Islamic Movements and Democracy in Central Asia: Integration or Isolation?

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Anthony C. Bowyer
International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES)

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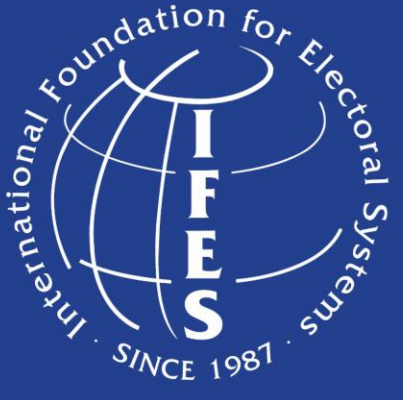

Islamic Movements and Democracy in Central Asia: Integration or Isolation?

This paper will address the present state of Islamic political movements in the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union, with focus on state and non-state actors. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and the movements Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are each trying to achieve power in their respective contexts but in very different ways. This was not always the case, as in the early 1990s all three grew out of discontent with Communist and post-communist authoritarian repression against religion and the rebirth of Islamic consciousness and identity. While two of the groups are native to Central Asia, all three had their "formative years" influenced by groups and events outside of the region, with the international Islamic Revival Party movement formed in south Asia, the IMU's leadership influenced by the Wahabbi movement from Saudi Arabia and HuT which was founded in Saudi Arabia and Jordan in the 1950s and became an international movement.

Each of these groups has played a major role in the advancement of an Islamic political agenda in Central Asia, for better or for worse, and affected the policies of the host countries. Their divergent trajectories to attaining power have distinguished each group in the late 1990s and 2000s, with the turning points linked to armed conflict: in the case of the IRPT, the end of the Tajik Civil War; and for the IMU, more recently, the 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. Only HuT has not been involved in an armed conflict in Central Asia, though they are front-and-center in the battle of ideas and influence.

This paper will argue that while the use of armed conflict by Islamic opposition groups did more damage to those movements than good in achieving their ultimate goals, if the democratic process does not lead to change and if the governments of the region continue to exhibit the kind of repression against all opposition, let alone an Islamic opposition, the region may invariably become embroiled in conflict as poverty and hopelessness for the millions living in Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan take their toll, particularly on the rapidly growing youth population. The next several years will be key: elections in Tajikistan in 2010 are being targeted by the IRPT as their best opportunity to re-assert their political influence and enshrine Islamic values in the political and cultural fabric of the country. In addition, the aging authoritarian leaders in each of the three states face severe economic crises and may not be able to control their disaffected populations for much longer. The Kyrgyz Republic, which endured upheaval in March 2005 with the ouster of long-serving president Askar Akayev, has remained in a perpetual

state of chaos since that time as living conditions across the country, most pronounced in the southern regions of Jalal-Abad, Osh and Batken, have worsened precipitously. In Uzbekistan, stalwart president Islom Karimov continues his harsh treatment of all opposition, particularly those he conveniently labels "Islamists" across the Ferghana Valley region, while favoring his Samarkand-based clan in matters of politics and government, and Tajikistan's Emomali Rahmon, president since 1994 who was credited for helping end the Tajik Civil War in 1997 but whose hold on power weakens by the day as electricity shortages spread and food prices skyrocket. Into this disorder step Islamic political movements, officially maligned but continuing to vie for power and influence, and perhaps representing the last hope of a desperate population.

Introduction

The Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union have been independent for nearly seventeen years following seven long decades of communist rule in which their identities and traditions were altered through Sovietization and the Russification that preceded it. The region was divided into Khanates and Great Hordes, which had their first experience with Islam dating back to the 8th century, consolidated through successive invasions by Persians and Arabs from the fifteenth century onward, and formed the northernmost expanse of the Islamic world. The gradual encroachment of Imperial Russian influence, first eastward into Siberia, southward into the North Caucasus and later into the steppe of Central Asia and beyond, came about as a shock to the traditional lifestyles and power structures of the region. The establishment of Tsarist military outposts was accompanied by often brutal suppression of local populations including seizure of land and imposition of alien social values. No strangers to outside invasions, the people of Central Asia adapted as best they could under the circumstances, struggling to maintain their cultures and history but capitalizing on the positive elements that contact with the Russians brought, namely trade and infrastructure modernization. Acceptance of the Tsar's rule was not universal, and as of the late 19th century much of the region was not under the Tsar's control.

Everything changed beginning in 1917, as Tsarist Russia fell to the new communist mass movement led by V.I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The chaos that gripped the European part of the Russian Empire affected Central Asia as well, and by 1924 the region was effectively incorporated into the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which eventually subdivided the area into five union republics whose borders, seemingly drawn arbitrarily, demarcated the five indigenous dominant ethnic majorities. Josef Stalin, who succeeded Lenin, mandated that borders

be drawn to include large ethnic minority groups in each of the republics, in order to assure that no single ethnic group became too powerful to challenge the center in Moscow. At the same time, the Soviet Constitution technically allowed each union republic the right to secede, a comical notion until the Soviet collapse in 1991. Unifying all fifteen constituent republics was the all-powerful Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the only legally-existing political party in the country and the ideology upon which the USSR was founded.

Seven decades of Soviet rule instilled the political and cultural institutions of the state-citizen relationship in Central Asia, which further removed citizens from the centers of decision-making even as the Soviet state claimed to be the benefactor of the masses. To get ahead one needed to become a member of the Communist Party, which eschewed all religious beliefs and in fact condemned them outright as anti-Soviet. Mosques in the Soviet Union existed, but were heavily regulated and state-approved Mufti were sanctioned to "properly guide" the devout into correct interpretations of the Koran vis-à-vis the principles of Communism. True religious expression remained largely underground, and the Muslim majorities of Central Asia practiced their faith clandestinely while struggling to preserve their traditions, which over the years, without true spiritual guidance, had evolved into regional variants.

Such was the condition that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Soviet Union, weakened by internal stagnation and a disastrous ten-year occupation of neighboring (a war against brother Muslims that shocked the Soviet citizens of Central Asia, many of whom experienced the war on the front lines as interpreters or simple infantrymen), entered its death throes and the new countries of Central Asia found themselves on their own. The ensuing struggle for power and consolidation was brief, as the Communist-era leadership renamed themselves democrats and assumed the mantle of leadership in their new republics. This did not last long in one of the countries, however, as Tajikistan, the most impoverished of the Newly Independent States, quickly found itself mired in a political crisis. Soviet-era holdover Rahmon Nabiev, elected to office in 1991, faced the collapse of his government as the result challenges by a coalition of democratic, communist, and Islamic forces that threatened to disrupt the old order. The most religiously conservative of the former Soviet republics, seven-million strong Tajikistan was slow to embrace independence and had neither the economic means nor an independent and strong centralized control over the country with which to impose the new, post-Soviet order. In contrast, neighboring Uzbekistan president Islom Karimov was quick to assert total authority over his population of 23 million persons, as was Kazakhstan to the north under the leadership of

Communist-era boss Nursultan Nazarbayev, both of whom remain in office to this day. Even tiny Kyrgyzstan, the most democratically-inclined of the new states and the only to shed its communist-era leader, transitioned peacefully, as did Turkmenistan under the cult-of-personality leadership of Saparmurad Niyazov.

The Soviet collapse also exposed the still raw ramifications of Soviet-era collectivization, namely, the transfer of large numbers of persons to work in agriculture and industry outside of their home regions. This was especially true of Tajikistan, where large numbers of the mountain-dwelling citizens of Gharm[1] were resettled in the valleys of Khatlon oblast to the south, near the town of Qurghonteppa. The receding of Soviet power and the poverty of the mountain kishlaks prompted the Gharmis to stake claims on land in Khatlon, prompting outrage among local residents. The general condition of anarchy and helplessness exposed a spiritual void among the population as well, and it was in response to this deficit that the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan came into being.

Meanwhile in the Ferghana Valley, which unites several Uzbek wiloyats with Osh and Batken oblasts of Kyrgyzstan and Soghd oblast of Tajikistan, momentum grew for change in the 1990s among local citizens who felt that their governments were ignoring their basic survival and subsistence needs. In spite of the Fergana Valley's reputation as the "breadbasket" of Central Asia, acute foot shortages and poverty resulting from the corruption of local and national governments of the three countries left residents eager to take advantage of those promising relief. The rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the Ferghana Valley was a direct response to both the repression of the respective authoritarian regimes, particularly the one in Tashkent, as well as the poverty and deplorable state of education and employment opportunities. The latter has forced hundreds of thousands of citizens of the three countries, mostly young men, to seek out employment elsewhere, with the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan being the primary destinations. For those left behind, life can be bleak. For those taking the long journey north, the difficult working conditions as well as the stereotypes and prejudice, in addition to outright violence, that they face in their countries of destination makes earning money and being removed from their families for many months at a time that much more difficult. With desperate conditions at home and the seeming indifference, or outright hostility, of their governments toward their plight, growing numbers of people have turned to Islamic political movements as a possible means of salvation. While smaller movements such as Bayat and the

[1] Over 93% of Tajikistan is mountainous terrain.

Islamic Movement of Central Asia are small and clandestine, there are larger, more well-known movements that influence the scene today, the IRPT in Tajikistan and the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the Ferghana Valley region, offering different paths to the acquisition of power and somewhat differing views of Islam.

Extra-governmental movements: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan developed as a reaction to the authoritarian leadership of Uzbek President Islam Karimov and the repression used against any political expressions of Islam after Uzbekistan declared independence from the Soviet Union. Local mullah and college dropout Tohir Yuldeshev was joined by the fiery Jumaboi Khojaev to found the movement in the early 1990s, which received training in Afghanistan from Osama bid Laden. Khojaev adopted the nom-de-guerre Juma Namangani, after his home town in Uzbekistan of Namangan, situated in the strategically vital Ferghana Valley. Namangani and Yuldeshev established a base in the Tavildara region of Tajikistan and fought on the side of the United Tajik Opposition, specifically with the Islamic Renaissance Party, during the 1992-97 Tajik Civil War. Namangani had actually served in Afghanistan prior to that with the Soviet Army in the 1980s. Receiving funding from Wahabbi groups in Saudi Arabia and other countries, Namangani built the IMU into a serious force, incorporating foreign fighters such as Arabs, Chechens, Pakistanis and Afghans, in addition to Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other Central Asian nationalities. The goal of the IMU was, unabashedly, to first overthrow the repressive regime of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and then "liberate" the other countries in the region to create a pure Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. Unlike Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which advocates non-violent methods to create an Islamic caliphate in the region, the IMU counted on the poor populations of the region to rise up and join them in their quest to defeat the Soviet successor regimes and restore, at long last, a form of true Islamic rule unlike one ever seen anywhere to the masses.

The Tashkent bombings in 1999 and subsequent attacks in the years that followed on Uzbek government (and western) targets by the IMU created a severe backlash by the government, which arrested thousands of suspected members and issued harsh and lengthy prison sentences, as well as conducting campaigns of harassment and public shaming of relatives. The fiery Uzbek president Islom Karimov even threatened to personally eradicate those found guilty of Islamic opposition activity, including his own children if they strayed down this path. As Central Asian scholar Eric McGlinchey notes, the ferocity of the Islamic opposition in Central Asia is directly

proportional to the severity of repression by the ruling regime of a country[2], hence why the IMU decided to take up arms at once against the Karimov government, and perhaps why the IRPT in Tajikistan, although clearly held at a disadvantage by the government, nevertheless holds two seats in parliament and has declared itself a loyal opposition. The IMU's tactics for supplanting the regimes in the region, beginning with that of president Karimov, were clearly predicated on violent action. Towards this end the IMU trained its members under the tutelage of Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar in Afghanistan, and maintaining a base of operations in both Tajikistan and the mountains of Batken oblast in Kyrgyzstan. The events of 2001 changed the fortunes of the IMU, which fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan against the western coalition military forces. The IMU's ranks were devastated in the ensuing fighting, which claimed the life of co-founder and undisputed leader Juma Namangani. While the movement has largely gone underground to reconstitute itself, it remains a wounded, and hunted, animal. But as is known, a wounded animal is an exceptionally dangerous one, and the governments of Central Asia would ignore the remaining IMU at its peril, as well as ignore the worsening conditions of the millions of citizens living within its borders.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Wahabbi-inspired movement established in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, has advocated a quite different approach to achieving its goal of creating an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. Renouncing (though not entirely discarding the possibility of) violence as a means to that end, HuT has worked in the shadows in the Ferghana Valley and the rest of Central Asia to recruit supporters and build a loyal base. The citizens of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic have been particularly targeted by HuT recruitment activities, and while the total number of known supporters may (for good reason) be modest, the total number of suspected supporters grows by the day. HuT recruitment activities are not restricted to these three countries, however. HuT literature and operatives have been seized in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and in the North Caucasus and other parts of the Russian Federation. In fact, HuT is a global movement which even has offices in London. In Central Asia the message is simple: spiritual awakening and the chance to live in a pure Islamic state, with jobs and food aplenty. For the desperate souls of the region this is a far better message than any they are getting from their own governments, whose corruption and general indifference to their plight (and inability to provide relief) has alienated citizens, particularly young men.

[2] Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: State and Islam in Central Asia," p. 23.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a clandestine, pan-Islamic movement that has as one of its goals the uniting of Muslims in Central Asian states and Xinjiang province in China in one caliphate. Although they disavow violence as a means of achieving this goal, they are particularly feared and reviled by the regimes of Central Asia, who have arrested more real or suspected HuT members than any other "radical" opposition group. Their numbers in Central Asia are difficult to estimate, though their reach is fairly widespread, judging from the dispersed geographic range within which their literature has been found, ranging from the Caucasus east to Xinxiang, and north into the Russian Federation. With an office in London, the movement has an extensive network of European (if not global) operations as well. Established in Saudi Arabia and Jordon in the early 1950s by diaspora Palestinians, the movement believes that repressive governments have repressed the true practice of Islam, and liberating Muslims to live under one Islamic state while overthrowing the governments of the oppressors. While HuT has often been associated with Wahabbi movements, HuT and Wahabbi groups have differed on key issues, such as the use of violence to achieve shari'a law and the creation of a modern Islamic state. The regimes of the Central Asian states link the two together nevertheless, justifying violent crackdowns and arrest of both Wahabbi groups such as the IMU and HuT leaders without difference. HuT is a sophisticated organization, and while it recruits members from different strata of society in particular it has sought educated young men from large cities in Central Asia, as well as educated, unemployed youth and teachers.[3]

HuT literature began appearing in the mid-1990s in Uzbekistan, and the crackdown against HuT members began in earnest in 1998 after the law on practice of religion was tightened by the Karimov regime, resulting in mass arrests. The next year, 1999, saw the first large-scale actions by Islamic opposition groups (the Tashkent bombings), which were most likely carried out by the IMU though which were linked to all groups simultaneously. HuT's popularity has grown in all three Ferghana Valley countries due to the extreme poverty and weak central government support. Aside from the strong government control in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley oblasts, the Tajik and Kyrgyz territories in the valley are relatively weakly administered, located far from their countries' capitals, and, considering the poverty of the region, certainly conducive to the appeal of outside influences. It is in these regions that HuT activity has been strongest, and where HuT will likely continue to find its stronghold. As Ahmed Rashid writes, as conflict between government and religion continues to degrade the human rights situation as well as the social and political climate, the governments of Central Asia refuse to consider allowing the legalization of

[3] Ahmed Rashid Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia, p. 124.

HuT as a political movement, which would force the governments to "deal with local problems and articulate concrete economic and political policies." Legalizing HuT would also "make it less likely that (HuT) would forge links with other radical Islamic groups who do advocate violence."[4] As it currently stands, however, only Tajikistan allows the existence of Islamic political movements, that being the IRPT, which was the result of the 1997 Peace Accords. As shall be seen, that party has become moderate and a "loyal opposition" party, and other, more conservative movements or offshoots are unlikely to achieve official recognition anytime soon.

One other movement worthy of mention is Akromiya, whose leader, Akrom Yoldoshev, found HuT's goals and methods, which originated in Arab countries, unsuitable for Central Asia.[5] Akromiya emerged in the mid-1990s. Yoldoshev was arrested in 1998 for allegedly running narcotics again in 1999 after the Tashkent bombings. The movement perhaps gained its most notoriety after the massacre at Andijon in Uzbekistan in 2004, in which Uzbek police and special forces massacred hundreds of civilians after a prison uprising in that city, which followed a momentary takeover of the city by escapees. The uprising did not have an overt Islamic flavor, though the Karimov regime was quick to label it a "fundamentalist uprising" and use the situation to crack down severely on suspected opponents of the regime, be they in Andijon or elsewhere. The resulting actions by Uzbek government forces led to the worst single, mass act of atrocity since independence, and led ultimately to harsh criticism of the regime. Among the loudest voices criticizing the Karimov regime was the United States, which one year later had its airbase rights revoked at Karshi-Khanabad.

Akromiya designed itself as a more "local" and "practical" version of HuT, with specific solutions to problems within Uzbekistan and relying more on those imperatives over HuT's more philosophical approach.[6] The movement continues to exist, though actual membership nor the group's plans are well-known. With Yoldoshev behind bars it will be difficult for the movement to flourish although the atmosphere in Uzbekistan still remains in recovery mode after Andijan and perhaps more ripe than ever for Islamic opposition groups, with the pressure put by on by the governments in the region driving and keeping those movements underground but nevertheless acting as a stimulus for their continued proliferation.

[4] Ahmed Rashid, p. 134.
[5] Adeeb Khalid Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia, p. 194.
[6] Vitaly Naumkin Radial Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle, p. 159.

Legal Opposition: The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)

The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, the leading force in the United Tajik Opposition, emerged from the Civil War in a position of strength. It advocated a return to Islamic values yet not the creation of a regional caliphate. As the only legally-existing religious-based political party in the whole of Central Asia[7], the IRPT commanded a devout following among many Tajiks who had felt wronged by the Soviets and the post-Soviet successor regime. The brutal prosecution of the war and the relentless propaganda of the government against the Islamic opposition served to frighten many citizens away from the cause of Islam, which came to be associated with the dark years of the war and the general hardship and malaise that accompanied it. In fact, the IRPT did experience a decline in its relative popularity after the conclusion of the Accords on Peace and Reconciliation on June 27, 1997, as the party was blamed for the conflict and saw many top officials assimilated into the government. In addition, the public was largely interested in returning to a state of peace and stability and after nearly five years of conflict followed by a period of instability and transition, including murders and kidnappings, political ideologies quickly lost their luster. Tajikistan appeared to return to its secular Soviet days, which perhaps speaks as much for their war-weariness as it does the relative popularity of political Islam.

As an output of the Peace Accords Tajikistan was to hold a parliamentary election within 18 months, and several key government ministries were given over to the United Tajik Opposition, including the Ministry of Defense. Gradually, due to infighting between moderate and conservative elements, the former UTO coalition began to fracture and weaken, and in time the government of Emomali Rahmonov re-asserted control over much of the authority granted the UTO as a result of the Accords. IRPT leader Said Abdullo Nuri was committed to the peace process and held up the agreement as a potential model for other Central Asian countries, and refused calls from more conservative elements of the party to renew violence as the government delayed implementation of the some of the Accords' major points. In fact, the election was held nearly three years after the Accords were signed, almost double the time mandated in the agreement.

After the much-delayed election (overseen by the new coalition-based Committee for National Reconciliation) in February 2000, the Islamic Renaissance Party emerged with but two seats in

[7] The other countries in the region ban the formation of political parties based on religious or ethno-nationalist orientation.

the new Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house of the Majlisi Oli, via party list vote and no seats won by individual IRPT candidates in the single mandate vote.[8] Some former commanders such as Sharif Himmatzoda and Qazi Turajonzoda were given government posts, which further thinned the party of its leadership ranks[9]. At this time the IRPT certainly faced severe obstacles in campaigning, with several candidates running in single mandates denied registration, and local branches not allowed to openly campaign in some regions. In addition, the party's power base was in the Gharm and Tavildara valley areas east of Dushanbe, and they had difficulty expanding into all areas of the country. Much was due to the still-fresh memory of the conflict and the perceived role of the IRPT in the UTO, no doubt exacerbated by official government propaganda. The other was the lack of party institutions and broad organizational structure of the party, which had never before competed on an electoral stage and lacked the resources and experience of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Emomali Rahmonov, which won the overwhelming majority of seats.

In spite of the weak showing in the 2000 elections, and clear indications that the IRPT faced an uneven playing field, Nuri continued to renounce a return to violence though on several occasions referred obliquely to the possibility. During the period of 2000-2005 the party began once again to grow, this time as a professional organization functioning as a "loyal opposition" party. The IRPT set up regional branches as best it could, established women's and youth subcommittees, produced and distributed party literature, and trained its members in debate and campaigning with the assistance of international democracy advisors.[10]

In the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections the IRPT had a much more solid organizational foundation than the party which competed in fits and starts in 2000. Despite the better preparation, the political environment in Tajikistan continued to prove disfavorable to the party, as harassment from local Hukumats and other government officials inhibited the party's efforts to strengthen its base. In 2004 it was evident that political parties in general had quite a ways to go

[8] For the 2000 elections to the Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house of the Majlisi Oli, 41 seats were elected via single mandate constituency elections with another 22 determined by party list vote (5% threshold), totaling 63 total seats. Tajikistan has a mixed majority-proportional representation election system for elections to the parliament. Deputies serve five-year terms. The 34 deputies in the upper house, the Majlisi Milli, are not directly elected by the voters.

[9] Ahmed Rashid, pp. 108-109.

[10] Among these was the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), which operated a Political Party Development Project in Tajikistan from 1997-2005 under funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which began party assistance activities in the country in 2005.

to gain legitimacy, with generally low name recognition of political parties, little awareness of party platforms or leaders, and few adult citizens who felt that Tajik political parties had clear proposals to address the most important issues facing the country. Less than half of adult voters polled in 2004 could name any political party, and those who could most often cited the Communist Party. The IRPT enjoyed a somewhat lesser and more dubious name recognition, garnering the highest "negative impression" rate of any party mentioned.[11] Nevertheless there was still support for a multi-party political system, one in which parties represented the interests of people, with those interests primarily being of an economic subsistence and survival nature. The relative engagement of the Tajikistani electorate in matters of politics can be derived from conflicting data, in which 2/3 showed "little or no interest in politics" in 2004 yet nearly ¾ said they were "definitely" or "very likely" to vote in the February 2005 parliamentary elections[12]. The population faces a deficit of information on matters of politics in the country, and since the Civil War the primary need of most citizens has been stability and creation of economic opportunities. As dire as the situation was, the absence or slow development of the latter during the years after the end of the war did not arouse enough public discontent to threaten the former, as the deterrence factor of resumed hostilities (and the growing strength of the ruling regime) was enough to stymie even small public demonstrations and anti-government protests.

When the IRPT again won only two seats in the February 2005 parliamentary elections, both via party list vote, it (as well as the Communist and Social Democratic parties) announced their intentions to boycott the results in the initial period after their announcement by the Central Committee on Elections and Referenda. IRPT Deputy Chairman Mohiddin Kabiri, who ran in a single mandate constituency election in the city of Vahdat as well as being on the IRPT's party list[13] had indicated that the IRPT had not expected to (be allowed to) win many seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon in 2005 even though it was consistently, according to its own information, polling in the double figures. Well before the election IRPT members were hinting that they expected their efforts to be frustrated during the 2005 elections by continued interference by Hukumats acting under orders by the executive to stymie the registration of their candidates and the campaigns of the party. Moreover, the party hinted strongly that the election

[11] IFES Public Opinion Survey in Tajikistan, 2004, available at www.ifes.org
[12] IFES Survey, 2004.
[13] Tajikistan has a parallel election system, in which 41 seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house of the bi-cameral Majlisi Oli, are elected in single-mandate two round elections, with another 22 seats elected via party list through a 5% barrier.

was to serve as a dry run for the next elections in 2010, during which they expected to win a significant number of seats and government interference would not be tolerated.

During the 2005 campaign the IRPT presented itself as a professional party, much more so than the group who ran candidates in the first post-civil war parliamentary election in 2000. While not as resource-rich as the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), the IRPT did have its sources of campaign funding from sympathetic groups in the Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world. What the IRPT lacked was experience in the political game and a fair environment in which to conduct its political activities. Nonetheless it persisted, taking on the PDP in televised debates, at election fairs, and in all-party round tables. While the party's origins were exploited mercilessly by the government to frighten away voters, the party began to show its maturation through the level of preparedness of its leaders and its willingness to work the democratic process. In the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary elections the party distributed newsletters, held town hall meetings as best it could, sent its members to western-sponsored political party trainings, and strengthened its women's and youth subcommittees. It retained a regional support base in the Tavildara and Karategin Valley areas as well as the regions immediately north and east of Dushanbe, though struggled to campaign and win supporters in the president's home region of Kulyab or in the northern oblast of Soghd, in the Ferghana Valley, both areas of the country which had fought against the United Tajik Opposition during the war.

Since 2005 the party has continued to develop its organizational structure, and in 2006 it experienced a leadership change after longtime Chairman and former UTO leader Said Abdullo Nuri passed away, opening the door for the moderate Deputy Chair Mohiddin Kabiri to take over. Kabiri, who has continued to re-orient the party into an almost western-style political organization, has been mentioned as a possible candidate to oppose President Emomali Rahmon in 2013. By that time, if not sooner in 2010, the government's tactic of using the experience of the Civil War to discredit the IRPT may fall on deaf ears: at present, the majority of Tajikistan's 7.3 million persons are under the age of 20, and of those only the oldest of this group directly remember the conflict. Moreover, virtually none among the youngest generation of Tajiks can recall the days of the Soviet Union and the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Thus the examples of the past no longer will have the same restraining impact on the majority of future voters as they did during previous elections, when direct recollections of the war were more pronounced. Without the dissuasion of the war acting as a buffer, and the highly corrupt ruling regime, poverty, and rampant unemployment fueling public opinion, there are no guarantees even that a

democratically-run election will lead to the kind of reforms that Tajikistan needs, but what is certain is that a "classic" Soviet-style election will not be tolerated in 2010.

The government of Emomali Rahmon has struggled to provide basic social services to the population. After the most severe winter in recent memory in 2007-08, the regime's capacity to respond to crises was exposed as grossly insufficient. The winter crisis has added to the long-running problems of availability and price of electricity, poor quality of water, unemployment and labor migration[14], corruption, and worsening education standards, among others. In 2006 a scandal erupted in Tajik universities when the ban on wearing headscarves in the classroom was challenged by one brave female student. Minister of Education Abdujabbor Rahmonov (no relation to President Rahmonov, now Rahmon) upheld the ban, which sent a clear signal that nothing but secular approach to education would be tolerated at the official level. The IRP quickly seized the moment to criticize the decision, no to inflame passions but to take the side of upholding equal human rights for all Tajik citizens.

In gauging public sentiment today for Islamic governance in Tajikistan, support for the IRPT appears modest on the surface according to a public opinion survey conducted by the Dushanbe-based Sociological Research Center *SHARQ* in November 2007, with the party earning only 4.55% of responses to the question "if the elections were held today, which party would you vote for?" By the same token, the only parties to receive a higher percentage were, predictably, Rahmon's People's Democratic Party, the Communist Party (still popular with older voters) and the largely defunct Democratic Party (which split into three branches several years ago). Also higher was the response "would vote for none" and "would not go to the polls." But when examining the role that Islam "should play in the political life of Tajikistan," over 50% of respondents indicated "a very large role," with nearly an equal number who conceded that at present it plays "a very small role." Nearly 70% believed that parties based on religious principles should be allowed to exist and compete in elections.[15] While extremist Islamic parties or movements such as the IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir or Bayat did not garner much support as alternatives to the current regime, Islam in general conceptually appears to be more acceptable today as a part of government than it was in 2005, even if the IRPT itself doesn't appear to be benefitting from this sentiment in the polls. This no doubt has to do with the imposition of government rules and

[14] It is estimated that up to 750,000 Tajik citizens live and work in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan as construction workers, produce sellers, or shuttle traders, sending remittances home that, by some counts, have accounted for up to half of Tajikistan's GDP.
[15] SHARQ Public Opinion Survey, November 2007.

regulations on religious traditions in people's everyday lives (such as official bans on large celebrations of births or at weddings) which have more to do with custom than religion per se. At the same time the public is tired of corruption and behavior of officials that is contrary to the piety and unselfishness teachings of the Koran such as they know it.

What then is the future of the IRPT, or of Islam itself, as a force in Tajik politics? According to IRPT Chairman Kabiri, the methods of groups such as the IMU are not in keeping with the best way to promote Islam and politics. The rise of groups such as the IMU, whose methods he does not agree with, can be attributed as a reaction to the repressive nature of the Central Asian regimes. The more open and democratic the regimes become, the less influence that radical movements will have. Kabiri sees the IRPT serving as a "buffer" between more conservative Islamic groups and the government, working through a "democratic process" which he sees is the only acceptable way to promote the values and principles of Islam that will be sustainable for the long term. The party's emphasis is to change the election code of the country, which Kabiri sees as one of the main culprits preventing the full participation of IRPT candidates. Another is political will of the government to run an open and fair election, which Kabiri acknowledged has been quite limited in the 2000 and 2005 parliamentary elections. Interestingly, the biggest impediments to the flourishing of political Islam in Tajikistan and in Central Asia in general is the pressure from radical Islamic groups and the repression of the regimes, with the radical groups considering the IRPT too "soft" and the Tajik regime being threatened by the IRPT as the only legitimate alternative to itself. Kabiri also claims to have evidence that the governments and radical opposition have even been engaging in "illegal collaboration" against the IRPT, possibly to weaken it. Regarding defections by conservative members of the party to other groups, Kabiri said that there have not been any defections for the last two years, though acknowledging that the party has been at times criticized internally for being a loyal opposition. As many in Tajikistan only see the Islamic opposition in terms of a radical, violent movement, they realize that continued education and promotion of the party needs to be done, and they refuse to succumb to those who would push them to be more critical of the government. At the same time, they remain one of the loudest voices of criticism, but in a constructive, and not divisive, manner. To do otherwise would allow the government to marginalize the influence of the party and its carefully-crafted plan to pursue change through the democratic process which, according to Kabiri, should yield no fewer than 20-25% of votes in the 2010 parliamentary elections.[16]

[16] Interview with Dr. Muhiddin Kabiri, Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, May 5, 2008.

So why not take a harder stance against the Tajik government in 2008? Kabiri believes that participating in the 2010 elections is a "waste of time, money and nerves" and "useless" without legislative changes, but that the IRPT has a plan to improve the law and create a more open, competitive system which it intends to share with the Majlisi Oli this year. In fact, the Central Commission on Elections and Referenda (CCER) of Tajikistan is considering legal and procedural changes to the code right now, though how much will truly change in terms of making the system fairer for all parties (such as allowing open campaigning and registering opposition candidates) remains to be seen and is largely outside of the law. Kabiri acknowledges that the part needs to overcome the loss of long-time leader Said Abdullo Nuri and recover its confidence. In terms of the party's future, the IRPT claims to be the only party in Tajikistan to have both women's and youth subcommittees, as well as regular party newspapers targeted to those groups. The median age of the party is 38, and over 70% of members are young persons (under age 30). Kabiri champions the IRPT as the party of students and defending students' equal rights in light of the ban in universities on headscarves for women and beards for men, along with the compulsory wearing of ties for men.

Kabiri offered his independent assessment on the growing influence of Islam in Tajikistan and Central Asia which appears to coincide with the SHARQ survey data. For Kabiri the question is not whether its growing, but rather what kind of Islam is growing. He worries more about the growth of so-called "enlightened radicalism" and the dire effect this could have on peace and stability. He adds that the Hanafi school of Islam by its nature is more liberal and tolerant than other Islamic schools, and in Central Asia religious or ethno-nationalist conflict is rare, and those conflicts that have arisen were due more to socio-economic or political problems. Further, integration of a pan-Central Asian Islamic political course will be quite difficult due to the differences in each country and the actions of the governments in the region, though at individual level it can have an influential effect on politics, such as in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and maybe the Kyrgyz Republic. To judge the entire region's potential for integration of Islam into politics is still too early.

Conclusion

Clearly the Islamic Renaissance Party is intent on staying the course and seeking regime change through elections and the democratic process, acknowledging that it will take time but still

predicting an impressive share of the seats in the 2010 legislative elections. IRPT Chairman Kabiri did not address what his party will do should it fail to win (or be denied) the number of seats it expects to win, but suffice it to say that the followers of the IRPT, both present and future, may show considerably less patience than Chairman Kabiri should things in Tajikistan stay on their current path. It is reasonable to expect a political showdown in 2010 in Tajikistan; the mild-mannered Muhiddin Kabiri, coy on his presidential election plans for 2013, is counting on the political will of the regime to accompany expected changes to the election law, resulting in a more representative legislature and stronger voice for his loyal opposition party, to the betterment of political Islam in Tajikistan and creating a model for neighboring countries. But the willingness of the regime led by long-serving president Emomali Rahmon, even in the face of the most severe criticism it has faced since the end of the civil war (much of it due to continued economic stagnation and the government's lame response to the humanitarian crisis of winter 2008) to display the degree of political will needed to allow an opposition it only very grudgingly acknowledges is its most serious, legitimate adversary to gain more power in government, is questionable at best. Failure to do so, however, may erode what little legitimacy his government has left in the eyes of the population, one growing younger by the day.

For groups such as the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, growing discontent in the Ferghana Valley does not automatically mean imminent regime change in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or the Kyrgyz Republic. With the largest population in the region and citizens most likely to embrace "radical" opposition of one sort or another in response to the authoritarian nature of the ruling regime, Uzbekistan will continue to struggle with internal disharmony. At the same time, a bigger crisis may ensue when, more likely, the eventual passing of Islom Karimov creates a leadership void. It is likely that a successor plan has already been developed; although in neighboring Turkmenistan it was evident that the passing of Saparmurat Niyazov came as a surprise, the rapidity with which the security services embraced nominated leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov ensured a relatively smooth transition. Karimov in Uzbekistan does not enjoy the same kind of personality cult that his counterpart in Turkmenistan (and few others) did and a struggle for power among several elites could easily ensue. It is not out of the question that Islam will have a role to play in this succession, and how broadly the Islamic movements in the country can appeal to citizens' hearts and minds as an alternative, albeit peaceful one, to the repressive years of Karimov's rule will determine the immediate future of Islam as a political force in that country.

It is unlikely that radical Islam will have mass appeal in Central Asia over the long term, and those groups who advocate extremism will invariably end up on the sidelines. That said, it is unquestioned that the citizens of the Central Asia region greatly desire a return to their Muslim roots and values, which will be respected and protected by the government. But it must be a "home grown" Islam that best fits the culture of the people in the region, not a foreign import nor an "official" brand. It will require an immense level of patience and persistence by citizens and their advocates, who will continue to encounter Soviet-style attitudes and demeanor from government officials for some time to come. At the same time, the worsening economic situation and "baby boom" leaves very little time for governments to respond to the needs of their citizens and embrace the changes needed to improve the lives of people, which they will continue to ignore at their peril.

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