

Problems Associated with Radicalism of Islamic Organizations in Kyrgyzstan

*Vyacheslav M. Khamisov*¹

Since the achievement of independence in the countries of Central Asia, an Islamic revival has begun to take place. Eighty percent of the Kyrgyz Republic's five million inhabitants practice Islam. The last decade has seen the number of Islamic organizations in Kyrgyzstan multiply 31 times. In 1991 there were 39 Muslim mosques in the country; now their number is 1,225. This essay will examine this Muslim resurgence in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the form of extremist organizations, and will examine some of its consequences for the young republic.

Defining Islamic Groups as Extremist Religious Organizations

In the town of Kara-Su, a Center for the Study of the Koran was built which is unique in Central Asia. It possesses texts in seventy different languages. The Koran is published and distributed in Kazakh, Uighur, Turkmen, and Russian. There is a great need for translation. The makeup of the Muslim population in Kyrgyzstan is the following: more than half are Kyrgyz, fifteen percent are Uzbeks, and the rest are Uighurs, Dungans, Kazakhs, Tatars, Bashkirs, Turks, Chechens, Dargins, etc.²

This return to Islam implies a reference to earlier modes of social behavior, which formed a particular type of person. According to M. Weber, Islam is a religion of warriors-conquerors, members of an order of knights who fight for the faith. Karl Popper notes that from a sociological point of view, Islam is a class hierarchy organized as a military religion. The youth of present day Central Asia are attracted by such features as bellicosity, knightly asceticism, and the formation of closed orders in secret organizations.

During the 1990's, against the background of Islamic revival, a new phenomenon appeared: religious radicalism, whose penetration into the political sphere is taking on more and more the characteristics of extremism. This radicalism stems primarily from political activism external to Central Asia, namely the ideological expansionism of Islamic countries and large religious organizations of non-Muslim orientation. Upon reflection, extremism depends on a condition of repression and behavior that contradicts the codes of the Islamic organizations of some states. The problems of Islamic mobilization and increasing religious extremism that Central Asia now faces stem from these conditions.

¹ Vyacheslav M. Khamisov is Academic Secretary of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

² Zh. Zhorobekov, *Regionalnaya politika Kyrgyzstana v tranzitnyi period* (Kyrgyzstan Religious Politics in Transition) (Bishkek, 2000).

In Western Europe, in the Middle East, and in Southeast Asia, experts have identified extremist organizations based on well-defined and well-ordered political features. The most general typology is structured according to the attributes of “right” and “left” extremists. However, the situation in Central Asia is completely different: such pure forms do not exist. What can be seen instead are various kinds of radicalism that are complexly interwoven into the structures of terrorist groups.

In order to better understand the complex maze of concepts surrounding terrorism, one must first examine it on two levels.

Debates and discussions are presently being conducted on the first level. Here, two camps can be defined. The first represents the standpoint of adherents of the revival of traditional Islam. The second one represents the standpoint of religious radicals, which received its synthetic name “Vakhabits” from the mass media. There are thorny discussions between these two camps, because their approaches to the problem of the revival of Islam clash. The first approach is inclined to be guided by traditional values of faith and ethics, while the second one is not afraid of modernism and political involvement.

The groups affiliated with the most radical religious organizations are shown in the table below. One can find almost the whole spectrum of radical Islamist organizations in the Ferghana Valley of Central Asia in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Some of the organizations in this table will be familiar to Western readers, while others have been more often mentioned in the mass media of Central Asia. Among these groups, the following trends can be clearly seen:

- The list starts with the radical Islamist organization “Tablikh,” which supports the preservation of the purity of early Islam, and ends with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which the U.S. State Department has recognized as a terrorist organization. The military operations of the IMU, both in the region of Batken and in Uzbekistan itself, are well known.
- The religious organizations “Nur,” “Tovba,” and “Islom Lashkarlari”³ were subjected to repression for several years after their establishment. Although they joined the IMU, they continue to carry out illegal actions.

The activity of illegal extremist organizations remains a serious problem for Central Asian countries.

The second level on which the phenomenon of terrorism must be examined is connected to the growing transnational arena, which radical Islam is trying to dominate. This is a virtual arena of modern communications, mass media, and,

³ O. Moldaliev, *Religiozniy ekstremizm i mezhdunarodnyy terrorizm kak faktory dastabilizatsii Tsentralnoy Azii* (Religious Extremism and International Terrorism as Destabilization Factors in Central Asia), Working Group on Central Asia (Almaty, 2001).

Table 1: Radical Islamic Religious Organizations in the Ferghana Valley

Name of organization	Year and place of establishment	Zone of influence	Support from abroad	Organizations determining the extremism of the activity
Tablikh	1920's, India	Ferghana Valley	Pakistan, India	Power structures
Adolat Uyushmasi (Society for Justice)	1991, city of Namangan	Ferghana Valley	—	Power structures
Islom Lashkarlari (Islam Warriors)	1991	Ferghana Valley	—	Power structures
Tovba (Repentance)	1991, Namangan	Ferghana Valley	Expanded from Azerbaijan	Power structures
Nur (Light) (light)	1992, Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Cities of Termez and Denau, Uzbekistan	Turkey	Power structures
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	1990's, Uzbekistan	Ferghana Valley. Since 1997, activity in the south of Kyrgyzstan	Afghanistan (Movement of Taliban), Al-Qaeda	Theological Boards of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; power structures; U.S. State Department.

Sources: Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan, V. Ponomarev.

most importantly, the Internet. This space has global characteristics, world connections, and socio-cultural content introduced by the 21st century. This space operates autonomously, according to concepts and categories pertaining to globalization and anti-globalization.⁴

The transnational level is not studied enough in view of the events of September 11, 2001. The interpretations of experts are often biased, without an analysis of

⁴ V. Khamisov, "O problemakh religioznogo ekstremizma v Kyrgyzskoy chasti Ferganskoy doliny" (On Problems Associated with Religious Extremism in Kyrgyz Part of Ferghana Valley), in *Problems of Religious Extremism in Central Asia* (Almaty, 2001).

the processes of anti-globalization in which the extremist organizations are evolving. Not to be aware of this is tantamount to promoting the politicization of the processes within the framework of the “Islamic factor–Islamic fundamentalism–Islamic radicalism–Islamic extremism.”

The formation of the “Hizeb at-Tahrir” party in Central Asia is one among many of such transnational phenomena. The growth of its influence in Central Asia since 1998 is incommensurate with the minor influence it wields in its branches in the Arab Middle East (its influences is even weaker in Western Europe, and to some extent in Russia). To disseminate its ideology, the party takes advantage of the weak spots in the establishment of market economies and democratic polities in the Central Asian countries.

Table 2: The Radical Islamic Illegal Party “Hizeb at-Tahrir”

Name of organization	Year and place of establishment	Zone of influence	Support from abroad	Organizations determining the extremism of the activity
Hizeb at-Tahrir al-Islami (Party of Islamic Revival), an illegal religious party	1991, Uzbekistan	Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan. Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China	Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Kuwait, Turkey, Western Europe	Theological Boards of Muslims in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; power structures; President of the Republic of Uzbekistan
“Akromiylar,” splinter group	1996–1997	Ferghana Valley	—	Power structures
“Hizeb an-Nusra” (Party of Victory), splinter group	1999	Ferghana Valley	—	Power structures

Sources: Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan, V. Ponomarev, B. Babadzhonov.⁵

The “Hizeb at-Tahrir” party started as an international organization in 1952, and has had connections with the Islamist organization Muslim Brotherhood. Since 1996–98, the problems of Central Asian have been mentioned more and more in their party leaflets. As a response, mass repressions have begun to take

place in Uzbekistan. During that period the two groups named “Akromiylar” and “Hizeb an-Nusra” broke away from the party. These groups supported more clandestine and radical methods of operation.

The way popular Islam is practiced in Central Asia works against the expansion of radicalism, and as a result the influence of “Hizeb at-Tahrir” is less in places where Islam is well-established. In this regard, Kyrgyzstan is home to 38 madrasas and 8 Islamic universities. In addition, there are up to 277 Kyrgyz studying abroad in the “Al-Azhar” World University, in Turkey, in Pakistan, in Syria, and in Kuwait.⁶ The Association for Religious Educational Establishments is operating in the city of Osh. There are two newspapers: a national newspaper, *Islam Madaniyaty* (published in Bishkek), and a regional one, *Muslim* (published in Dzhahal Abad).

The position of Islamic extremists is strengthening through the actions of other non-Islamic international religious organizations. The Report of the Theological Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan of March 2002 on the activity of Christian sects has revealed inter-religious friction concerning a reshuffling of spheres of influence in the republic. This report indicated that fifteen thousand Kyrgyz Muslims had converted to Christianity. This phenomenon is of social significance, as it shows a religious division within rural communities. Thus, in Suzak, in the Dzhahal Abad region, 500 fellow-villagers discriminated against eight families who were converted by proselytizers.⁷

On the one hand, the influence of foreign and local missionaries is increasing. Over the past ten years more than 600 of them have appeared in Kyrgyzstan. The overwhelming majority of them are from the Republic of Korea. They do not adhere to any particular denomination, maintaining a more traditional connection to Christianity. Some examples of some of the churches are: the “Association of Holy Spirit for Uniting the World Christianity” of San Men Mun, the “Church of Jesus Christ,” “Faith,” “Emmanuel,” and “Bogym–Good Message.” On the other hand, the activities of many missions from abroad, created originally for charitable purposes, are now operated by Kyrgyz for fellow Kyrgyz. All-Kyrgyz communities of evangelical Christian Baptists and “Baha’i of Kyrgyzstan” have been established as well.

Is dialogue between secular and religious organizations possible?

The state’s attack on religious radicalism has been brought about by demands for structures to toughen the clauses of the Criminal Code and to make repressive amendments to the legal system. This was justified in Kyrgyzstan because of the

⁶ *Spravochnik po religiozным fondam, uchebnym zavedeniyam, proshedshim uchelnuyu registratsiyu* (Reference Book on Registered Religious Funds and Educational Establishments) (Bishkek, 2001).

⁷ S. Gafurova, “Demograficheskaya situatsiya na yuge Kyrgyzstana” (Demographic Situation in the South of Kyrgyzstan), Round Table, Osh, 2001.

Batken wars of 1999 and 2000. But after the suppression of aggression and the crushing defeat of the Taliban in 2001 by the counter-terrorist coalition, the motives for strengthening national security, unfortunately, have prevailed. However, its persuasiveness to the wider population has weakened.

The tendency to restrict religious freedom exists, for instance, in the activity of the Kyrgyzstan State Commission on religious issues. It has insisted on toughening the process of registration of religious associations. Some Commission officials consider non-registered organizations illegal, a view that is not absolutely correct. Because of the ill-conceived legislation, many extremist organizations find themselves in a gray area that is not subject to any article in the current legislation. In addition, there are gaps in legal documents causing conflicting situations and tension between the state and religious organizations.

There is also an absence of models for mechanisms for conducting such a policy in the draft of the “Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic Concerning Religions and Religious Organizations.” There is no framework for forms of dialogue regarding cooperation. The authors of the project sincerely believe that they can ensure “the protection of religious minorities and non-believers from potential discrimination by majority religions (comprising the largest part of the population).”⁸ Moreover, the issue of the activities of the National Security Service was totally omitted in the draft, yet it was this department that had pressed for toughening regulations on prosecution.

The draft Concept has assigned the State Commission on Religion Issues a task no less than “to develop and implement the state policy towards religions and religious organizations.” The obvious reaction of the government to the numerous oversights in the draft was to dismiss the chairman of the Commission and to order further work on the Concept.

The draft for a new law of the Kyrgyz Republic, “On Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations,” has introduced the articles on alternative military service and on teaching citizens about religion. The role of the mass media and of religious organizations has been particularly emphasized in this document, and other important articles have been introduced as well.

However, the most disputed part—economic relations between the state and religious organizations, and in particular relations concerning land and specific forms of taxation—still remains to be developed.⁹ Meanwhile, Muslims in Kyrgyzstan have strong traditions in such legal areas as inheritance, family law, some types of commercial and banking transactions, and especially in charities.

⁸ See “Kontseptsiya gosudarstvennoy politiki v otnoshenii religii i religioznykh organizatsiy” (Conception of State Policy as to Religion and Religious Organizations), draft, 2001.

⁹ Proekt zakona Kurgyzskoy respubliki, “O svobode veroispovedaniya i o religioznykh organizatsiyakh” (Draft of Law of Kyrgyz Republic, “On Religious Freedom and on Religious Organizations”), 2002.

These examples are given to show that many significant documents, especially in the religious sphere, should ideally represent the agreement of several sides, reaching consensus through dialogue. Certain attempts have been made in this direction, but they have not become routine practice. That is why unreciprocated actions lead to conflict situations, due to a lack of understanding between religious organizations and state institutions.

To give just one example, Islamic educational institutions have not been granted a license from the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education. The ministerial officials are afraid to take responsibility for curricula and do not allow the religious organizations to make them themselves. The official basis for this is the obviously out-of-date ordinance of the Ministry of Education of 1995.¹⁰

Such a method of overcoming obstacles is slow and circuitous. The non-governmental organization “Society for the Protection of the Rights of Religious Organizations” was established in Kyrgyzstan to develop forms of dialogue. Mr. Alisher Sabirov, Deputy of Zhogorkhu Kenesh (Parliament of Kyrgyzstan) is the president of the Society; Mr. Kimsanbay-azhy of the Theological Board of Kyrgyz Muslims, and Mr. Aleksandr Alyanchikov, journalist, are the vice-presidents. The organization is based on principles of tolerance.¹¹

Unfortunately, at times the Theological Board of Muslims fails to keep up with events. The resources of the Islam Center in the city of Osh are poorly utilized. Islamic charity organizations for prisoners, homeless children, and other needy groups of the population are insufficiently exploited.

Kyrgyzstan’s public has more than once proposed a dialogue with “Hizeb at-Tahrir.” Not long ago even Mr. Mamayusupov, the Chairman of the State Commission on Religious Issues, expressed his opinion on this matter in the pages of the national mass media, but later he denied his statement, intimating that the journalists had misunderstood him.

The constitutional interdiction on the activity of religious political parties is the main obstacle to such a dialogue. For the moment, dialogue with a religious party does not seem possible, but it could be possible with other non-partisan religious organizations in Kyrgyzstan.

Assessment of the Evolution of Islamic Organizations

For the time being, the social stability in the Kyrgyz portion of the Ferghana Valley is in question. The tolerance of the population for the social hardships over recent years has been whittled down by fears of instability caused by the war in Tajikistan

¹⁰ I. Ivanova, “Svobodomyслиye v Kyrgyzstane: puti mezhreligioznogo dialoga” (Freethinking in Kyrgyzstan: Ways for Dialogue between Different Religions), in *Central Asia and World Culture*, No. 1-2 (2000).

¹¹ A. Sabirov, “O rabote Obshchestva po zashchite prav religioznykh organizatsiy” (On Work of Society for Protection of the Rights of Religious Organizations), Round Table of Institute for Regional Studies, 2002.

and threats of aggression from Afghanistan. Now these major external threats have been removed due to the actions of the member countries of the counter-terrorism coalition.

But in the future, the growth of Islamic radicalism in the face of an impoverished population will become more and more likely. The events in the Ak-Syi region in the south of Kyrgyzstan have demonstrated both the absence of creative thinking and the stereotypical behavior of the authorities. Concerning the above, time is of the essence regarding actions aimed at preventing social upheavals. It is much better to conduct such preventive measures rather than to wait for radicalism to be channeled into extremist forms.

With the growth of political opposition (including from religious parties), the state continues its struggle using ineffective authoritarian methods. In contrast, the extremist organizations use modern network technologies for organization and management. The high degree of responsiveness and personal involvement in risks within the organizations considerably raise their evolutionary capacities and their adaptability to the punitive measures directed against them. One can find Internet sites of the extremists' organizations. For example, the Taliban site is <http://www.taliban.com>; the "Hizeb at-Tahrir" Party possesses its own site in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian at <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org>; the International Islamic Front for the Fight against Jews and Osama bin Laden's crusaders can be found at <http://www.obm.clara.net/iif-main.htm>.¹² Young people get acquainted with these materials from British servers and make their own conclusions.

Unfortunately, neither extremism nor the influx of drugs and weapons have decreased with the end of the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. There are many other issues of a transnational character that need to be solved jointly. This is why the strategy of overcoming instability and religious extremism in Central Asia is so urgent.

¹² A. Ignatenko, "Zelenyi internet-tional" (Green Internet-tional), in *NG-Religii* (Independent Newspaper: Religions), April 7, 1999.