraq threw Bulgaria into heightened alarm. On 24 January 2003 in the daily with the largest circulation, *24 Chasa*, the former UDF president Ivan Kostov, who had embraced a more populist and anti-Islamic profile, warned that the government's one-sided support of the USA could give rise to terrorist attacks within the country. Even his political enemies supported his analysis, apart from the MRF, which dismissed his fears as groundless.

The chief mufti's office hosted a conference attended by representatives from 55 Muslim countries on 12 September 2003. Despite all his considerable efforts to promote a spirit of tolerance, Mekhmet again and again found himself having to defend his community against allegations of links with fundamentalists. On Sofia radio he was forced to try to identify those who had taken part in a 'secret' Islamic conference in Sofia University. While admitting that there might be some extremists there he emphasised that he did his best to distance such people from mainstream religion. His claim that for the first time in many years he had the structures of his office firmly under control did suggest that there had indeed been differences of approach within his community (BTA, 2003). According to Kanev dissent within the community has been easily suppressed and not given a voice, unlike in the Orthodox Church.

In November 2004, in an unprecedented case, the regional court in Pazardzhik, a town in the Vale of Thrace with a largely Muslim population (mixed Turkish, Pomak and Roma), charged a certain Akhmed Musa Akhmed with implanting interethnic hostility and hatred. He was alleged to be one of the creators of an illegal prayer house in the Roma district discovered by the police the previous year, containing specialist Islamic literature and sermon discs. It was alleged that he had propagated extremist views in other towns. Akhmed made a full confession and pleaded guilty to the charges. Five doctors confirmed that he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and as such was extremely susceptible to outside influence. He was given a three-year suspended sentence against which he did not appeal (SMN, 2004; US State, 2005).

One specific community, 400 strong, the Ahmadis, were denied registration on 8 December 2003 by the Sofia Court, following Board of Religious Affairs proscription. The grounds for this decision appear to be that the Ahmadis, founded in the nineteenth century by Ghulam Ahmad, are regarded as heretical by the Pakistani government, which in the 1970s banned them from preaching or propagating their faith. Eventually in December 2005 the Ahmadis obtained registration as a non-commercial organisation by the regional court at Blagoevgrad where one of their biggest congregations is located. In the autumn of 2006 the local prosecutor's court under Maria Zoteva and the Board of Religious Affairs under Ivan Zhelev, alerted by the central Muftiate, tried to strip the community of its legal status, despite not being able to specify any criminal activities by any of its members, some of whose teaching literature the court had confiscated. One member is a Pakistani citizen. The community maintained that all they wanted was to be left to worship in peace and objected to accusations that they were not Muslims and that they presented a danger to society (Corley, 2006b).

Muslim Antagonism towards Evangelicals

The traditional mutual respect between Muslims and Orthodox does not apply to Protestants. Regions with Turkish majorities such as Kãrdzhali and Khaskovo are wary not only of fundamentalist Muslim proselytisers. According to Evangelical

Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Nikolov of Nova Zagora, local officials are showing increasing hostility to Evangelical Christians and often effectively blocking their actions in a manner reminiscent of the hostility which Evangelicals encounter in the north in towns dominated by former communists. In some villages where Protestants have rented public halls for evangelistic meetings their leases have been cancelled following protests by local Muslim organisations. On one occasion villagers threatened to burn down houses where Christians had held meetings. In another case in 2005 a mob beat up a visiting evangelist and tried to destroy his car. Because police are often MRF members who favour Muslims, complaints were not redressed. According to lawyer Ivan Gruikin, officials, presuming that registration at local level is compulsory, which it is not, routinely demand that Christian missionaries present documentary proof that their communities are registered. A local court closed Gunal Sherifov's church at Dzhebel on the pretext that he had not applied in time for a tax declaration. The rent of the public hall used by Pentecostal Georgi Yalamov's church was raised to five times its previous level by Khaskovo's council (Corley, 2006a). Evangelisers anxious to show Christian films sometimes get short shrift from infuriated Muslims.⁶

International Terrorism Sparks More Alarm in Bulgaria; Renewed Schism in the Muslim Community

In August 2003 Gendzhev again claimed that several dubious foundations were penetrating the Rhodope and a hundred students were returning from study in Jordan, Sudan and Iran to spread a more militant brand of Islam. On 24 November he accused Mekhmet of accepting bribes and not doing enough to prevent 'Wahhabi' Muslims from entering the country. When 22 Turkish clerics arrived to commemorate Eid, Mekhmet assured President Georgi Pärvanov that all had Diyanet approval and were to discuss the creation of a forum of Bulgarian religious leaders to highlight Bulgaria's tradition of tolerance (Transition, 2003).

After the deadly suicide attack in Istanbul in November 2003 Professor Paul Wilkinson of St Andrews University told the BBC that terrorists would look for support in countries with Muslim populations and warned the Bulgarian authorities to be on high alert because Bulgaria's geo-strategic position rendered it a likely target for Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks (Novinite, 2003). The topic of the radicalisation of Bulgaria's Muslims and the influence of terrorist groups on them aroused panic and got the undivided attention of politicians. Even SIINM chairman Stanislav Ilchev exploited the situation, appealing to the USA to open a military base, arguing that with Muslims representing over a tenth of the population the issue of radical Islam was not an abstract one.

Paradoxically, panic was further fuelled by allegations flung at each other by rival factions when a vicious struggle for the control of the chief muftiate and replacing of Mekhmet really took off in the December 2003 elections. At elections different factions often organise events at the last moment. At one conference Fikri Sali Khasan, who had held the position from 1992 to 1994, was elected chief mufti again and Ridvan Kadiov chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council. Clerics from Gotse Delchev, Plovdiv and Smolyan walked out, protesting that there had been MRF manipulation. They attacked the adoption of new statutes stipulating that only candidates with higher theological education could stand as regional and chief muftis – an issue that had caused dissension in the 1990s when there was widespread feeling within the community that many of its representatives lacked adequate training

in Islam. Gendzhev convened a breakaway conference on the same day that elected his proxy candidate, Ali Khadzhi Saduk, the Plovdiv mufti, as chief mufti, while in Ruse a court registered a certain Daud as chief mufti, though this claimant eventually dropped out (RFE/RL, 2003b). The whole community was thrown into disarray and riven by litigation, with costly appeals to various higher courts resulting in controversial and conflicting decisions for over two years. So many ill-founded allegations were spread by the media, internet, interested extremist parties and rivals for the muftiate that Muslims were almost overnight transformed from their status as victims of Zhivkov's campaigns to participants in a sinister conspiracy. By the time General Atanas Atanasov, head of counter-intelligence under the UDF government of 1997–2001, retracted ill-advised accusations he had made against the MRF and stressed that the tensions which had been created were artificial, fear and distrust had been sown between the different ethnic communities which, given the circumstances, it would be hard to undo. The MRF compounded the situation by declining to clarify what was going on, on the pretext that politicians should not meddle in spiritual affairs.

Both leadership structures applied for registration with Sofia Court, which on 8 March 2004 invalidated both of them. On 19 July the court appointed an interim triumvirate until the dispute was resolved (US State, 2005). On 5 November the Sofia Appellate Court overruled that decision, stating that the community's leadership could be appointed only on its own initiative and not by the Sofia court.

Gendzhev and other critics alleged that the triumvirate was slanted in favour of Khasan and two of his allies and was connected with Saudi Arabia, and possibly with terrorists.⁷ Another member of the triumvirate, Kadiov, complained that the public were avid for sensationalism, pointing out that the Bulgarian branch of Al-Waqf Al-Islami had attracted attention but that no evidence of links with Al-Qaeda had been found. Nicholas Wood of the *International Herald Tribune* said that the dispute frustrated those who longed for genuine theological debate in a community that had been so heavily suppressed during the communist era. Sofia Islamic Institute's Velen Belev told him that the nature of Islam in Bulgaria was a genuine issue; should they turn towards Arabic Islam or retain their current tradition? However, people were more interested in money than theology (Wood, 2004).

Surnitsa was in the limelight again following allegations by a Gendzhev supporter, Nedzhip Daud Mutalib, that the triumvirate was promoting fundamentalism in study centres under its control which he defined as 'laboratories for brainwashing', recruiting children to study abroad and sign promises to fight in future jihads. However, he was unable to substantiate these claims. Said Mutlu was by then adept at fielding such accusations. He told Wood that in the six years of his college's existence only one out of over a hundred students had opted to continue studies abroad. Local townspeople again grumbled about unwelcome publicity, blaming Sofia fabrications.

The dispute has been, as it was back in the 1990s, enmeshed in politics. Meanwhile, Gendzhev continued to challenge the legitimacy and decisions of the 1997 and 2000 conferences in the Bulgarian courts, as well as in the ECHR (Obektiv, 2005). In a broadcast in January 2005 he accused the MRF of having dictated prior to each National Conference since 1992 who would be chief mufti, forcing other candidates to withdraw and thereafter controlling its pronouncements and property transactions at every level, and even of trying to privatise the chief mufti's properties. His accusations had some justification in that, when fully in power, the MRF does exert control over elections and structures of the community, which, unlike dissatisfied Orthodox Christians who had the support of many UDF deputies during the standoff over the

Law on Confessions, have no possibility of recourse to any other party (his own Democratic Party of Justice existed in name but hardly in fact). Implicitly referring to the ECHR's criticism on 26 October 2000 of the government's failure to provide his faction an opportunity to retain control over some of the Muslim community's property, he maintained that the majority of them faced misery under MRF oppression. Dogan, he claimed, had lied when he boasted that his party would have 30 deputies in the next Assembly (in fact it won 34!) and that it was open to all Bulgarian citizens (Pankov, 2005). Khasan explained the MRF position to Velina Nacheva on 14 January 2005, the day after Bulgarian Turks were among those arrested in Germany on charges of belonging to Islamic extremist groups including Al-Qaeda – predictably, a further Sofia court registration had endorsed him as chief mufti. He expressed concern that the new Law on Confessions allowed groups harmful to both church and mosque to register and become active. Relying on World Islamic Conference and World Islam League recommendations his office closely monitored what he termed 'sects'. 'There is no such thing as Muslim or Christian terrorism', he declared. Asked about the Revival Process, he said that though it was essential to commemorate its victims, he would prefer it to remain history and not be discussed. He was optimistic:

I was one of the people who had to purge communist elements out of the Muslim faith. It wasn't easy at all. Things are very different in democratic Bulgaria, with no restrictions or bans on the ethnic and religious activities our community is promoting. Is there anything to stop our Christians and Muslims, who have lived side by side for centuries, from entering the twenty-first century hand in hand?' (Nacheva, 2005).

Khasan's optimism was short-lived. Conflict ensued as the Supreme Court overruled the Sofia Court decision, ordering it to reinstate Gendzhev, enabling him to register his faction (Marinov, 2005). This put the clock back to Videnov's BSP government's recognition of Ali Usunov as chief mufti and Gendzhev as chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council on 10 September 1996. The Supreme Court decision was based on the grounds that the subsequent (UDF-dominated) government failed to validate that registration and that Gendzhev had won his lawsuit in the ECHR (Sega, 2005; Marinov, 2005). The Sofia court refused to recognise the judgment and, backed by the Prosecutors Office, issued a certificate of Current Legal Status to Khasan and his council as leaders of the Muslim community. The Helsinki Committee blamed the Sofia Court and Prosecutor's Office for creating an unprecedented situation, leaving the Muslim faith deeply divided, with no officially recognised leadership, while grossly violating Muslim rights to choose their own leaders and spiritual teachers (Obektiv, 2005).

Gendzhev's supporters were following the Holy Synod's precedent in demanding that the prosecutor general ensure that the Supreme Court's decision be enforced. A year and a half after the December 2002 Law on Confessions (*Zakon za veroizpovedaniyata*) recognised only one Orthodox Church in Bulgaria, that under Patriarch Maksim, the prosecutor had given the go-ahead for the Holy Synod, with the aid of the police, to reoccupy all property appropriated by the rival schismatic synod. In the course of this, violence had been employed in many places and against some adherents of the alternative synod, some even being temporarily arrested. These measures were backed up subsequently by the strict enforcement of ecclesiastical discipline. Now for a time the chief mufti's office was closed. The implication that the Muslim community might also be involved in strife over key properties, comparable

to that which had rent the Orthodox Church for several months, was very disturbing, especially in view of the government's expectations of and commitment to a stable Islamic establishment. Hence the government took the initiative to forestall further nasty confrontations, while taking care to avoid active interference in the dispute. It was no doubt aware of the negative international publicity its intervention in the Orthodox dispute had aroused; there have never been any forcible expulsions of Muslim dissenters from their places of worship, such as the schismatic Orthodox suffered.

Prior to a special emergency Islamic National Conference at the Palace of Culture in Sofia on 20 March 2006, attended by 1400 delegates from all regional and mufti offices and mosque boards, the president, the prime minister, the assembly speaker, MRF representatives and others all urged delegates to set aside their differences and work towards unity. It was in vain. Although of the eight candidates seeking the Chief Muftiate, Khadzhi was found to be the most unobjectionable and potentially the most capable of reconciling differences within the community, both during and immediately after the conference, outside the hall there were allegations, predictably from the Gendzhev faction, that the MRF had manipulated the election and put pressure on other candidates to take themselves out of the running and support Khadzhi, who had indeed had some backing from the MRF. Four candidates chose to absent themselves from the hall at the time of voting and the delegates who supported them walked out of the conference, while three others asked to be struck off the list in favour of Khadzhi.

Khadzhi's announcement that Muslims had found a way to unite and overcome their problems seemed to be wishful thinking. When on 11 May the Sofia Court confirmed Khadzhi's election Gendzhev immediately contested it, so litigation started again. In December the Court of Appeals issued a judgment directing the Board of Religious Affairs to register Gendzhev as chief mufti. In spite of this, the Board issued a document endorsing Khadzhi! Although some observers regarded this as yet another instance of government interference, subsequent events indicated the soundness of the Board's preference.

According to Eminov, it is difficult to say that one or the other faction is representative of mainstream Muslims. Neither faction can claim to offer a better-trained and more highly qualified slate of candidates than the other. Divisions did not stop at the top either. They were deeply reflected at local level with two sets of regional muftis and two sets of imams. The situation fluctuates. Muftis switch from one side to another frequently. Supporters of different factions refuse to worship together, especially if the imam at the mosque has shown a preference for one or the other faction (Eminov, 2005; US State, 2005). The overall situation appears more fluid than that in the Orthodox Church, where most priests and their parishes returned (although most of them unwillingly) to the fold of the Holy Synod. A total of 75 appeals to the ECHR were pending from 36 priests, 35 parish wardens and 721 laypersons – a scattered minority (Popov, 2006).

Scandal Breaks over Gendzhev

Gendzhev himself had miscalculated. In February 2006 he was accused of embezzlement, of illegally transferring close to one million levs from the accounts of the chief mufti's office to his son's private foundation, and arrested, though he was subsequently released on bail by Sofia Court. His justification was that otherwise the money would have been 'stolen by unsavoury characters' and his real aim had been to benefit the Muslim community. Just before the scandal broke, in an interview on the

Turkish-language programme of Bulgarian National Radio he claimed that he had spent all his life doing good deeds, and had fought for Bulgarian national interests and for the last 15 years against fundamentalism. 'I opened Islamic schools. I opened the Islamic Institute. I provided Muslims with Qurans and other religious texts. I built 62 mosques' There was some truth in these claims. As a skilled entrepreneur he had certainly responded to community needs, but, he added, 'Nothing has been done for Muslims since I was forced out from my position as Chief Mufti in 1997. Only money has been stolen from the community. If you want to know, I can tell you who stole the money and how much was stolen' (Eminov, 2006). Thereafter, as Eminov reported in August, Gendzhev became 'uncharacteristically quiet'. Eminov also said that he would not be surprised if Gendzhev managed to extricate himself from this very serious predicament and continue to be a source of conflict and division within the Muslim community for years to come.

Ataka and the Emergence of Xenophobia

The xenophobia of the early post-communist era represented by Dr Ivan Georgiev's virulently anti-Turkish Bulgarian National Radical Party (*Bălgarska natsionalna radikalna partiya*) subsided but still surfaced on occasion. In the winter of 2000, Plevn mosque and mufti's office were repeatedly sprayed with graffiti and 50 graves defaced, as was the Silistra mosque. In Lovech, in a sinister reminder of the 1980s, over 100 Turks applied to change their Muslim names to Bulgarian in order to be eligible for local employment (Obektiv, 2001). Anti-Islamic feeling was also evident in intellectual circles. In September 1997, in an instance of blatant discrimination, Aleksandăr Veselinov-Shansădin, assistant professor in Arabic studies at Sofia University since 1991, was dismissed following anonymous calumny claiming that an examination text he set contravened Christian morality. He was also accused of attracting students to Islam through lectures on Islamic mysticism (Metodieva, 1997). One of the staff who teamed up against him, Professor Mariya Penchova, highlighted the threat of Islamic fundamentalism (as she did to the author back in 1990).

An attempted relocation by Kărdzhali Municipal Council of an Islamic girls' school from Rogozhe village to the dilapidated former primary school in Kărdzhali's Veselchane suburb in 2003–04 encountered considerable resistance from the local mainly ethnic Bulgarian residents, who petitioned the Ministry of Education and local regional governor, declaring that it was an insult to the memory of their forefathers. In the event, the chief mufti's office was very hard pressed to afford essential repairs (Myuhtar, 2004).

However, these manifestations were as nothing compared with the virulence exhibited with the emergence of deputy editor of the daily *Monitor* Volen Siderov's new party, *Ataka* (Attack) in the elections that brought about the demise of the SIINM government on 25 June 2005. Siderov's antisemitic publications, with eye-catching covers, had long been readily available in central Sofia.

A New Government but no Change in Religious Policy

Ataka played on justifiable public fears of rampant organised crime and corruption, but it also established links with neo-fascist parties in Austria, demanded a monolingual, monoethnic state dominated by the Orthodox Church and even chose an Orthodox cross for its symbol on television. It called for a ban on Turkish-language broadcasts on the National Television channel.

No party had a clear majority; the BSP's slender lead, with only 31 per cent of the votes, compelled its leader Sergei Stanishev to seek partners in a coalition. Of merely five parties which exceeded the four per cent threshold, the prerequisite for representation in the Assembly, Ataka had 8.16 per cent and 21 of the 240 seats. It fell short of the MRF, however, which won 14.17 per cent of the vote and predictably joined the coalition, with 34 seats. The US ambassador found Ataka's rhetoric reminiscent of that employed in the early 1990s in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Cohen – along with many others – was horrified that a political party could 'come from the blue' in two months and muster so much support. Surveys revealed that a fifth of the ethnic Bulgarian population was so anti-Roma and anti-Turk that they did not even recognise the right of these people to coexist in the same country as 'pure Bulgarians'. These negative attitudes towards minorities are relatively evenly spread throughout the Bulgarian population. While Dogan was relaxed in his attitude, Kanev insisted that Ataka was not a 'normal' fascist party but something far worse, and referred to Hitler and Karadžić. Demonstrators outside Sofia's St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral had shouted 'Send Turks to Anatolia; gypsies to camps; Jews – out!'

This emergence of a patently xenophobic party, which succeeded in gaining such substantial support, including that of certain elements within the Orthodox Church, threatened to undo the painstaking measures taken by previous governments to foster a society which had successfully integrated its major ethnic minority and was acceptable to the EU. Today one of the front-runners involved in a power struggle to succeed Patriarch Maksim as patriarch is Metropolitan Kiril of Varna and Veliki Preslav. Kiril owes his position to his uncle Khristo Marinchev, head of the Board of Religious Affairs under Zhivkov (Stefanov, 2003). His reputation within his diocese leaves much to be desired. According to Fr Lyubomir Popov, an esteemed priest whom he forcibly expelled from his well-attended church, and other senior diocesan officials, he not only participated in the expulsion of Turks in 1989 but called on his priests to help (Chernomore, 2003). That a person who commended and has employed the use of force, and still employs it, might become the leader of the Orthodox Church is a very worrying prospect.

Stanishev condemned Ataka's attempts to foment ethnic tension as irresponsible, unacceptable and hindering the country's democratic progress and access to the EU (Novinite, 2005). Several concerned human rights organisations, NGOs and individuals, after due deliberation, filed a suit against Siderov in the Sofia Court in February 2006. Kanev, justifying their decision, stated that the 2004 Anti-Discrimination Act was not adopted just for the sake of EU entry; it needed to be enforced (Kanev, 2006).

All this boded ill for future interreligious and interethnic relations. Ataka played on an issue of deep concern to the government (though such concerns are rarely expressed in public). In 2003 and 2004 60–70 per cent of all newborn children came from the non-Slavic minorities. Admittedly, the Roma birth rate was higher than the Turkish, which was tending to slip into the overall pattern of demographic decline. This decline has been in response to personal insecurity, rampant crime, lack of adequate medical and social provision and malnutrition, which have reduced Bulgaria, previously a relatively prosperous communist state, to the level of a typical Third World country. Ethnic minorities suffer the impact of this, and face discrimination in employment compared with the 'Slav' majority. That fact is of no concern to Ataka, which exploits and fans fears that Bulgaria will be swamped by minority peoples (Vassilev, 2006). In 1990 it rated twenty-seventh in human development reports; by 2003 it was fifty-seventh; 75 per cent of the population lives at bare subsistence level, 40 per cent in

extreme poverty. The social cost of transition has been one of the worst in East-Central Europe. The birth rate reflects this; it is the lowest in Europe. Sociologist Mikhail Mirchev warned Pärvanov at a meeting of experts on the 'demographic crisis' that by 2050 the population could have shrunk to 5.2 million people, of whom only 60 per cent would be of Bulgarian descent. Svetoslav Nikolov, asking how Ataka and the ultra-nationalist Bulgarian National Union intended to 'solve' the crisis, predicted that the enemy they targeted would be minorities, not the real enemy, the state, for its failure to make adequate social, educational and health provisions for all its citizens (Nikolov, 2006).

When the fourth presidential elections since 1989 came up, the MRF and the Muslim community made their support for the incumbent, Georgi Pärvanov, quite clear. Pärvanov, a former historian, running as an independent though backed by his party, the BSP, as well as the leftist Coalition for Bulgaria and the Social Democrats, claims to represent all Bulgarians regardless of their religion. He garnered a record high 64 per cent in the first run-off on 23 October 2006, but only 49 per cent of eligible voters turned out and Siderov emerged as his main rival, with 21 per cent. In the run-off the proportion of the electorate voting slumped to 41 per cent, but Pärvanov gathered not far short of 80 per cent as against a still significant 24 per cent for Siderov. What was the most striking feature, according to Kanev, was the discrepancy between the low turnout from Bulgarians and the high turnout – 91 per cent from Kärldzhali region, for instance – from the Turks. There was also a very high turnout among the 200,000 Bulgarian Turkish refugees who had opted to remain in Turkey, where they are still eligible to vote in elections. It was ironical that the victims of Zhivkov's expulsion helped BSP member Pärvanov become the first politician to be elected for a second term as president (Novinite, 2006). Had Ataka gained a say in the government this would have resulted in serious restrictions of human rights (K. Kanev, conversation with the author, 2006). At the General Assembly of the International Helsinki Federation for Human rights meeting in Sofia in November concern was expressed about the rise in anti-minority rhetoric and discrimination. The Assembly called on the government to ensure that clear instances of hate speech were criminally prosecuted.

Government policies with regard to the Muslim community have had serious shortcomings, but, possibly learning through bitter experience, the government has avoided the brutal interference employed in the Orthodox Church disputes.

Bulgaria's Muslims remain a key factor in national stability. Ataka is by no means the only fascist backlash party in Europe. The danger it poses is not only jeopardising hard-won minority and religious rights but also awakening extremist reactions in a community which has so far proved to be sober and restrained. It has provoked a response within the more extreme elements of the Muslim Turkish community: 6500 signatures by two minor Turkish pressure groups have called for compulsory Turkish lessons in schools for Turkish children, more Turkish on television and some other more extreme demands (there is little prospect of their being fulfilled, however). Bulgaria's practical experience of peaceful coexistence could provide a model for other European countries. Admittedly, relations remain better on an individual than on a collective level. Back in 1994 the travel writer Stephen Lewis said that six centuries of mutual respect and acceptance could be found in the sentiments he heard in scores of towns and villages, especially in the words of farewell. Unsure of his nationality or religion, Bulgarians and Turks took him by the hand and blessed him: 'May God protect and help you . . . by whatever name you know him' (Lewis, 1994). Twelve years later, a winegrower told a BBC interviewer that if they, the ordinary Bulgarian people,

could live so comfortably with their Muslim neighbours, and if they could have such friendly ties with Turkey, then once Bulgaria was let into the EU Turkey rightly must be able to join too. For that, the EU would have to thank Bulgaria. 'We have a much more powerful lesson to teach the rest of Europe', he concluded (BBC, 2006).

Notes

- 1 The term Pomak is commonly regarded by slavophone Muslims as pejorative when used by outsiders, but they commonly use it to identify each other and it will be used for convenience in this article.
- 2 Yonko Grozev, Helsinki Committee representative for Khasan and Chaush, stated his belief that many Eastern European countries as well as Bulgaria needed clear and predictable standards on which to base official decisions when registering religious communities and their leaderships. He said that the judgment gave a positive answer to the question whether registration of the leadership of a religious community fell within the remit of freedom of religion. The Bulgarian government had argued that administrative matters relating to the existence of a religious community were not 'manifestations of religion' and thus fell outside the scope of Article 9; that nobody had prevented the two applicants from attending religious gatherings or practising their faith alone or together with others; and that what they were denied was administrative powers over the community. The ECHR rejected this viewpoint. Although registration, under normal circumstances, does not represent intrusion, where there is a dispute in which governments take sides it may be considered intrusion. Scrutinising the legislation underlying the Bulgarian authorities' decision, the ECHR decided that it provided ample grounds for abuse by failing to provide specific requirements limiting the discretion of the authorities.
- 3 The decision was hardly reported in the Bulgarian press and neither the government, the Justice Ministry nor the Board for Religious Affairs, whose director Lyubomir Mladenov was away on a visit to the USA, were prepared to comment on it. Nevertheless the UDF government accepted the ruling and paid out damages to the two applicants. The ECHR stressed that 'the autonomous existence of religious communities [was] indispensable for pluralism in a democratic society and an issue at the heart of the protection afforded by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights'. The facts demonstrated the 'failure of the authorities to remain neutral in the exercise of their powers in respect of administrative registration of religious communities'. A British specialist in ECHR cases on religious liberty, Professor John Warwick Montgomery, who was involved in the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia's challenge against the Moldovan government, also argued that if a religious organisation claimed autonomy, this had to be respected. In the absence of antisocial or illegal practices on its part, its recognition could not legally be withheld by the state. Montgomery believed the case to be of paramount importance for other Eastern European countries where governments are involved with Orthodox Churches functioning under diverse patriarchates. The ruling could apply in Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Estonia (Corley, 2000).
- 4 The church's appeals to corporations had failed, only President Pärvanov responding with a donation of 5000 lev, according to *Standart*, 7 May 2003.
- 5 For further information on this subject see Balci (2003).
- 6 In October 2005 two preachers were attacked by Muslims in Gotse Delchev while distributing invitations to a film. On 4 August in Grokhotno near Devin some students distributing biblical films were greeted with a protest demonstration led by the local imam, as a result of which the local mayor withdrew the permission he himself had granted to them to distribute the films (BHC Helsinki report 2005, bghelsinki.org).
- 7 Gendzhev had already revealed that Khasan had made a trip to Saudi Arabia in July as a guest of Al-Waqf Al-Islami, a charity which promotes Wahhabi Islam and which gained notoriety after it was disclosed that six of the 11 September hijackers had attended one of its seminars. This Khasan had denied, until the charity's branch in Eindhoven in the Netherlands confirmed that he had been to Saudi Arabia.

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