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THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF POPULAR REFORMIST MOVEMENTS IN THE FORMATION OF THE BUKHARA PEOPLE'S SOVIET REPUBLIC (1920–1924)

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Abstract
This article explores the legal and political role of popular reformist movements primarily the Jadids and Young Bukharans in the formation of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic (BXSR) from 1920 to 1924. Drawing on primary constitutional texts, treaties, and archival materials, the study analyzes how these indigenous actors shaped the republic's legal foundations, promoted secular modernization, and navigated Soviet ideological influence. While Soviet support was decisive, the BXSR bore clear imprints of Muslim reformist ideals, making it a unique case of transitional sovereignty in Soviet Central Asia.

Keywords: BXSR, Jadidism, Young Bukharans, legal reform, Islamic modernism.

Introduction

In the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, the ancient Emirate of Bukhara - a Russian protectorate since 1868 – was transformed into a new Soviet republic under local leadership. The Bukharan People's Soviet Republic (BPSR, Бухарская Народная Советская Республика, often rendered BXSR in Uzbek) was proclaimed in October 1920 and existed until late 1924. Its founding was the culmination of decades of reformist agitation and political upheaval. Popular Muslim modernist movements - notably the Jadids (enlightened reformers) and the secret society of the Young Bukharians (Yosh buxoroliklar) – had long agitated for educational, social, and political reform in the emirate. These groups eventually allied with the Bolsheviks, helping to overthrow the Emir and establish the BPSR. This article examines the **legal and political role of these popular movements in forming the BPSR**, analyzing the historical context from the late emirate through 1924. It draws on primary legal documents (treaties, constitutions) and contemporary official accounts as well as secondary scholarship to assess how Jadid ideals and Young Bukharan leaders shaped the new state's constitution, laws, and policies.

The BPSR's own constitution - adopted by the All-Bukharan Kurultai in September 1921 - explicitly linked its existence to the overthrow of the Emir: "Having overthrown the power of the Emir, the revolutionary Bukhara people establishes…a Soviet Republic". It proclaimed the former Khanate of Bukhara to be "the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic," a "single, indivisible and independent state" within its existing frontiers. The document went on to vest supreme authority in the Kurultai (Soviet Congress) and its executive committee. In short, the revolutionaries claimed sovereignty for the Bukhara people as a new polity. Yet the BPSR was also deeply connected to regional and imperial politics – it was immediately allied to the Russian

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Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) via treaties (March 1921) and ultimately merged into the Soviet Union in 1924 [2]. The study below analyzes these dynamics, focusing on how popular Muslim reform movements influenced the legal framework, governance, and ideological orientation of the BPSR.

Methods

This study employs a historical-legal approach using both primary sources and scholarly analysis. Key primary materials include the **1921 BPSR Constitution** (adopted at the 2nd All-Bukharan Kurultai), contemporary treaties (e.g. the March 4, 1921 friendship pact with the RSFSR), proclamations by the All-Bukharan Revolutionary Committee, and relevant state records. Where available, secondary sources were preferred: works by Adeeb Khalid and others provide modern scholarly interpretation of events and ideology. The analysis also draws on English-language journal articles and archival-era compendia (e.g. USSR: Sixty Years of the Union, 1922–1982 for translated documents). All claims are substantiated with citations. For historical events and legal provisions, the approach is largely documentary and contextual: tracing the actions and writings of Jadid and Young Bukharan leaders, and examining how they influenced or drafted the Republic's laws. The constitutions, flag symbols, and legal decrees of the BPSR are interpreted in light of the political aims of these movements. Throughout, attention is paid to historiographical debates - for example, contested interpretations of how "autonomous" the BPSR actually was - by referencing both contemporaneous Muslim accounts and later scholarship [3].

Results

Historical Background: Bukhara to 1917. Since the 1868 Russian conquest, Bukhara remained formally an independent emirate under a Russian protectorate. Under Emir Alim Khan (ruled 1911–1920) [5], the state was conservative and Islamic; traditional sharia-based law and **waqf** religious endowments dominated land and family law. In this environment, a Muslim modernist reform movement (Jadidism) emerged, initially focusing on education. The Jadids argued that traditional maktab (Koranic) schooling was obsolete and sought to import secular sciences and new teaching methods. In Bukhara, the Jadids produced the first native-language periodicals and founded new-method schools around 1908–1910. By 1909 they formed a secret reform society, the Young Bukharans (Mladobukharans), led by figures like Abdurrauf Fitrat and Abdul Kadir Mukhitdinov. Early activities (pre-1917) were mainly cultural: "young Bukharans worked to implement large-scale political reforms in the Emirate of Bukhara" and to establish new-method schools and libraries. For example, they published journals like Buxoro Sharif (1912–13) and Turon (1912–13), set up the "Library of Enlightenment", and opened dozens of schools in both urban and rural areas. These efforts were violently repressed by the Emir's regime: many Jadid schools were closed after 1914, and some reformers were forced to flee or operate underground. Despite limited grassroots support (most Bukharis remained conservative and loyal to the Emirate), the Jadids articulated a vision of modernity that combined Islamic culture with secular science. As Adeeb Khalid notes, by 1917 Fitrat and others were disillusioned with gradual reform. They embraced the idea of revolution, not as class struggle but as a means of achieving **national progress and self-strengthening**. This ideological shift – from "education reform as

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gradualism" to "revolution against tyranny" – aligned many Jadids with revolutionary currents from late 1917 onward. Thus, by the time of the Russian revolutions, Bukhara's Jadid intelligentsia was poised to ally with Bolsheviks against the Emir's autocracy [3].

The 1917–1920 Revolutionary Period. News of the February and October Revolutions in Petrograd quickly reached Central Asia. Unlike Turkestan proper, the Emirate remained outside the initial Bolshevik system. In 1918, a faction of Young Bukharans attempted an armed uprising with Red Army support. Bolshevik forces under Commander F.K. Kolesov entered the emirate in March 1918 to demand reforms, but Emir Alim Khan repudiated the Bolsheviks and incited a jihad against them. The young activists fled to New Bukhara (a Russian workers' settlement) and then to Turkestan. The Red Army withdrew, and Alim Khan agreed to a tentative peace with Soviet Russia. A treaty in April 1918 reaffirmed Bukhara's nominal independence, much to the frustration of Bukhara reformers. This episode showed both the limitations of the Young Bukharians' military readiness and the Bolsheviks' initial reluctance to destabilize the region due to the civil war elsewhere.

In the interim, Bukhara became a refuge for anti-Bolshevik forces (White emigres, pan-Turkist militants). Meanwhile, a clandestine Bukhara Communist Party (BCP) was formed by émigré Jadid-turned-communists (e.g. Fayzulla Khojaev) and by February 1920 a broader alliance (the "Turkburo" of revolutionary Young Bukharians) emerged to jointly overthrow the emir. In summer 1920, Bolshevik enthusiasm had grown: Lenin's government now permitted active support for national revolutions. As Khalid explains, the Young Bukharans "flocked into the new organs of power" opened by the Russian state in Turkestan. By August 1920, the Communist Party of Turkestan and local Young Bukharan leaders reached an agreement: the Young Bukharans would join the Communist Party and participate in planning an overthrow of the emir. At the same time, Mikhail Frunze was appointed commander of the Turkestan Front to prepare for an attack on Bukhara.

On 28 August 1920, the Red Army under Frunze launched a surprise advance on Bukhara city. After four days of fighting, the citadel (the Ark) fell and Emir Alim Khan fled to Afghanistan. The flag was raised over the Kalyan Minaret, symbolizing the end of the emir's rule. Within days a revolutionary committee (the All-Bukharan Revolutionary Committee) took control, headed initially by Abdulqadir Mukhitdinov and – at its 14 September 1920 session – by Fayzulla Khojaev as chairman of the Council of People's Nazirs (the new government). In Soviet terms, this government was called a "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" (a transitional form). The BPSR was formally proclaimed on 8 October 1920 with Khojaev as its Prime Minister (People's Nazir) [4].

Constitutional and Sovereignty Framework. From its inception the BPSR claimed legal sovereignty. On 3 August 1920, Soviet authorities in Tashkent authorized local revolutionaries to announce the end of emir's rule, and they soon proclaimed independence at a Kurultai (people's congress). On 4 March 1921 the BPSR and the RSFSR signed a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance, in which Soviet Russia recognized the BPSR as an independent republic. Later that month a unanimous Kurultai resolution declared that "the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic is a single, indivisible and independent state within the limits of its present state frontiers". This explicit assertion of statehood and territorial integrity was enshrined in the **September 23, 1921 Constitution** of the BPSR. Article 3 of the Constitution states: "The

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Bukhara People's Soviet Republic… is a single, indivisible and independent state". Article 4 proclaims that "state power in the Bukhara Republic… belongs entirely to the whole Bukhara people", indicating that sovereignty had been transferred from the old emir to the mass of citizens.

At the same time, the constitution established a Soviet-style government structure. Supreme power vested in the All-Bukharan Kurultai – the Congress of People's Deputies – which met periodically as a legislature. Between these congresses a Central Executive Committee (Tsentralnyi Ispolnitel'nyi Komitet – CEC) held authority. Thus the BPSR adopted the Soviet model of people's councils at all levels. Compared to the emirate's autocracy, this was a radical legal transformation: power was no longer hereditary or clerical but formally popular, embodied in written laws and elected bodies.

The constitutional framework also reflected the Jadid and Young Bukharan reformist agenda in its content. Article 6 guaranteed private property to all citizens, including land and movable assets, without restriction on size. In practice, this meant that unlike the 1918 RSFSR Constitution (which nationalized land), the Bukhara constitution allowed peasants and tradesmen to keep individual property. (Large landlords and the Emir's relatives were disenfranchised – a point we detail below.) Articles 7–8 enshrined civil liberties: freedom of religion, conscience, speech, press, and assembly, subject only to the general interests of the people. For example, citizens "enjoy freedom of religion" so long as worship does not violate others' rights, and "freedom of speech, press, assembly. must not run counter to the interests of the Bukharan people". These provisions mark a notable accommodation to the region's Islamic culture: the secular republic explicitly permitted public practice of Islam (and other faiths).

The symbolic flag of the BPSR (adopted at its foundation) embodied this legal-political synthesis. Its upper green stripe and crescent recalled the Emirate's Islamic heritage and the pan-Turkic-Islamic **Jadid** aspirations; the red lower field and Soviet star-hammer spoke to Bolshevik revolution. This deliberate combination of Islamic and socialist motifs – even enshrined on the state flag – illustrates how popular Muslim activists sought to merge national-Islamic identity with Soviet-style governance. Legally, the BPSR remained formally a republic of councils and aligned with Soviet law, but it allowed a degree of legal pluralism: private property and religious rights coexisted with the Soviet state ideology.

Reforms and Policies: Young Bukharians in Power. Under the BPSR government, many Jadid and Young Bukharan leaders assumed high office (most famously Faizullah Khojaev as head of the Council of Nazirs). These reformers set about realizing their vision of modernization. Their program focused on **education and cultural transformation**, in continuity with their earlier goals. In Khalid's analysis, "The Young Bukharans embarked on a program of national and cultural reform that dated from their time as an underground movement". The 1921 Constitution and subsequent decrees reorganized the education system: old Qur'anic schools (maktabs) were reformed into a unified network of secular public schools, and even the traditional Islamic madrasas were gradually secularized. According to Khalid, "They set out to reform the maktabs and the madrasas and to systematize them in a network of public education". One leading Jadid, Abdurauf Fitrat, returned from exile to serve as the first Minister of Education. He established a national music conservatory and oversaw curricula changes to include modern sciences and languages in the school syllabus. The government also promoted education in local languages:

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the constitution explicitly guaranteed the right of each nationality to open schools using its mother tongue. These measures reflected the Jadid emphasis on 'illumination' (tahlil) of the Muslim masses through modern schooling and literature.

Land reform and economic policy also bore the imprint of popular activists. In early 1921, the BPSR carried out a partial **land reform**: large feudal estates (owned by the Emir's family and allied nobles) were confiscated and redistributed to poor peasants. (By 1924 most former beks' lands were nationalized for the state). The old Islamic waqf tax on farmers (formerly 30–40% of produce) was replaced with a uniform 10% ushr tax, undercutting the clerical landholders [2]. These changes, initiated by the Young Bukharan ministers, institutionalized their prior demands for relief from oppressive taxes and for empowering the peasantry. In the **economy**, the BPSR government allowed private trade and small-scale enterprise, in line with its constitution. As the Soviets stabilized, however, the regime began to move toward centralized planning. By 1922 the Communist Party (into which the Bukhara communists had been merged) started to limit the earlier economic freedoms, though this process accelerated only after the BPSR's absorption into the Uzbek SSR.

Politically, the Young Bukharans tried to co-opt moderate Islamic leaders. As Khalid observes, they organized "progressive" ulama into the new government's orbit. In 1923 and 1924 the BPSR even held Ulama Congresses – in the Soviet manner – to rally support for "reforming Islam" and for the policies of the Young Bukharan government. These congresses appealed to tradition by professing anti-imperialism and adaptation of Islam to the new age. Notably, some respected Bukharan religious scholars (e.g. Domla Ikrom, Sharifjon Makhdum) broke with the old regime and supported the republic. Thus in its brief life the BPSR pursued a dual path: dismantling the Emir's patrimonial structures (through expropriation and purges of the old elite) while claiming to preserve an Islamic cultural identity. Legal reforms such as property rights and religious freedoms were intended to protect peasant and merchants, whereas the abolition of feudal privileges and the nationalization of waqf signaled a shift to a secular, nationalist socialist order under a nominally Islamic banner.

Internal and External Dynamics. The BPSR's popular movements faced immediate challenges. Internally, a **reactionary insurgency** (later called the Basmachi movement) arose among conservative peasants and Ulema of the remoter regions. Hundreds of ulema who resisted the new regime were executed or driven into Afghanistan. By 1922, large parts of Eastern Bukhara (e.g. Hisor region) were in open revolt. The Red Army had to be redeployed repeatedly to suppress these rebellions. The BPSR government, echoing Jadid rhetoric, offered amnesty to many rebels and promised respect for Islam and land reform to undermine the insurgency. For instance, the Kurultai 1922-24 decrees called for respecting Islamic customs and pardoning former pro-Emir fighters if they laid down arms. These concessions reflected the government's attempt to balance revolutionary fervor with broad legitimacy. At the same time, civil laws and courts were established to replace the old hakimiat (emir's courts), and the constitution provided that citizens could legally charge any official with abuse of power. This rule-of-law clause was a clear break from the arbitrary justice of the Emir. In effect, the BPSR introduced a nascent legal pluralism: secular Soviet law operated alongside a regulated religious sphere (e.g. personal status laws were reformed but allowed religious practice), undergirded by Bolshevik oversight.

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Externally, the BPSR was influenced by Soviet and regional politics. The RSFSR government viewed Bukhara as a Soviet "ally" rather than an organic part of Russia. It paid large subsidies to the BPSR and sent advisors – teachers and commissars – to support schools and administration. Yet it insisted on its own interests. In 1924, under Stalin's nationalities policy, the BPSR was dissolved and its territory divided between the Uzbek and Turkmen SSRs. The September 1924 Fifth Bukharan Kurultai, under Bolshevik direction, declared the end of the BPSR and its entry into the Uzbek SSR and thus the USSR. This move effectively absorbed the "sovereign" republic into the Soviet federal structure, a process consistent with Lenin's earlier notions of voluntary association. Outside influences also included the neighboring Afghan monarchy and even disenfranchised figures like Ottoman Enver Pasha (who briefly traveled to Bukhara in 1921 as a diplomatic envoy). However, foreign threats (e.g. potential British intervention from India) had largely receded by 1920. Instead, the BPSR's fate was decided in Moscow: as Khalid writes, the Bukharan Jadids had initially sided "with the Bolsheviks, even as they were hostile to the language of class", a marriage of convenience. In practical terms, the Red Army's victory was indispensable to establishing the republic, and Bolshevik advisors tightened control over time.

Historiographical Debates. Scholars have long debated the nature of the BPSR and the roles of its founding movements. Early Soviet accounts (e.g. those by F. Khojaev, who later became a Stalinist victim) hailed the People's Republic as a triumphant "socialist revolution" led by the enlightened youth of Bukhara. By contrast, some Western or nationalist historians have portrayed the emirate's fall as largely engineered by Moscow, with local actors playing subordinate roles. Our analysis suggests a more nuanced picture: the Jadids and Young Bukharans indeed provided essential leadership and ideological direction, but their agenda had to be negotiated with Bolshevik strategic interests. Historiographically, Khalid (2010) argues that the BPSR was "ostensibly independent" – it functioned with its own government and constitution – but in reality it depended on Soviet support and was quickly subsumed into the Soviet hierarchy. The local historiography of Uzbekistan (post-1924) later downplayed the Soviet connection and emphasized the national revolutionary heroism of the Jadids and communists.

Another historiographical issue is legal pluralism. The BPSR constitution's guarantees (religious freedom, private property, etc.) have led some to view the early republic as an experiment in blending Islamic and socialist law. However, others note that these provisions were short-lived. By 1924 and thereafter, the Uzbek SSR's Soviet civil and criminal codes replaced virtually all independent legal practices. In that sense, the BPSR's progressive legal framework served only as a transitional façade. The interplay of constitutions and actual practice – for example, the promises of amnesty and rights during 1920–23 – reflect this tension between ideology and power. Contemporary debates also circle around figures like Fitrat and Aqchaqurbanov (an MVD official of the emirate who supervised some reforms); were they true patriots or opportunists? Such questions remain contested.

Discussion

In sum, the founding of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic was a complex process shaped by both indigenous reform movements and Soviet revolution. The Jadids and Young Bukharians

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gave substance to the Republic's legal and political program: the 1921 constitution's provisions on independence, rights, and national self-government echoed their pre-revolution demands (modern education, popular representation) while placating peasant Islamic sensibilities. At the same time, the practical establishment of the BPSR was enabled by Bolshevik military and diplomatic support. External pressures (regional insurgency, Soviet nationalities policy) soon overtook local autonomy: by late 1924, the republic was dissolved into the Soviet Union.

This study shows that popular movements did not merely follow the Bolshevik lead; they helped craft the legal discourse of the new state. For example, the constitutional declaration of the Bukhara people's power and sovereignty would likely have been inconceivable without the national-democratic ideals of the Jadids. Yet ultimately, these very provisions were superseded when the BPSR joined the USSR (the Fifth Kurultai declared incorporation in 1924). In the end, the BPSR stands as an ephemeral but instructive case: an attempt to synthesize Soviet socialism with Central Asian popular aspirations. The role of the Jadids and Young Bukharans in this experiment was decisive, although their vision of "national revolution" was soon subordinated to the broader.

Conclusion

The Bukhara People's Soviet Republic (BXSR) represents one of the most distinctive and paradoxical experiments in early Soviet state-building. Unlike many other territories absorbed directly into the Soviet Union, Bukhara's transformation occurred through an alliance between local Muslim reformists and Bolshevik revolutionaries. This collaboration gave rise to a republic that was ideologically socialist yet culturally Islamic, constitutionally sovereign yet politically dependent on Moscow.

As this article has demonstrated, the role of the Jadids and the Young Bukharans was foundational not incidental in this process. Their prior decades of reformist agitation laid the intellectual and institutional groundwork for revolutionary change. These movements transitioned from cultural activism and clandestine resistance under the Emirate to positions of executive power within the BXSR. In doing so, they attempted to institutionalize their vision of modernity through law: by drafting a constitution that emphasized popular sovereignty, civil rights, land redistribution, educational reform, and religious tolerance.

This legal-political transformation was remarkable in at least three respects. First, it disrupted centuries of autocratic and theocratic rule under the Emirate, replacing divine-right governance with popular legal authority codified in a written constitution. Second, it merged Soviet legal forms people's councils, nationalization, one-party rule with regional cultural specificities. The legal protection of Islamic practice, the use of indigenous languages in schools, and cautious preservation of private property illustrate a pragmatic blend of Bolshevik centralism and local reformism. Third, it demonstrated that Muslim reformist ideology was not inherently incompatible with revolutionary governance, at least in the short term. The BXSR was thus not simply a Soviet puppet state, but a negotiated outcome between distinct ideological traditions.

However, the BXSR's political fragility became evident almost immediately. Despite its declared sovereignty, the republic was economically, militarily, and diplomatically dependent on the RSFSR. The internal resistance from conservative forces (Basmachi rebels) further eroded its ability to function independently. The very legal pluralism that marked the republic's

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uniqueness also made it ideologically vulnerable to pressure from Moscow, particularly after Lenin's death and Stalin's rise. By 1924, the BXSR was formally dissolved and absorbed into the Uzbek SSR as part of a larger Soviet plan to reorganize Central Asia along ethno-territorial lines.

This outcome reveals the deeper tension within the early Soviet imperial project: while promoting self-determination and revolutionary modernization, it simultaneously sought centralized control and ideological uniformity. The Jadid and Young Bukharan experiment in legal governance thus came to an end not because it failed in conception, but because it conflicted with the political logic of Soviet integration. In later decades, many of these reformers were vilified or purged, and their contributions buried under official Soviet historiography.

In conclusion, the BXSR offers a crucial case study in how localized political movements rooted in indigenous traditions can temporarily reshape legal and state structures, even under conditions of foreign dominance. It reminds us that sovereignty, legality, and revolution are not merely imposed from above, but also emerge from below, from the aspirations of those who seek to remake society on their own terms. The legacy of the BXSR, and of its Muslim reformist architects, continues to invite reevaluation in both Central Asian historiography and broader studies of transitional justice and post-colonial legal development.

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