POST-SOVIET RADICALIZATION OF ISLAM IN KYRGYZSTAN: HIZB UT-TAHRIR

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In August 2006, Kyrgyzstan marked 15 years of its independence: a historically short period that upturned the course of history in this republic. The Soviet Union disappeared together with the communist utopia of an atheist state to let religion finally reap the fruits of its opposition to the official Marxist-Leninist ideology. The state loosened its grip on religion somewhat earlier under the impact of perestroika, which brought in democratization and the 1988 ceremonies dedicated to the millennium of Christianity in Russia. Kyrgyzstan, and many of its Central Asian neighbors, inherited a weak economy and spiritual vacuum from the Soviet Union: for seven decades of Soviet rule most people, be they Muslims or Christians, were too frightened to openly demonstrate their devotion. The

socialist system disintegrated to bury the bipolar world of socialism/capitalism confrontation under its debris, the resulting gap being filled with another confrontation: the rich and economically dynamic West and the poor Muslim Southeast.

There is the opinion that religion's new status in society legalized the people's previously hidden devoutness and allowed religion to come out into the open (thus ending the "underground period" of religious activities). People were no longer afraid to discuss their religious convictions; mosque and church attendance as well as religious rites at home were no longer a crime. Atheists and people earlier indifferent to religion developed an interest in it. Islam and Christianity launched wide-scale propaganda campaigns and distributed religious publications in large numbers. As a result, in two years, the number of believers nearly doubled, together with the number of religious associations. By 1991, in Kyrgyzstan 25 churches and parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church and 39 main mosques had received official status; 1,000 more mosques were operating unofficially. By the early 1990s, religion in the republic was represented mainly by Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity. In Soviet times, there were underground communities of Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses operating across the country—Kyrgyzstan being no exception. Today the republic is a multi-confessional country with over 25 religions and religious trends. This is the result of legalization and the resumed activities of some of the religious trends earlier banned and persecuted. Foreign missionaries, who brought absolutely new religions to the republic, have also contributed to the present confessional diversity.

Today there are 44 parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church (including one nunnery); 1,600 mosques (1,042 of them registered); 3 Catholic and 2 Judaic communities; 1 Buddhist community, and 216 Protestant religious facilities (20 missions of newly arrived foreign confessions included). In addition, there are 20 Bahai communities in Kyrgyzstan; about 1,000 foreign missionaries work in the republic. Before 1991 Kyrgyzstan had no religious educational establishments—today there are 7 Islamic institutes and 41 madrasahs.[1]

The higher Islamic educational establishments include among others one university (set up in July 2003 by a decision of the Second Kurultai of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan) and the Rasul Akram Kyrgyz-Iranian Islamic Institute (before 2002; it was closed down in 2002 on the initiative of its founders); in the same year the Kyrgyz founders opened an independent Islamic institute.

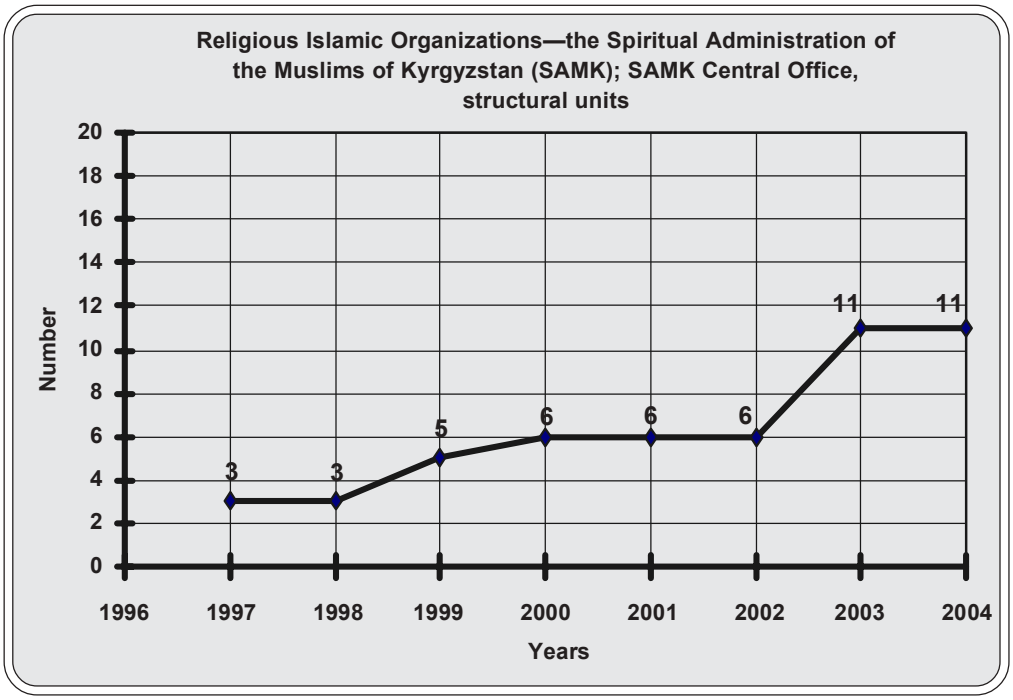
Very soon the newly acquired rights and freedoms created favorable conditions for Islam's natural self-development, free philosophical and religious self-identification, and the propagation of religious ideas. The growing number of Muslim communities and mosques in the republic and across the former Soviet territory was more evidence of an Islamic renaissance. This was especially obvious in the south where the people are more religious than in the north because of the region's geopolitical location and ethnic composition.

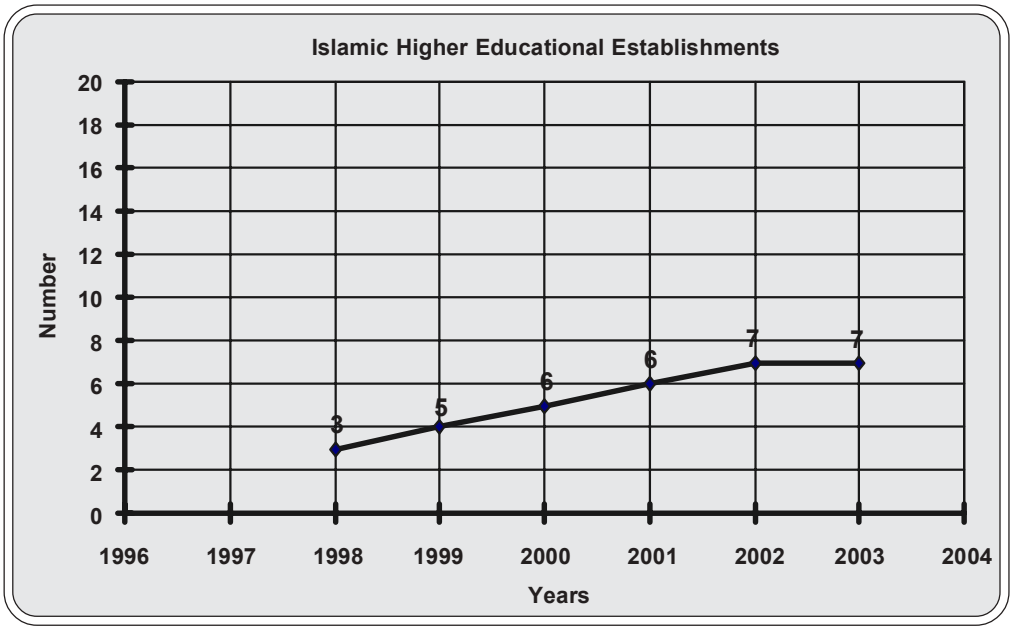
In the last 15 years, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan (the nearly 1,000 mosques that functioned unregistered under Soviet power included) increased several times. Most of them (545) are found in the Osh Region (before 1989 there were only 10 registered mosques that functioned between 1943 and 1947). There are 440 mosques in Jalal-Abad; 219 in the Batken; 161 in the Chu; 73 in the Talas; 56 in the Issyk Kul, and 52 in the Naryn regions. Many of them were built on donations from private persons, industrial enterprises and organizations, local religious leaders, foreign Islamic funds operating in the republic, and certain Islamic countries (Turkey and Pakistan). Last year the town of Kara-Balta received three mosques built on private donations from Saudi Arabia and the UAE; the Issyk Kul Region received about 40 such mosques.[2]

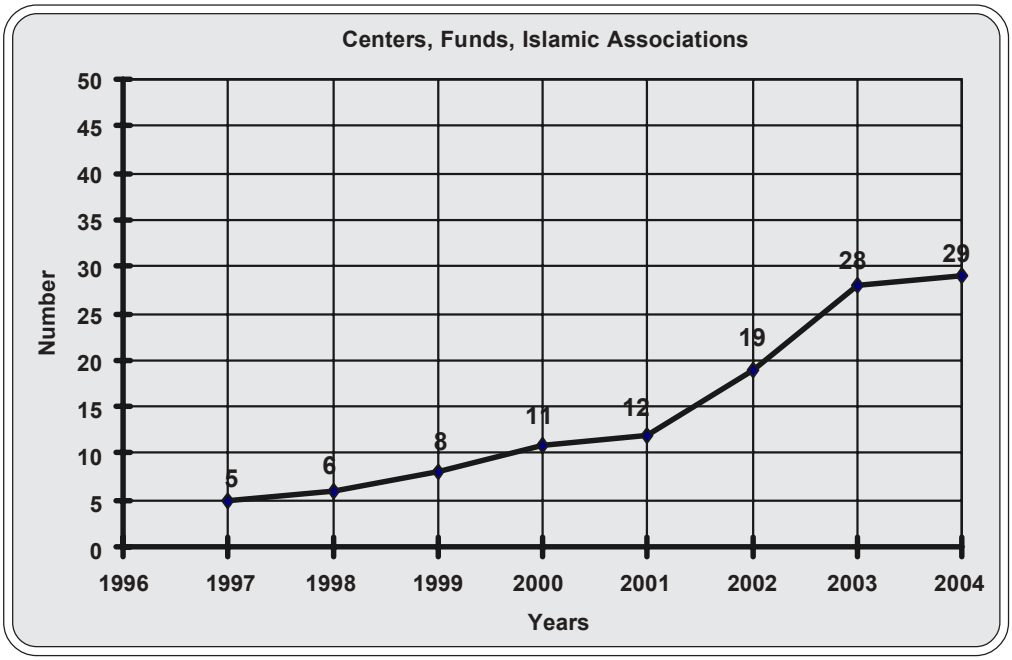
[1] Information dated to 15 April, 2004 was supplied by the Committee for Religious Affairs at the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic.

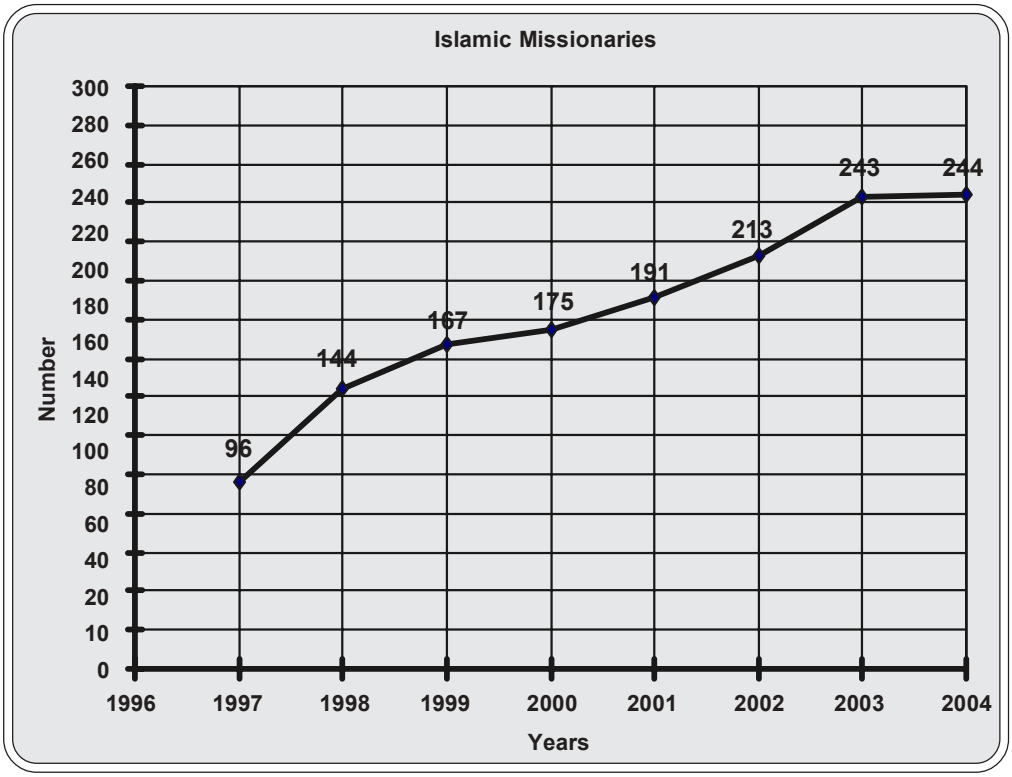
[2] See: G.A. Seytalieva, "Otdel'nye pokazateli rosta populiarnosti islama v Kyrgyzstane za 2002-2003 gg.," *Materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii "Islam v istorii Kyrgyzskoy gosudarstvennosti",* Bishkek, 2003, pp. 23-39.

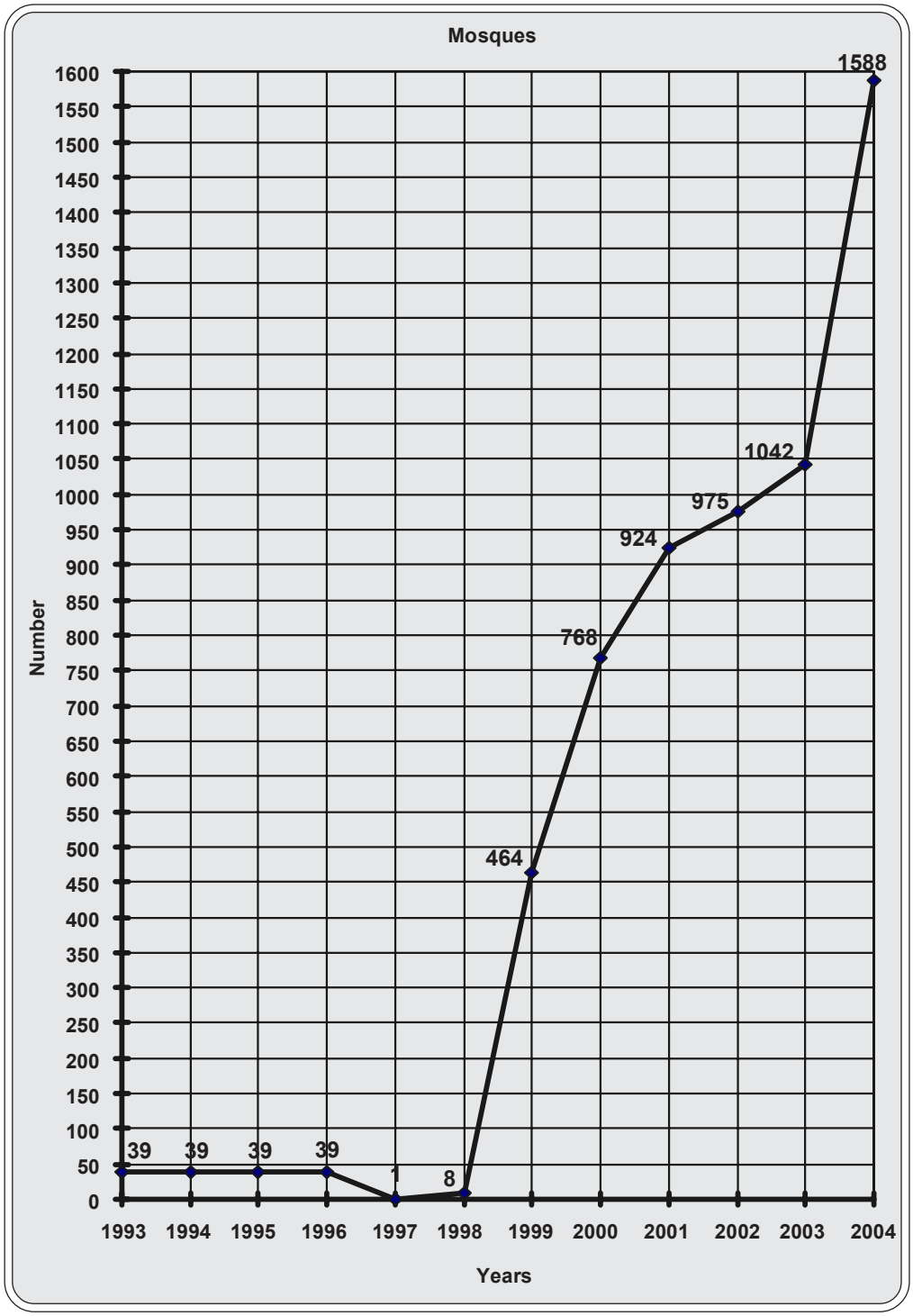
Dynamics of the Number of Islamic Religious Facilities in the Kyrgyz Republic between 1996 and 15 April, 2004 (*from the day of registration*)






Centers, Funds, Islamic Associations
Number
Years
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
35
40
45
50
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
5
6
8
11
12
19
28
29


Islamic Missionaries
Number
Years
0
10
20
40
60
80
100
120
140
160
180
200
220
240
260
280
300
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
96
144
167
175
191
213
243
244


Mosques
Number
Years
1600
1550
1500
1450
1400
1350
1300
1250
1200
1150
1100
1050
1000
950
900
850
800
750
700
650
600
550
500
450
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
1993
1994
1995
1996
1997
1998
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2004
39
39
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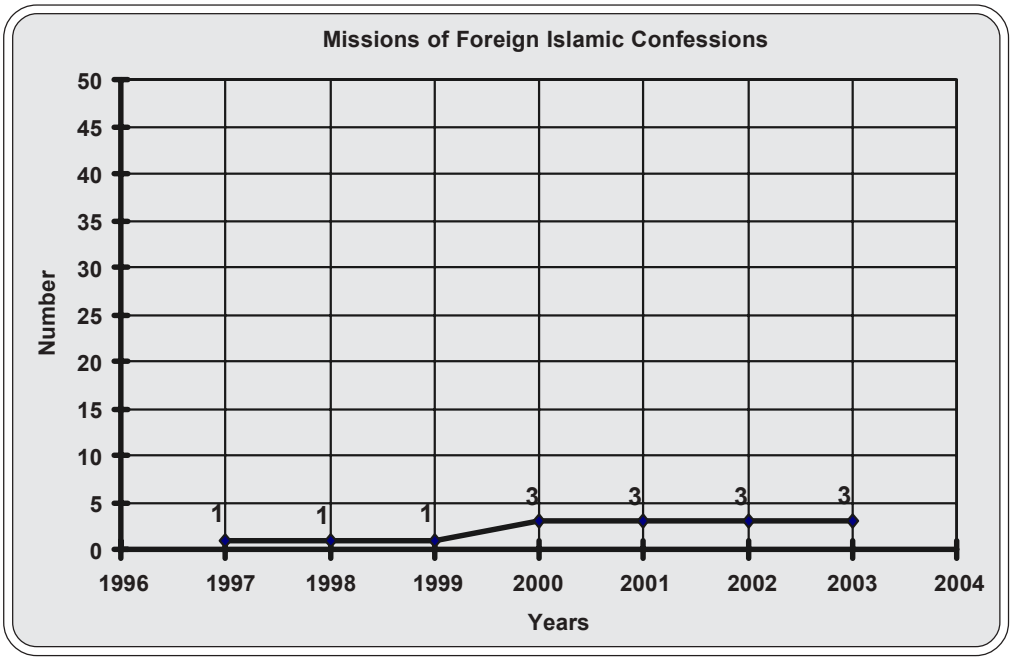
39
1
8
464
768
924
975
1042
1588



There is concern over the practice of direct monetary donations from abroad into the building and religious activities of mosques and Muslim communities: they make the clerics and the faithful dependent on foreign beneficiaries. In fact, this encourages propaganda of all sorts of religious ideas and madhabs previously absent in the republic. Today the Akromiylar, Wahhabis, and Islam Lashkarlari (the Warriors of Islam) are already operating in the republic. The Hizb ut-Tahrir party is even more visible than the others.[3]

The Hizb ut-Tahrir al-islami Party (the Islamic Liberation Party) is a religious-political structure with its headquarters (amirat) either in Western Europe or in Palestine. Some of the amirats are found in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab countries, as well as in Turkey and several European states. Recently the party opened its amirats in Central Asian countries as well. The party was set up in 1952 in Jerusalem by the judge of a Shari'a court of appeal Taqiuddin an-Nabhani al-Falastini (1909-1979) out of members of the Palestine branch of al Ihwan al-muslimin (The Muslim Brotherhood), another fairly popular party. Hizb ut-Tahrir came to Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s; by that time it had already left its mark in Uzbekistan (in the Tashkent, Namangan, Andijan, and Ferghana regions). Later it appeared in the Sogd Region of Tajikistan; by 1995 it betrayed its presence in the south of Kyrgyzstan. According to Sania Sagnaeva, political analyst of the International Crisis Group, Hizb ut-Tahrir came to Central Asia when the Soviet Union was still alive. She is convinced that the party was driven to Kyrgyzstan by President Karimov's cruel repressions—otherwise Kyrgyzstan would have remained ignorant of the party much longer.[4]

The larger part of the Uzbek members of Hizb ut-Tahrir had to emigrate under pressure of massive persecutions and numerous court proceedings against the party's leaders in Namangan, Fergha-

[3] See: "O religioznoy obstanovke v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike i zadachakh organov vlasti po formirovaniu gosudarstvennoy politiki v religioznoy sfere," Resolutions of the KR Government of 10 August, 1995, No. 345; of 17 January, 1997, No. 20; of 19 February, 1998, No. 83; of 7 July, 1998, No. 442; of 28 February, 2000, No. 107; of 22 August, 2000, No. 510; of 5 April, 2001, No. 155.

[4] See: O.Sh. Mamaiusupov, K.S. Murzakhalilov, *Islam v Kyrgyzstane: tendentsii razvitia,* Osh, 2004, p. 7.

na, Andijan, and Margelan. They crossed southern Kyrgyzstan to reach northern Afghanistan; many of them, however, preferred to remain in Kyrgyzstan with the families of their relatives in Osh and Jalal-Abad. Numerous leaflets criticizing the Karimov regime in Uzbek and Arabic that appeared in Kyrgyzstan in the early and middle 1990s confirmed the mainly Uzbek membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. The newcomers, however, did not limit themselves to criticism: they tried to enlist locals, mainly of Uzbek origin, to create the first party cells in southern Kyrgyzstan.

As soon as the state recognized its new ideological opponent, it spared no efforts of the special services, the militia, the public prosecutor's offices, the clergy, and public movements to stem the process. It turned out that the ever-growing numbers of local Muslims were moving onto the party's side, the members of which were calling for bringing down the current constitutional system to set up a Caliphate in the Ferghana Valley. The state and its officials were rapidly losing their authority, especially in the Osh Region: they obviously lacked the perseverance required to stand opposed to the party's activities. It should be said that so far the state has not yet decided on its course of action: there is no agreement between it and the official clergy on how the new phenomenon called Hizb ut-Tahrir, a religious Sunni party, should be described. There are two opinions among the top state officials: it is either a religious party seeking a firmer foundation among the local Muslims, or (according to a much larger group) it is a party exploiting religion to pursue political aims. Each politician, theologian, and statesman describes the party according to their range of knowledge and interests. The clergy and the theologians are more worried than the laymen, probably because they are losing followers to Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Sania Sagnaeva of the ICG believes that Hizb ut-Tahrir protests against the state order: "They encroach on the prerogatives of power; they are afraid of neither courts of justice, nor the militia, nor public prosecutors. Many of them are unemployed and starving—they know nothing about state policies and state institutions." She says that the party members do not watch TV, listen to the radio, or read newspapers—all of this is too expensive for them. At all times the destitute turned to religion for consolation and assistance in removing the rulers.

The party members are prepared to work under all conditions, either in cities or the countryside, to achieve their aim—the Caliphate. According to Solijon Abdukarimov, one of the party members, they prefer to ignore all other religions and confessions: Islam as an ideology will be imposed on those far removed from Islam as a religion to make society completely Islamic. According to the party, "the world will embrace Islam through jihad while the unfaithful (the non-Muslims) who refuse to embrace Islam or to pay tax (jizyan) to demonstrate submission will be fought against." This is especially true of the Western "kiafirs" and those who are fighting the Muslims.

According to the National Security Service of Kyrgyzstan, Hizb ut-Tahrir is especially active in the republic's south with its predominantly Uzbek population: the Karasuui, Aravan, Uzgen, and Nookat districts of the Osh Region and the city of Osh, as well as in the Bazarkurgan and Suzak districts of the Jalal-Abad Region and the city of Jalal-Abad. It was there that the party members who fled Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s under pressure from the Karimov regime settled.

There is the opinion that the bulk of the banned party is made up of ethnic Uzbeks, yet neither the power-related structures, nor the human rights people, nor the public has more or less exact information: everything is based on surmises. According to the law-enforcement structures, there are about 4,000 party members bound by the Koranic oath operating in the republic's south. There is a large group of undecided who still remain outside the party. According to special servicemen, 94 to 96 percent of the party's membership is Uzbek probably because, on the whole, the Uzbeks are more religious than the Kyrgyz.[5]

Religiosity of the Uzbeks notwithstanding, many of them disagree with the official opinion about the party's ethnic composition. Abdumalik Sharipov, who heads the inter-national department of Justice, the Jalal-Abad human rights organization, wants to know why the special services became convinced that the party consisted of Uzbeks. Nobody knows, he argues, how this conviction was formed

[5] See: A.V. Sukhov, "Osobennosti partii 'Hizb ut-Tahrir' v Kyrgyzstane," *Res Publica,* 21 November, 2002.

in the first place: either because of the ethnic affiliation of those detained, or of those about whom the militia had information, or of those who were sentenced by the courts. The human rights activist says that many of the membership cases never reach the courts. At the same time, he agrees that Uzbeks outnumber all other nationalities in the party: the religious factor does affect the ethnoses' attitude to the party, which, we all know, plans to build a Caliphate in the Ferghana Valley. The Uzbeks' social status in Kyrgyzstan is also responsible for the predominantly Uzbek membership: the republic refuses to use the Uzbek youths' intellectual potential.

Rakhmatullo-hojja Kasymov, the kazi of the city of Osh, is convinced that the national composition of any locality affects the party's ethnic composition: the south is populated by Uzbeks, he argues, therefore the local cells are Uzbek-dominated; in the north (the Naryn and Chu regions), where Kyrgyz predominate, there are no Uzbeks in the local cells. The National Security Service agrees with this: the first cells appeared in Kyrghyz-populated areas (Shamaldysay and Tashkumyr of the Jalal-Abad Region) where enlistment has become active. According to the republic's media, there are party members in the Naryn and Chu regions.

Several children of top officials were also enlisted; today the party is seeking larger membership by recruiting the children of civil servants, members of the power-related structures, and businessmen in the hope of attracting more money and gaining patrons from among the decision-makers. The party is active among the power-related structures: the NSS reports that Hizb ut-Tahrir subjects heads of the local militia departments to moral and psychological pressure. Since the absolute majority of the law-enforcement officials (99.9 percent) are Muslims, the party is actively exploiting this fact in an effort to pull the militia to its side. Militiamen admit that it is not easy to oppose the pressure and religious arguments.

Uzbeks, a more religious ethnos than the Kyrgyz, were the first targets of religion-based enlistment efforts. It should be said, however, that the first party members in Kyrgyzstan were Uzbeks from Uzbekistan. For obvious linguistic reasons, they were working among the local Uzbeks. More than that: they argued that in Kyrgyzstan the Uzbeks, as an ethnic minority, had fewer rights and received much less attention from the state than the Kyrgyz. The local Uzbeks driven to the political and social margins eagerly accepted the arguments. In full conformity with its program slogan: "Those who can fight should fight—those who cannot should use their tongues and property," the party launched an extensive propaganda campaign through the imams of new (illegal in the first place) mosques. The party presents its ideas in periodicals acting through likeminded or bribed journalists and politicians who insist that in Kyrgyzstan Hizb ut-Tahrir should be legalized. The party activists are busy printing leaflets in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in huge numbers and disseminating them in these republics.[6]

However, after a while the party leaders realized that the mono-ethnic composition was precarious. The special services were successful when it came to stemming money flows and closing down printing facilities. The state structures began taking party members to court, thus producing the first religious-political prisoners to be liberated. This could not be done without involving highly placed judges, public prosecutors, civil servants, and officers of the special services, in short, posts mostly filled by Kyrgyz. This suggested the obvious: people from state structures should be enlisted no matter how risky this might be. In the absence of money from abroad printing and dissemination of printed matter became even harder. It was necessary to find money inside the republic, where the Kyrgyz dominated in big business as well. The party moved in this direction: according to the power-related structures, several influential Kyrgyz businessmen have already fallen victim to persuasion and are funding the party without being its members. The situation is under control, and adequate measures will be taken when time comes.

For political considerations, the party needed Kyrgyz members together with influential bureaucrats and wealthy businessmen. With the predominantly Uzbek membership and the predominantly

[6] See: A. Krylov, "Kyrgyzstan: islamskiy radikalizm ili traditsionnyi islam?" Moscow, 23 September, 2004, available at [http://www.novopol.ru/article509.html].

Kyrgyz state administration, the party found itself in a situation where the religious-political Uzbek party stood opposed to the secular state administered by Kyrgyz. The rank-and-file members interpreted this as persecution of the Uzbeks, while the Kyrgyz saw this as an effort by the Uzbeks to set up an Uzbek autonomy with subsequent separation from Kyrgyzstan and joining Uzbekistan.

There is no doubt that the party enjoyed and still enjoys favorable conditions for its activities, and this will probably continue. Today, the party is readjusting its theoretical propositions and is looking for new forms and methods of working in the local conditions. It is banned in all Central Asian countries, many of its members serve terms in prisons, but leaflets and other printed materials are still distributed. The state governed by one ethnic group will hardly change its attitude toward Hizb ut-Tahrir, therefore the party will remain illegal in Kyrgyzstan and in all countries where it has its amirats. The clandestine activities of the outlawed party and its political, religious, and social isolation from the local confessional (also Islamic) environment have made the party intolerant of the rest of the Muslim community, which is reciprocating in the same way. Intolerance of the political system and the confessional milieu is making the party even more radical.

I have already written that the new mosques built on foreign money and the emergence of a uniform religious sphere through education in the newly established religious schools are making Islam more radical and contributing to the party's activities. In turn, Hizb ut-Tahrir will long remain a factor of radicalization and politicization of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. The party might even go on to radicalize the means and methods of its propaganda and anti-state activities. This will trigger another split inside the party's amirats.

On the other hand, the Central Asian amirats will overcome their isolation within certain countries and will move toward closer cooperation among themselves. The most radical wing of Hizb ut-Tahrir might coordinate its actions, if not merge, with the militant opposition abroad—the Islamic Movement of Turkestan.