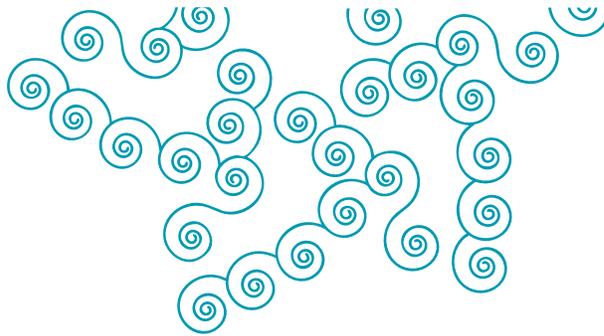


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## Hayrullo Hamidov and Uzbekistan's culture wars: how soccer, poetry, and pop-religion are "a danger to society"

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### Key Points

- Hamidov's life and fate are representative of hundreds of other young, religiously-active Uzbeks caught up waves of mass trials and repression. Persecution of popular cultural figures like Hamidov increases frustration and resentment among a population already dissatisfied with the pace of economic development and strict limits on the public expression.
- His popular resonance and respect comes perhaps first from this willingness to stand up and discuss topics that the climate of censorship and repression refused to allow, and just as importantly to give others a space in which they could air their opinions on these same issues.
- Hamidov gives voice to a feeling of deep frustration and disappointment that many Uzbeks share about the broken promises of independence and of moral chaos, collapse, and corruption that has accompanied the new post-Soviet order. He represents a popular desire to revive Islamic values and norms as a solution for these problems and sense of moral disorder
- His strong sense of Uzbek national pride, careful emphasis on the necessity of adapting religious principles to both modern and local contexts, and frequent references to famous Sufi mystics all set him apart from the rhetoric of fundamentalist groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir or the Salafi movement.

In late April 2010 a closed trial took place outside Tashkent for a group of young observant Muslim men; it proceeded like dozens of others that go unnoticed, resulting, as always, in foregone convictions for every defendant. This one drew the attention of the world, however, because Hayrullo Hamidov—Uzbekistan’s first religious celebrity—sat in the defendant’s cage.

Hamidov’s fate is representative of hundreds of other young, religiously-active Uzbeks caught up in this latest wave of mass trials and repres-

simultaneous promotion and persecution of religious expression.

Hamidov’s voice represents a much larger rift between the Uzbek government and an important part of the society it rules. Even though his arrest and trial failed on its own to spark a public backlash in a country where the memory of Andijon lingers, persecution of popular cultural figures like Hamidov increases popular resentment among a population already dissatisfied with the pace of economic development

## **The Uzbek authorities have a long history of repressing independent religious or cultural production, particularly when someone gains a popular following. Hamidov’s work, however, contains no controversial religious content**

sion, but it has also stirred a wave of anger and resentment among his followers and fans that has never fully subsided. Hamidov is one of the most popular living Uzbek public figures, respected among many young Uzbeks not only in Uzbekistan, but in neighboring countries and abroad as well. His work has daringly addressed issues and concerns that many in his generation share but about which the regime actively represses discussion.

Long in prison, his work resonates widely across Uzbek social media and is curated on dozens of pages and YouTube channels devoted to him. Though the government of Uzbekistan seemed to hope to silence him by charging him with religious extremism and putting him away, he was clearly not an extremist and, what is more, represents a popular movement to return Islamic values to a central place in Uzbek culture and national identity and address very real social and economic problems the country faces. He has become a symbol for a generation of Uzbeks increasingly interested in expressing their personal and national identity in religious terms—from nominal Muslims to Sufi mystics and reformist Salafis alike—and of the contradictions in the Uzbekistani government’s

and frustrated about strict limits on the public expression. The ubiquity of his work online years after it was proscribed shows that he has become a symbol of those values, of that resentment, and of the will of Uzbeks to think for themselves, no matter how little they can speak.

When police in Tashkent arrested Hayrullo Hamidov in his home in January 2010,<sup>1</sup> the limited international reporting and media analysis focused on his career as a sports journalist and soccer commentator.<sup>2</sup> Nationally famous as a successful young sportscaster, focus on this aspect of his life obscured an inspired change of direction in his career known very well to his Uzbek audience. Especially in the years since his imprisonment, he is known almost exclusively now as a revivalist religious teacher, popular nationalist poet, and prominent disciple of one of Uzbekistan’s most influential independent Muslim clerics.<sup>3</sup> His religious programs, both video and audio, and his poetry in particular are widely disseminated and popular on the internet and social media in the Uzbek language and available for sale in local bazaars across the region.<sup>4</sup> His arrest prompted a spike in his fame and popularity and outpourings of anger, grief,

and prayers by the hundreds on social media that has never ceased in the years since.<sup>5</sup>

Hamidov's religious and popular nationalist work interweaves the two categories so tightly that it would be impossible to make a distinction between them, and this appears to be at the heart of his popularity for many of his readers and listeners. His work clearly resonates with young Uzbeks in particular. His sophisticated blended use of old and new media (newspapers, magazines, radio, the internet, video, MP3) and high

## Hamidov initiated two extremely popular new ventures: an independent newspaper called *Odamlar Orasida* (Among the People) and a radio program called "Xolislik sari" ("Towards Fairness")

production values in all his media work, coupled with his ability to shift seamlessly from sports to religion to the great works of Uzbek literature, make him a highly appealing figure to young Uzbeks whose lives bridge the experience of the Soviet Union and independent Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup>

The Uzbek authorities have a long history of repressing independent religious or cultural production, particularly when someone gains a popular following. Hamidov's work, however, contains no controversial religious content. Moreover, he appears to have been extremely careful in cooperating with the state-sponsored religious authorities.<sup>7</sup> His work frequently broached "taboo" topics on which the official media keeps a stony silence, and he challenged the government's own statements about Uzbek nationalism and the place of religion in the Uzbek national myth in ways that his fans and supporters find extremely appealing. These, and not his religious beliefs, are more likely the reasons the Uzbek regime finds him most threatening.

Exploring his life, the content of his work and the way it is received by the Uzbek public can give us important insights into the lives of many in his generation and what they want for their society, and highlight the fault lines of tension between the Karimov regime and the society it rules.

## A post-Soviet life

Born in 1975, Hayrullo Hamidov studied journalism and broadcasting at Tashkent State University (TSU) in the mid-1990s.<sup>8</sup> He came of age in the post-Soviet era as the citizens of his newly independent country struggled with what it meant to be Uzbeks and Muslims. His is the first generation to begin university education that is no longer forced to twist every subject into a Marxist worldview, use Russian words for technical terms or neologisms, or

frame their country's destiny in terms of what was best for the Soviet Union and ultimately for Moscow. Hamidov also began to study Arabic and Persian at TSU. Early in his career as a sports journalist covering Uzbek national football (soccer) leagues, he was encouraged by his producers to model Arab media and use Arabic loan-words to replace Russian terms that had crept heavily into Uzbek media in the Soviet period.<sup>9</sup>

This language study appears to have facilitated his interest in also studying the Qur'an and other Islamic religious texts. Many young men and women of his generation followed a similar path. As newly independent Uzbeks began to recover their heritage, culture, and literature, like Hamidov many also became deeply interested in Islam and recovering the rich religious heritage of their country as a critical and defining part of their national or ethnic identity.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the late 1990s through the middle of the 2000s, Hamidov's career as a journalist focused primarily on sports, as a popular football commentator for both radio and television. Sometime in this period, however, he began to study religion more formally under the guidance of clerics affiliated with Shaykh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf.<sup>11</sup>

Muhammad Sodiq is by many accounts the single most popular and influential religious figure in Uzbekistan, though he is independent of the religious structures (the Muftiate) controlled by the Uzbek government. In fact, he is himself a former Mufti and retains popular authority as such in the eyes of many Uzbek believers. Forced into exile by the Karimov regime in 1993, he was allowed to return in 1999 and has since worked privately as a teacher, scholar, and popular author in a somewhat uneasy live-and-let-live agreement with the regime.<sup>12</sup> Hayrullo Hamidov

At some point in or around 2007, Hamidov appears to have come under direct pressure from the police, who warned him to cease his religious work and return to sports or suffer consequences.<sup>17</sup> He eventually complied in the sense that he did not attempt to return to producing religious material for the public airwaves or start another newspaper, and instead accepted a position as deputy editor of a major sports publication.<sup>18</sup> His religious education programs continued in new format on CD and MP3, however, and older programs from “Towards Fairness” continued to

## **This revived tradition of inviting a popular or influential religious figure to give a talk for religious edification at weddings and other life-cycle feasts is itself indicative of the kind of religious revival that Hamidov represents**

appears to have shown promise in his religious studies, and at some point before he embarked on his career as a public religious figure he began to study with the Shaykh himself in personal sessions and became a frequent and welcome guest in the Shaykh’s home.<sup>13</sup>

Sometime around late 2006 Hamidov’s public career began to reflect his religious beliefs. He initiated two extremely popular new ventures: an independent newspaper called *Odamlar Orasida* (Among the People) and a radio program called “Xolislik sari” (“Towards Fairness”) that broadcasted on the privately owned Tashkent FM station Navruz.<sup>14</sup>

Both of these projects were short-lived in their official run and quickly came under pressure from the authorities. They also both exploded with popularity almost overnight, which seemed to alarm both officials and the rest of the Uzbek media world. Though they were quickly closed down, both live on thanks to digitization.<sup>15</sup> The popular radio program was also produced on CD and is widely available not only in Uzbekistan, but also in Uzbek-speaking areas of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan<sup>16</sup> and has spread virally across the Internet.

be widely distributed. He also produced a series of videos about the basic teachings of Islam for Muhammad Sodiq’s popular internet portal, Islam.uz, where some of his other work continues to be distributed as well, in spite of his imprisonment.<sup>19</sup>

In the years between his media programs and his arrest, even as new production of materials appears to have ceased, Hamidov continued to appear frequently in large private speaking engagements at traditional venues such as weddings and other festivals.<sup>20</sup> This revived tradition of inviting a popular or influential religious figure to give a talk for religious edification at weddings and other life-cycle feasts is itself indicative of the kind of religious revival that Hamidov represents, returning overtly religious elements to Uzbek cultural traditions that had become in many ways secularized during the Soviet era.<sup>21</sup>

## **“A threat to public safety and social order”**

The police raid on his home and his subsequent arrest in late January 2010 was supposedly justified by the content of a talk at a life-cycle

celebration in a village near Tashkent, at which police sources claim that Hamidov participated in some kind of discussion of Salafism.<sup>22</sup> Whether such a discussion actually took place or not is unclear, but it would not be unlikely. The debates about how Uzbek Hanafi Islam relates to Arab-based reformist movements have been common among young Uzbek Muslims since at least the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Some sources claim that Hamidov had been recruited by his teacher Muhammad Sodiq to participate in an educational campaign to dissuade young

position as thousands of other young “religiously active” men over the past 15 years, in wave after wave of secret closed trials in multiple cities and regions across the country.<sup>28</sup>

It is perhaps partly because Hamidov’s life story, including his ultimate arrest and prosecution, is so typical of many in his generation that his work resounds so strongly for many young Uzbeks. His writing and audio programs, particularly their critical and nationalist elements, also sets him apart, however, from other popular religious

## Discussion of issues like infant mortality, botched medical treatments, or pedophilia, for example, is forbidden because they acknowledge a problem

Uzbek Muslims from interest in Salafism and Salafist groups.<sup>24</sup>

Though the Uzbek regime would seem to want to support such efforts and has used Muhammad Sodiq in the past to speak out against groups or movements it opposes, none of this seems to have helped Hamidov’s defense.<sup>25</sup> After a quiet investigation, his trial began four months later in tightly closed secret proceedings at a remote district courthouse in a village outside Tashkent. He was charged along with 14 others with the “illegal formation of a civic or religious group” and “preparation or distribution of materials which constitute a threat to public safety and social order.”<sup>26</sup>

The court refused to provide details about the evidence on which the charges were based or other details of the case for independent evaluation by defense attorneys, human rights organizations, the media, or Hamidov’s family. As in similar trials, access to the court itself was blocked up to two kilometers from the courthouse, which was surrounded by heavy guard.<sup>27</sup>

Sentenced to six years in prison on terrorism charges and unable to contact his relatives or external organizations that might assist him, Hamidov has now found himself in the same

teachers like Abduvali Qori Mirzoyev or Obidxon Nazarov, who were actively persecuted by the Karimov government.<sup>29</sup>

Though his teaching has a similar broad following and his recordings have a wide distribution that invites comparisons to these imams, both of them were trained clerics whose work concentrated heavily on controversial theological issues.<sup>30</sup> Hamidov, on the other hand, is an educated layman whose poems and prose express deep frustrations common to many Uzbeks from all walks of life. A closer examination of the content of his work allows us to reach some conclusions about what these frustrations are and why the Uzbek government finds talking about them at all to be “a threat to public safety and social order.”

### “An Uzbek’s Declaration:”

#### Hayrullo Hamidov’s work

The research for this project examined a number of primary sources, including Hamidov’s poems, stories, issues of his newspaper *Among the People*, video and audio recordings of his poems and programs, and one lengthy interview in which he took questions from BBC Uzbek

presenters and from BBC Uzbek listeners in Uzbekistan and abroad. Additional information about the content of his work was taken from comments and forum posts on Uzbek-language internet sites, from interviews with his fans and followers, and from secondary reports published by Uzbek or Russian language media.

Based on these materials and interviews, three distinct themes from Hamidov's work appear to resonate with his readers and parts of the Uzbek public at large. These are:

## Hamidov's willingness to be the person who "stood up and had a voice" and the courage that this step demanded fuels his popularity and inspires his supporters

1. A willingness to talk frankly about taboo topics and politically incorrect social problems that are of deep concern for many Uzbeks. This includes expressing desire for genuineness in public discourse, that is, for openness, fairness (justice), and free speech.
2. Expressing frustration with the sense of collapse, decay, corruption, and backwardness. Many Uzbeks share this frustration in regard to the current state of Uzbekistan (and by proxy the leadership of the Karimov regime).
3. Islamic revivalism (not to be confused with Islamism),<sup>31</sup> stressing the importance of "Muslimness" as a part of Uzbek identity and advocating religious education and a revival of Muslim values as a solution for collapse and corruption. Unlike Islamist fundamentalism, however, this includes a push for development and progress, rooted in Muslim values but including technological and economic development (combining "the best of the West with the best of the East").

### Prophet, poet, and journalist

#### "Among the People"

Several independent evaluating organizations judge the Uzbek media one of the least free in

the world.<sup>32</sup> Not only is political dissent or criticism actively repressed, but so is "bad news" in general, which leaves most people in an information vacuum when it comes to important issues of daily life like health education, crime, or consumer safety. Heavy censorship and the climate of fear that prevails in the Uzbek media deny the public an open forum in which to discuss things that are important to them.

As Hamidov's career branched out from sports journalism, this desire for frank discussion of

social issues seems to have been one of his primary motivations. Both of his public productions—the newspaper *Among the People* and his radio program "Towards Fairness"—tried in different ways to fill this void without crossing the censor's lines.

"Towards Fairness" primarily addressed religious and moral issues that will be discussed in other points below, but it should be noted that open discussion of these issues from a religious perspective, particularly by a non-cleric, was a daring puncture in the wall of media censorship. Opening public discussion of religious issues outside of the mosque or scripted government-sponsored programs that typically draw bland and predictable moral lessons ("respect your elders, obey your government") was an exciting development for many listeners, and helps explain the runaway and lasting popularity of the program.

The issues of *Among the People*, for which Hamidov served as a writer and editor-in-chief, however, fall more directly into this category. A number of articles written since his arrest have speculated that it was this content that may have led to Hamidov's persecution even more directly than his religious material.<sup>33</sup>

The weekly paper, which ran for only 26 issues, quickly became one of the highest circulating

periodicals in the country.<sup>34</sup> It raised a broad variety of issues untouchable in “traditional” publications but deeply important to much of the public: risks and problems with popular medical treatments or theories,<sup>35</sup> the dangers of ultra-nationalism, abortion, the spread of religious cults,<sup>36</sup> the influence of foreign missionaries,<sup>37</sup> the omnipresence and openness of prostitution, pedophilia,<sup>38</sup> and other issues that could not be openly acknowledged or independently discussed as social problems in most publications.<sup>39</sup>

mentality, and especially a shortcoming of people in our own profession [journalists]: if one person stands up and wants to have a voice, when one person starts to speak clearly above the fray, no one stands with him ... most people think that in Uzbekistan somebody keeps everything under control, someone keeps a lid on things, that’s what’s always thought. But the situation among the people themselves is that their own internal censor is so extremely strong that this can be deceptive. In several of the places I’ve worked I heard someone say,

## **The poem avoids placing direct blame on politics or policies, but openly blasts the apathy of the people themselves and their perceived moral decline**

While some of these issues may seem mundane to a Western audience, it is important to understand that discussion of many of them is precluded in the Uzbek press for the simple reason that reporting on any social problem requires *admitting* that there is a problem in the first place. Discussion of issues like infant mortality, botched medical treatments, or pedophilia, for example, is forbidden because they acknowledge a problem. Other issues, such as the openness of illegal prostitution, stir a different kind of official anger because prostitution operates in the open precisely because mid-level officials and police frequently take a cut from the profits or run the rings themselves.<sup>40</sup> In addition to its controversial content, the newspaper also included a variety of popular interest sections on poetry, literature, history, and even a cartoon section for children.<sup>41</sup>

As late as September 2008, more than a year after the paper was forced to shut down, Hamidov publicly and probably strategically denied that *Among the People* was closed by official censorship. Instead, he bitterly cited the suffocating internal censorship and climate of fear among writers and journalists in Uzbekistan, saying:

There’s another issue here—something that I don’t personally like. It is part of our national

“Hey, wait, think about what you’re saying!” ... It’s not bosses or people in high places saying this, it’s other journalists ... I came to the conclusion that this is how things are, that’s the price we have to pay.<sup>42</sup>

Hamidov’s willingness to be the person who “stood up and had a voice” and the courage that this step demanded fuels his popularity and inspires his supporters. His imprisonment appears to only have enhanced his legitimacy and support among Uzbeks at home and in exile, who yearn for openness and honesty in public dialogue—whether connected to religious or purely secular issues.

## **“What is becoming of the Uzbeks?”**

Hamidov’s most broad popularity, however, comes not from his formal media productions, but from his poetry. It was in his poems that Hamidov dropped the careful, measured criticisms of his journalistic voice and let loose the raw emotions shared by millions of Uzbeks deeply frustrated with a feeling of collapse, degeneration, and corruption in the post-Soviet era.

unsparing in condemning the social conditions the post-Soviet government had created and uses of double-entendres or ambiguous terms or symbols that could easily be implied to directly denounce the Uzbek regime in harsh terms. One of the central themes of his most popular poems is the decline of Uzbek society, questioning the disappointing path the country is currently on, one that was supposed to lead to development. His frustrations are echoed by many in Uzbekistan who have become bitter and increasingly angry as the promises of independence have led

himself, he turns it as a weapon against the status quo and, by implication, against the government itself.

In his most popular work, “What is Becoming of the Uzbeks?” he cites the lost greatness and achievements of this nationalist history as a rhymed lament about the current state of the country and its chosen path. “My country was free for centuries/but now instead in total debasement/the leading one is completely corrupted/What is becoming of the Uzbeks?”<sup>44</sup>

## **Hamidov gives voice to a feeling of deep frustration and disappointment that many Uzbeks share about the broken promises of independence and of moral chaos, collapse, and corruption that has accompanied the new post-Soviet order**

instead to intolerably low wages for educated professionals, declining educational standards, and a massive drain of human resources as the human capital of the country, educated and uneducated alike, has had to seek work abroad.

In stark contrast to the difficulties of post-independence, development is the almost constantly growing embellishment of the Uzbek national myth propagated by the current regime. Official propaganda and cultural production has attempted to project Uzbek cultural identity much further back into history than was actually the case. This propaganda appropriates great cultural and historical figures of early and medieval Islamic science, art, and literature and world historical figures like the conquerors Tamerlane and Tumaris, a long-forgotten warrior queen who defeated Cyrus the Great in battle in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>43</sup>

The Uzbek regime attempts to use these cultural and historical figures to enhance its own legitimacy and convince the society it rules that this past greatness is proof that a great future lies ahead. As many of his readers do under their breath, Hamidov turns this nationalist propaganda on its head. Claiming this immense cultural heritage for the Uzbek people them-

Like many of his other works, the poem avoids placing direct blame on politics or policies, but openly blasts the apathy of the people themselves and their perceived moral decline.<sup>45</sup> As in the interview above, the poem again complains that the people around Hamidov try to discourage him from speaking out, to keep silent and keep his observations to himself. He refuses, and instead tries to use shame to motivate his listeners to action. The Uzbek national image created by the nationalist myth is supposed to show that Uzbeks are heirs to the greatest heritage in the region and far superior to their nomadic neighbors. While championing the notion that this was true in the past, Hamidov writes that this only shows the height from which the Uzbek nation has fallen: “everyone laughs at our sorry state ... even the Turkmen mocks [us].”<sup>46</sup>

Connected to this superiority to their neighbors in official propaganda is the notion that Uzbekistan, and specifically its government, is first and foremost independent and sovereign. Supposedly justified by this great cultural history and the peoples’ will for independence, the Karimov regime can therefore thumb its nose at international opinion, advice, or allies. A central national propaganda slogan, especially

after the barrage of international criticism following the Andijon massacre in 2005, was “The Uzbeks will never depend on anyone.” Hamidov is especially damning in this dire assessment of contemporary Uzbekistan’s status in comparison to other countries in the second-to-last stanza:

*Any kind of foreign-born person  
Who accidentally stumbles into Uzbekistan  
Is like a candle shining in the darkness  
What is becoming of the Uzbeks?*<sup>47</sup>

## “The day the Prophet came is the day I was born”<sup>48</sup>

Hamidov’s work explicitly calls for a revival of religious education and a return to moral principles grounded in Islam as the cure for society’s problems. He firmly roots the cause of society’s decline in the lack of attention to these values—in paying too much attention to being Uzbek and not enough to being Muslim.

Though Hamidov makes strong statements about the centrality of Islam to the country’s moral and cultural identity, this should not be interpreted out of context and used to construe him as an Islamist opposed to secular government, or as an Islamic fundamentalist. He is clearly a conservative Muslim and a religious revivalist who strongly believes that society’s morals should be drawn from Islam. However, he carefully avoids politics or making political statements. He reserves his harshest criticism for society itself, constantly emphasizing the importance of individual moral choices.<sup>49</sup>

His strong sense of Uzbek national pride, careful emphasis on the necessity of adapting religious principles to both modern and local contexts, and frequent references to famous Sufi mystics all set him apart from the rhetoric of fundamentalist groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir or the Salafi movement. These characteristics also put him clearly within the guidance likely given to him by his teacher Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq and show his influence and authority, to which Hamidov openly defers.<sup>50</sup>

This desire to return to Islam and to recover the rich heritage of Islamic culture, art, literature, spirituality, and moral guidance is one shared by, and resonates with, millions across the region and is a central aspect of Hamidov’s message. The impressive reach of his religious programs and poems and the overwhelming proportion of comments and statements of support for him since his arrest that contain religious language (e.g. “May Allah keep our brother Hayrullo safe and preserve his family!” “God grant him salvation!” etc.)<sup>51</sup> indicates that he reflects this much broader trend in Uzbek society in an important way.

Assessments of the Soviet legacy in Central Asia that focus on “ideological vacuums” left by the collapse of communism tend to reflect the terms and understandings brought to the situation by outside analysts rather than what Central Asians say about themselves. In their own words, as in those of Hamidov, Central Asians and Uzbeks in particular speak often of a sense of loss, of chaos, moral, physical and economic disorder, and of a religious heritage that was a central part of their identity taken from them by the Soviet regime.<sup>52</sup>

Hamidov combines this desire for a return to Muslim values with a passion for progress and education. His form of Islamic revivalism is conservative and perhaps not entirely compatible with some Western values, but he speaks eagerly of a desire to combine the “best of the East with the best of the West” and is clearly open to adapting religion to modernity in positive ways that preserve the basic moral imperatives of Islam.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

Hayrullo Hamidov’s life story is tragically typical of many in his generation. It begins with an increased interest in religion and exploring the deep Islamic heritage in Uzbek history and ends in a mass trial where he is accused along with hundreds of others of participation in a vague plot to overthrow the government or harm society.

What makes him stand out, however, is that he has a unique voice that rose “above the fray” as

he put it, and gives expression to a large group of others in his generation who feel that no one listens to them. As a journalist he has shown a remarkable versatility in different issues of popular interest to his generation, from sports and religion to controversial debates of great concern to Uzbek society.

His popular resonance and respect comes perhaps first from this willingness to stand up and discuss topics that the climate of censorship and repression refused to allow, and just as importantly to give others a space in which they could air their opinions on these same issues.

Secondly, he gives voice to a feeling of deep frustration and disappointment that many Uzbeks share about the broken promises of independence and of moral chaos, collapse, and corruption that has accompanied the new post-Soviet order.

Finally, he represents a popular desire to revive Islamic values and norms as a solution for these problems and sense of moral disorder. Although not a formal cleric, with a successful media career and guidance from one of Uzbekistan's most respected independent clerical authorities, he quickly established himself by becoming the country's first religious celebrity, advocating the popular push to return Islam to a central place in Uzbek culture and identity.

Any one of these facets by itself would likely have been enough to draw the persecution of Uzbek authorities. Combined together they appear to have created enough fear on the part of the government that they may lose control of the nationalist narrative to independent voices like Hamidov's, that they are willing to risk popular backlash by jailing Hamidov in an attempt to silence him.

Putting Hamidov in jail, however, has done little to silence his message and certainly does nothing to improve the situation that made his harsh criticism resonate so strongly. Hamidov's popularity illustrates important rifts between the government of Uzbekistan and the population it rules, and his work helps us understand the concerns of many Uzbeks of his generation.

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6. One of Hamidov's especially poignant religious nationalist poems can be found reposted, for example, on a website right next to a song by Uzbekistan's most famous pop star (Yulduz Usmanova) and the Uzbekistan national anthem. Hayrulla Hamidov; "O'zbekning Iqrori" [Uzbek: "An Uzbek's Declaration"]; <http://reader.blogger.uz/>; Accessed via Google cache, 28 April 2010.
7. In a September 2008 interview, Hamidov confirms that the content of all of his religious programs was submitted for pre-approval to the state's religious authorities, whose work he credited for preventing divisions among Uzbek believers. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
8. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
9. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
10. Abdujabar Abduvakhitov; "Islamic Revivalism in Uzbekistan," in Dale F. Eickelman Adeeb Khalid; "The Revival of Islam," *Islam After Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 116-139. ed.; *Russia's Muslim Frontiers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 79-100. For a closer examination of the mixing of nationalism and religion (to make religious nationalism) in Central Asia, see: Noah Tucker; "Wives Submit to your Husbands? Revivalist Movements and Religious Nationalism from Texas to Tashkent," MA Thesis; Russia, E. European and Central Asian Area Studies Department, Harvard University, 2008.
11. For Hamidov's own description of his relationship with Muhammad Sodiq, whom he calls "the greatest living Islamic scholar in Uzbekistan," see his interview: BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
12. Bakhtiyar Babadjanov; "Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan: A View from Within," in Stephane Duduignon, ed., *Devout Societies vs. Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2004).
13. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010. Ferghana.ru; "Uzbekistan: nachalsya zakrytiy sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym. Ego I eshyo 14 chelovek obvinayut v sozdanii nezakonnykh religioznykh organizatsiyii" [Russian: "Uzbekistan: Closed trial begins for journalist Hayrullo Hamidov. [Hamidov] and 14 other people accused of formation of illegal religious organization"]; 29 April 2010; <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14633&mode=snews>; Accessed 4 May 2010.
14. Uznews.net; "V Tashoblasti nachalsia sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym" [Russian: "In Tashkent Oblast Journalist Hayrullo Hamidov's trial begins"]; 29 April 2010; [http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514); Accessed 29 April 2010. Commentary on *Odamlar Orasida* and links to some of the issues in PDF form (which were hidden/protected on sites outside of Uzbekistan) were available here: Arbuz.com forum; "Thread: "Odamlar

- Orasida: Haqparvar gazeta, ( bosh muharrir-Hayrullo Hamidov)" [Uzbek: "Among the People: a paper that seeks the truth (editor-in-chief Hayrullo Hamidov)"]; <http://www.arbuz.com/showthread.php?t=36364>; Accessed 29 April 2010. Episodes of "Xolislik Sari" are widely available on the internet on both Uzbek file-sharing sites as MP3s and on sites like YouTube. Many of the popular poems by Hamidov that are also widely available (and frequently referenced and quoted by his supporters) appear to have been first broadcast/published on the radio program.
15. As of late 2008, Hamidov denied that *Odamlar Orasida* was closed by censors or because of concerns about content. He speculated that the sheer explosive popularity of the paper had made its backers nervous and they had effectively pulled the plug under pressure from competitors, etc. This statement, like a number of others he makes in that interview, seems overly cautious and politically conscious. That said, it remains unclear exactly why *Odamlar Orasida* was closed. See: BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
  16. Since the mid-1980s, taped sermons and programs on audio tape and now on CD and MP3 are one of the most important and popular formats for religious teaching in Central Asia, especially for material that is censored or disapproved of by authorities. Ferghana.ru; "Toshkentda taniqli jurnalist Xayrullo Hamidov hisbga olindi," [Uzbek: "In Tashkent well-known journalist Hayrullo Hamidov taken into custody"]; 24 January 2010; <http://uzbek.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=7529&mode=snews>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
  17. Ferghana.ru; "Uzbekistan: nachalsya zakrytiy sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym. Ego I eshyo 14 chelovek obvinyayut v sozdaniy nezakonnykh religioznykh organizatsiyii" [Russian: "Uzbekistan: Closed trial begins for journalist Hayrullo Hamidov. [Hamidov] and 14 other people accused of formation of illegal religious organization"]; 29 April 2010; <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14633&mode=snews>; Accessed 4 May 2010.
  18. Hamidov's own account of his return to full-time sports journalism at the end of 2008 indicates that he was still producing religious radio programs, only for publication on CD and the internet instead of the public airwaves. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
  19. Hamidov's poetry and religious education materials appear in several places in the currently available content at Islam.uz, and one reader asking Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq a question about which brands of meat in Uzbekistan were truly halal references input from Hamidov. For an example of Hamidov's work on Islam.uz, see: Islam.uz; Hayrullo Hamidov; "Duoning Qabul bo'lish shartlari" [Uzbek: "What must be done for a prayer to be accepted?"] No date. <http://islom.uz/content/view/275/137/>; Accessed 5 May 2007. Islam.uz; Hayrullo Hamidov; "Universitetga kirmay olim bo'lish mumkinmi?" [Uzbek: "Can one become a religious scholar without studying at a university?"]; No date; <http://islom.uz/content/view/640/137/>; Accessed 5 May 2010.
  20. Ferghana.ru; "Toshkentda taniqli jurnalist Xayrullo Hamidov hisbga olindi," [Uzbek: "In Tashkent well-known journalist Hayrullo Hamidov taken into custody"]; 24 January 2010; <http://uzbek.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=7529&mode=snews>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
  21. For more information on the revival of the tradition of the "wedding speaker," see Julie McBrien, "Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 341-357.
  22. Several sources indicate that the occasion was an *akika*, a large traditional dinner held to celebrate the birth of a new child, held in the town of Chinoz outside Tashkent in the home of someone acquainted with Hamidov personally. Some sources allege that a

- neighbor was recruited by the secret police to videotape the dinner and the talk, which took the form of a question and answer session in which someone asked a question about Salafism and Hamidov responded. Uznews.net; “V Tashoblasti nachalsia sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym” [Russian: “In Tashkent Oblast Journalist Hayrullo Hamidov’s trial begins”]; 29 April 2010; [http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514); Accessed 29 April 2010.
23. Hamidov’s teacher, Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, has played an active role in these debates since the 1980s, participating in them and chronicling and commenting on them. See, for example: Babadjanov, “Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan: A View from Within”.
  24. Author’s direct correspondence with an Uzbek human rights lawyer monitoring the Hamidov case and others like it; March 2010. A more recent story confirms that one source claims Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq himself has told police that he had tasked Hamidov with combating Saliafi ideology and that the discussion of Salafism at the January event was part of this mission. See: Ferghana.ru; “Uzbekistan: nachalsya zakrytiy sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym. Ego I eshyo 14 chelovek obvinyayut v sozdanii nezakonnykh religioznykh organizatsiyii” [Russian: “Uzbekistan: Closed trial begins for journalist Hayrullo Hamidov. [Hamidov] and 14 other people accused of formation of illegal religious organization”]; 29 April 2010; <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14633&mode=snews>; Accessed 4 May 2010.
  25. Martha Brill Olcott, “A Face of Islam: Muhamad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf,” *Carnegie Papers* #82; March 2007.
  26. These charges are, respectively, articles 216 and 244-1 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code, the more serious of which, 244-1, carries a sentence of up to eight years in prison. Ozodlik.org; “Xayrulla Hamidov ustidan mahqama boshlandi” [Uzbek: Hayrullo Hamidov’s trial begins”]; 29 April 2010. <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2028059.html>; Accessed 3 May 2010.
  27. Ozodlik.org; “Xayrulla Hamidov ustidan mahqama boshlandi” [Uzbek: Hayrullo Hamidov’s trial begins”]; 29 April 2010. <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/2028059.html>; Accessed 3 May 2010. Ferghana.ru; “Uzbekistan: nachalsya zakrytiy sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym. Ego I eshyo 14 chelovek obvinyayut v sozdanii nezakonnykh religioznykh organizatsiyii” [Russian: “Uzbekistan: Closed trial begins for journalist Hayrullo Hamidov. [Hamidov] and 14 other people accused of formation of illegal religious organization”]; 29 April 2010; <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14633&mode=snews>; Accessed 4 May 2010.
  28. Ferghana.ru; “Uzbekistan: Srazu v trex oblastiax prokhodyat zakrytye sudy nad sotnyami obvinyaemykh v religioznom ekstremizme” [Russian: “Uzbekistan: Hundreds accused of religious extremism on trial simultaneously in closed courts in three regions”]; 24 February; <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14094>; Accessed 3 May 2010.
  29. For the most thorough analysis of the works of Mirzoyev and Nazarov available in English, including a number of primary source texts with English translation, see Allen Frank and Jahongir Mamatov, *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Dunwoody Press, 2006). For a broader account of the popular following of Mirzoyev (also spelled Mirzayev) and Nazarov and the reaction to their disappearances (Mirzoyev presumed murdered by Uzbek authorities in 1995, Nazarov disappeared in 1998 and reappeared in exile only in 2006), see Monica Whitlock; *Land Beyond the River: The Untold Story of Central Asia* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2003), 149; 198-265.
  30. Frank and Mamatov; *Uzbek Islamic Debates: Texts, Translations and Commentary*.
  31. Islamism, in the generally accepted definition, is a philosophy that rejects secular government and calls for the transformation of society from the top down (by a theocratic government) rather than from the bottom up or on an individual basis.
  32. Reporters Without Borders, for example, ranks only 15 countries in the world worse than Uzbekistan, which according to their

- evaluation is even less free than Libya and Sudan; only Turkmenistan is rated worse in the former USSR. Uzbekistan was ranked 160 out of 175 in 2009. Reporters Without Borders; "Press Freedom Index 2009;" <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2009,1001.html>; Accessed May 3 2010.
33. See, for example: Uznews.net; "V Tashoblasti nachalsia sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym" [Russian: "In Tashkent Oblast Journalist Hayrullo Hamidov's trial begins"]; 29 April 2010; [http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514); Accessed 29 April 2010.
  34. For circulation details see: Uznews.net; "V Tashoblasti nachalsia sud nad zhurnalistom Khayrullo Hamidovym" [Russian: "In Tashkent Oblast Journalist Hayrullo Hamidov's trial begins"]; 29 April 2010; [http://www.uznews.net/news\\_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514](http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=hot&cid=3&nid=13514); Accessed 29 April 2010. For information about the number of issues that ran and Hamidov's own comments on the reasons for their instant popularity, see: BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
  35. Ferghana.ru; "Toshkentda taniqli jurnalist Xayrullo Hamidov hisbga olindi," [Uzbek: "In Tashkent well-known journalist Hayrullo Hamidov taken into custody"]; 24 January 2010; <http://uzbek.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=7529&mode=snews>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
  36. Articles on these issues are from a single volume still accessible in PDF form. *Odamlar Orasida*; no. 11/12, 26 April 2007. Available via: [http://www.htwm.de/truziboy/forum/Odamlar\\_orasida\\_-\\_12son.pdf](http://www.htwm.de/truziboy/forum/Odamlar_orasida_-_12son.pdf); accessed 3 May 2010.
  37. Arbuz.com forum; "Thread: "Odamlar Orasida: Haqparvar gazeta (bosh muharrir-Hayrullo Hamidov)" [Uzbek: "Among the People: a paper that seeks the truth (editor-in-chief Hayrullo Hamidov)"]; <http://www.arbuz.com/showthread.php?t=36364>; Accessed 29 April 2010.
  38. Ferghana.ru; "Toshkentda taniqli jurnalist Xayrullo Hamidov hisbga olindi," [Uzbek: "In Tashkent well-known journalist Hayrullo Hamidov taken into custody"]; 24 January 2010; <http://uzbek.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=7529&mode=snews>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
  39. A number of articles from *Odamlar Orasida* were also available on a popular Uzbek literary site with ties to the Islamic University in Tashkent.
  40. Ferghana.ru; "Toshkentda taniqli jurnalist Xayrullo Hamidov hisbga olindi," [Uzbek: "In Tashkent well-known journalist Hayrullo Hamidov taken into custody"]; 24 January 2010; <http://uzbek.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=7529&mode=snews>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
  41. See for example: *Odamlar Orasida*; no. 11/12, 26 April 2007. Available via: [http://www.htwm.de/truziboy/forum/Odamlar\\_orasida\\_-\\_12son.pdf](http://www.htwm.de/truziboy/forum/Odamlar_orasida_-_12son.pdf); accessed 3 May 2010.
  42. Translation by the author. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.
  43. For fairly exhaustive historiography of the creation of the Uzbek national mythology, Alisher Ilkhamov, "The Archaeology of Uzbek Identity," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 3-4 (2004): 289-326.
  44. It should be noted that this line reflects one of the ambiguous opportunities for double meaning described above. "The leading one is completely corrupted" most likely refers both to Uzbekistan as the former cultural leader of the region, but also to President Karimov, the current self-declared leader of the Uzbeks. Hayrullo Hamidov; "O'zbeklarga nima bo'lyapti?" [Uzbek: "What is becoming of the Uzbeks?"]; Date unknown, though likely between 2007-2009; The poem is widely available on the internet in both written and audio form, though many of the written examples are clearly privately transcribed from the audio and contain typographic errors or mis-transcriptions. The language of this poem is literary and heavily Persian, in the style of much of the great classic poetry of Uzbek literature.

45. Hamidov frequently presses home the point that individuals have to take control of their own moral destinies and that the country's moral collapse is the collective result of individual choices. For other examples, see: Poem; Hayrullo Hamidov; "Majnuntol" [Uzbek: "The Willow Tree"]; No date. Poem; Hayrullo Hamidov; "Qusur" [Uzbek: "Failing"]; No date.
46. Poem; Hayrullo Hamidov; "O'zbeklarga nima bo'lyapti?" [Uzbek: "What is becoming of the Uzbeks?"]; Date unknown, though likely between 2007-2009.
47. The literal translation of the third line of the stanza is "... is a candle lit for everyone in the night." It was paraphrased slightly here to make the meaning more clear in English. Poem; Hayrullo Hamidov; "O'zbeklarga nima bo'lyapti?" [Uzbek: "What is becoming of the Uzbeks?"]; Date unknown, though likely between 2007-2009.
48. Poem; Hayrullo Hamidov; "O'zbekning Iqrori" [Uzbek: "An Uzbek's Declaration"]; No date.
49. Ilkhamov 2004.
50. Hamidov displays an impressive ability to use reasoned theological arguments to defend things common in Central Asian Hanafi Islam (like the use of music in his religious programs) against accusations by fundamentalists that this is against *sharia*. See: BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010. For more information about the life and teaching of Muhamad Sodiq, see Martha Brill Olcott; "A Face of Islam: Muhamad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf," *Carnegie Papers* #82, March 2007.
51. These kinds of comments are scattered all over the forums both reporting the news of his arrest and trial (especially Ozodlik.org, which encourages comments) and those also simply featuring his work (YouTube and other Uzbek specific file sharing sites), not to mention discussion forums specifically related to the topic. See for example the comments at Arbuz.com; "Xayrullo Hamidov Hisbga Olindi!" [Uzbek: "Discussions: Religion and Culture: Hayrullo Hamidov Arrested!"] see post 227]; <http://www.arbuz.com/showthread.php?t=55470&page=16>; Accessed 28 April 2010.
52. For an excellent description of this feeling, see Maria Elisabeth Louw; *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (New York, London: Routledge, 2007), 21-41. See also Farideh Heyat; "Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan: Gender, New Poverty and the Moral Dimension," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 3-4 (2004): 275-287.
53. BBC Uzbek; "Bi-bi-si mehmoni: Xayrullo Hamidov," [Uzbek: BBC Guests: Hayrullo Hamidov]; 29 September 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929\\_hayrullo\\_hamidov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/news/story/2008/09/080929_hayrullo_hamidov.shtml); Accessed 28 April 2010.