RADICAL ISLAM IN UZBEKISTAN: PAST AND FUTURE

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For religious extremists Uzbekistan is the most desirable aim in Central Asia because of its favorable geostrategic location, high economic potential, and the rapidly growing population. Control over it would allow the Islamists to deliver a serious blow to contemporary civilization and to lay the cornerstone of the Islamic Caliphate.

Since the early 1990s Tashkent has been engaged in a difficult struggle against religious extremists. At first it was fighting alone under fire of human rights and other democratic organizations convinced that the opposition was treated with unjustified cruelty. It was as early as 1997 that President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov spoke about the dangers of dismissing lightly Islamic fundamentalism and its threats and said that the media abroad had been saying for some time that the Uzbek leaders invented the threat to scare the West for the reasons of their own. Western analysts and experts in Islam readily embraced the idea that fundamentalism was absolutely harmless for the world community and was the headache of "its own" states alone. They even believed that had the Islamists managed to adjust the local regimes to their patterns they would have readily entered into a dialog with the rest of the world. These people proceeded from the fact that many of the fundamentalists were educated in Europe and America. One is tempted to ask them: Do you understand the real state of affairs in the Muslim East repeatedly subjected to disintegration, dissent, and humiliations?[1]

Time has shown that the Uzbek leader was right. Tashkent recognized the threat of religious extremism earlier than any other capital; Moscow arrived at this conclusion in 1999, while the West awoke to this fact in the wake of 9/11. This explains why Tashkent proved to be better prepared to rebuff extremist expansion.

[1] See: I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka: ugrozy bezopasnosti, uslovia i garantii progressa,* Tashkent, 1997, pp. 45-46.

Emergence of Religious Opposition

In the past people who lived on the territory of contemporary Uzbekistan were highly religious. Islam played an important role in the Khiva and Kokand khanates and in the Bukhara Emirate. Repressions against the Muslim clerics and suppression of Islam during Soviet times undermined its positions. Even though in 1943 the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was set up together with several religious educational establishments and the state demonstrated greater tolerance of religion and the faithful Islam, along with other confessions, remained under strict state control.

In the 1960s the Soviet state unfolded a wide-scale anti-religious campaign; several mosques were closed, while the clergy in Uzbekistan became divided into "official" and "unofficial."[2] The majority of

[2] R. Abazov, A. Vassilivetskiy, V. Ponomarev, *Islam i politicheskaia bor'ba v stranakh SNG,* ed. by A.M. Verkhovskiy, Moscow, 1992, p. 10.

the makhallias (religious communities) had their own unofficial mullah who performed the necessary rites. If the community remained politically neutral, the authorities preferred to ignore this practice.

In the 1970s-1980s the situation more or less stabilized. Even though the republic never had had a more or less developed Islamic underground movement some time later certain unofficial religious leaders (and adventurers) claimed the honor of organizing illegal religious groups.

The first radical religious organizations appeared in Uzbekistan at the turn of the 1990s: Akromody (set up by mullah Akrom from the Ferghana Valley); Uzun sokol (The Long Beard) founded by mullah Fakhritdin; Adolat, Islom lashkarlari, Tablih, Tovba, Noor. They were mainly operating in the Ferghana Valley, in the Namangan, Andijan, and Ferghana regions. In addition, they were found in the Tashkent, Dzhizak and Surkhandaria regions. In 1990-1992 they were fairly active and organized numerous meeting, rallies, and marches; in 1993-1994 they became underground organizations living on donations of members, kindred organizations operating abroad and Islamic funds. The groups were disseminating the idea of an Islamic state; as a rule they had several scores of members; at best they were 300-400 strong.

Their influence on the domestic situation was fairly limited, yet they managed to cause a lot of trouble for the authorities. On the whole, the leaders of the "first wave" (as well as the leaders of two secular organizations Erk and Birlik) were not educated enough to create massive movements and pursued primitive policies unable to ignite the masses. By the mid-1990s their activities subsided.

Between 1993 and 1997 the opposition radically changed its image; the most active and ambitious structures united on the Islamic platform, while some of the Erk and Birlik members joined what remained of the religious groups. Religious parties found the situation conducive to the growth of their influence in the country shattered by the radical changes that had taken place after 1991. The standard of living plummeted under the pressure of the disintegrated (formerly united) economic system and economic reforms. By the mid-1990s the nation in general had realized that the transition period would take a long time to be completed. This coincided with a demographic explosion when the population increased by about 500,000 every year.

Under the pressure of destitution, unemployment and overpopulation part of the local people turned to religious organizations. Their activists never tired of repeating that ordinary people would live well only in a "correct," that is, Islamic state free of omnipotent bureaucracy and ruling clans in which everybody would be wealthy and able to develop their abilities.

Many lent an ear to this: Islamists paid for the membership in their organizations and for services rendered. Distribution of leaflets, for example, could earn from $50 to 100 in the country where a monthly wage of $25 to $30 was a great luck to be envied (especially in the regions far removed from the capital and in the countryside). In 1998, Islamic opposition became bold enough to move from secret propaganda in markets and mosques to large-scale agitation and an open propaganda of the radical Islamic ideas. More and more leaflets appeared in villages and towns; prayers in Ferghana mosques developed into political rallies. The Islamists were exploiting the weakest points of the powers that be: the ruling clans, corruption, and appalling poverty. Over time the flow of leaflets reached the capital. A wave of protest against economic policies and the arbitrary rule of local authorities swept some of the regions. The Islamists even risked contacting the media in Tashkent in an effort to interest journalists in information directly from the original source and make them their allies.

In the mid-1990s new organizations appeared: these were the embryos of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Liberation Party). They described the Caliphate as their goal and said nothing about national-democratic ideas and aims.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

In Uzbekistan it is operating underground as part of the worldwide organization born in Syria early in the 1950s and has copied its hierarchical arrangement. In Uzbekistan, the "mutamad" heads the organ-

ization; there are regional leaders (masul) under him, their assistants (musoids) responsible for the district structures. The districts are divided into smaller parts; there is information that there are even smaller units down to the makhallias headed by naqibs. The naqib and his assistants form a "zhikhoz"; its members are "mushrifs" (subordinate to the "naqib") and rank-and-file party members. Depending on the numerical strength of the zhikhoz each of the mushrifs may have one or several khalka (a group of 4 to 5) under him.

The party mainly operates using its own money: each of the members has to pay monthly dues (normally from 5 to 20 percent of his income depending on his financial status).

According to official documents, the party favors an evolution from a secular to an Islamic state achieved through propaganda and enlisting more members. At the same time, there is no clarity about the methods with which the party hopes to gain power (this is testified by what the members say as well as by the party documents). This allows its supporters and those who agree with it to speak about its peaceful intentions in gaining power and about a possible coup.

The Hizb ut-Tahrir draws on the following books: *Nizomul Islom* (The System of Islam); *Hizb ut-Tahrir tushunchalari* (The Idea of Hizb ut-Tahrir); *Hizb ut uiushma* (United Movement); *Caliphalik* (How to Build the Caliphate); *Demokratia qufr nizomi* (Democracy is for the Unfaithful); *Caliphalik kanday tugatildi* (How the Caliphate Disappeared), and *Mankhaz* (Coup d'état). The party uses them as a guide to action. All of them taken together form the party's ideological platform. From time to time the party leaders contact the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, yet they have not joined their forces and do not coordinate their actions.

Persecutions and arrests of members and leaders did not undermine the organization: all arrested members are immediately replaced with others. According to the law enforcement bodies and special services of Uzbekistan, late in the 1990s the party's membership was growing in geometric progression.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan does not hesitate to use force to create a Shari'a state; its leaders and activists took an active part in the civil war in Tajikistan and were maintaining close ties with the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and its members—the former head of the Ministry for Emergency Situations of Tajikistan Mirzo Zieev, commander of the presidential guard Gafur Mirzoev, and others.[3]

Late in the 1990s, having acquired definite organizational forms the main forces settled in the Tavildaria zone of Tajikistan; Tajik opposition, the Taliban and religious funds and organizations from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan brought them weapons and paid for their armed forces. Juma Namagani, Tahir Yoldosh, and Zubair Abdurakhman became leaders of the IMU. In 1997-1998 they carried out their first terrorist acts by murdering several local officials in the Andijan Region of Uzbekistan. On 17 February, 1999 a series of terrorist acts in Tashkent betrayed their true aims for the first time. There were five explosions that killed 19 (or even more, according to alternative sources); several of the bombs exploded at the building of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of the Interior.

The IMU expected to destabilize the situation, cause havoc, and attract international attention. This never happened thanks to the timely measures of the country's leaders, yet international response was considerable. Before that Uzbekistan was believed to be the most stable Central Asian country. Later the top officials admitted that the long spell of stability and order in the republic created an illusion that the nation had accepted the economic reforms and deprived the opposition (and religious opposition) of its strongest arguments. Reality proved to be much more complicated. At that

[3] See: V. Shelia, "Gde taliby sdaiut khvosty?" *Novaia gazeta,* 5-8 October, 2000.

time, there were at least 1,000 well-armed fighters in the IMU armed forces that could count on support of Arabic mercenaries, fighters of the Tajik opposition and the Taliban ready to side with the Uzbek Islamists.

In the summer of 1999 and in 2000 the IMU fighters invaded the Surkhandaria Region of Uzbekistan and the Batken Region of Kyrgyzstan. Some of the units approached the capital of Uzbekistan using mountain roads. The authorities were very much concerned; it took a lot of efforts, patience, and time to move back the fighters who were using the tactics the local separatists had tested in Chechnia.

The Ferghana Valley was the strategic goal of the IMU: its leaders expected support from those who believed in the Islamic state; the fighters aimed at controlling one or two districts to set up an Islamic state there. In anticipation of a decisive battle they stored weapons and ammunition.

In the latter half of the 1990s, up to 30-35 percent of the local population supported the Islamic ideas and their radical variants. (The Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley comprises 4.5 percent of the republic's territory and is home for about one-third of its population, out of the total 25 million.) Had the fighters entrenched themselves in the valley the results would have been hard to predict. According to the local authorities, if the Islamists managed to establish control over Uzbekistan, at least eight million of those who did not want to live according to medieval rules would have left the country driven away by fear of repressions.[4] A civil war, similar to that that had been tearing apart Tajikistan in the 1990s, could not be excluded.

In 2001 official Tashkent was facing a very real threat of a large-scale guerilla war. Having defeated General Doustum the Taliban moved to the state border of Uzbekistan. Meanwhile the IMU leaders who remained in the camps the Taliban had set up for them in Afghanistan issued belligerent statements to the effect that the IMU fighters and the Taliban would join forces to attack Uzbekistan. There was no stability inside the country either. Seemingly secure, the official authorities had all reasons to be concerned with the situation in the Ferghana Valley; the leaders of Uzbekistan were readying to rebuff aggression: the state border with Afghanistan was fortified, more weapons were bought, while diplomats tried to attract attention of international community to the problem of religious extremism and terrorism.

The events of 9/11 convinced the world that terrorism was a common threat; all leading states became aware of this. Very soon the United States launched an operation of retribution against Afghanistan in the course of which the IMU was very actively involved on the side of the Taliban, while the IMU leader Juma Namangani was appointed bin Laden's deputy and commander of the northern front. The IMU paid with heavy losses for this (especially at Kunduz and Talukan). There was information that Namangani himself had been killed that later turned out to be false.

In the latter half of November 2001, having realized that victory could not be achieved the leaders of the Taliban altered their tactics. What the world media called "a complete rout" of the Taliban was probably a tactical ploy of its leaders. To avoid direct confrontation with the stronger enemy, they went underground to preserve what was left of the battle-worthy forces. Part of the Taliban retreated to Pakistan; others went up to the mountains, while still others formed the so-called "Pashtoon units of the anti-Taliban coalition." None of the prominent leaders of the Taliban, to say nothing of bin Laden, have been captured.

The IMU was ordered to spare its forces and lie down for a while as well. At first its members tried to find shelter in the northern provinces of Afghanistan in the zone controlled by Tajik filed commanders, later the larger part of them moved to Iran, the Pashtoon regions of Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Religious Opposition Today

According to official estimates, the IMU is no longer as dangerous as it was before. During the counter-terrorist operation of the United States in Afghanistan the IMU lost nearly all its bases in the north

[4] See: Z. Todua, "Islamskaia oppozitsia v Uzbekistane do i posle nachala antiterroristicheskoy operatsii v Afghanistane," *Publications,* April 2002 [www.niiss.ru].

of the country. It also lost its financial sources. In 2002 and 2003 it was much less active than before and could no longer threaten Uzbekistan and Central Asia as a whole.

The situation with Hizb ut-Tahrir is different: for some time (during and after the active phase of the American military operation in Afghanistan) it remained quiet probably in anticipation of another wave of arrests; there were fears that the authorities would destroy the organization if the situation permitted. Later the party revived. Today, despite repressions it is working: in the first half of 2003 it reached the highest peak of its activity by distributing leaflets in Tashkent and its environs, in the Ferghana, Namangan, Andijan, and Surkhandaria regions as well as in the Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana Valley (in places with the predominant Uzbek population). These leaflets are either printed in small printing shops or written by hand. As a rule the party activists dropped them into postboxes.

Today the party is actively building up its membership through propaganda and agitation, leaflets, religious literature, clandestine meetings, and massive Friday prayers in unregistered mosques. It has also mastered new methods: its leaflets call on people not to be afraid of arrests and prisons and explain that each arrested rank-and-file member win at least 30 to 50 of his close and distant relatives over to the party's cause. Those who leave prisons under amnesty or because their term expires tell their relatives and friends about the horrors of being a political prisoner in Uzbekistan, which increases the number of enemies of the state.

According to local experts, recently the quality of leaflets worsened: they became too blunt, teach the faithful intolerance and call them to the struggle against the "unfaithful" and "apostates." One of the leaflets, for example, says that there can be no cooperation between Islam as the perfect religion and other faiths, that Islam is the main religion and nothing will come after it, and that those who say that all religions are equal contradict the Koran. If the unfaithful reject Allah, the Koran, and its rules a dialog with them will be meaningless. Those who want to enter into a dialog with other religions betray Islam. As before leaflets heap primitive criticism on the country's leaders. The lower quality of the leaflets can be probably explained by the fact that the better-educated party members have been arrested. In 2003, about 7,000 were kept in prisons as members of religious extremist organizations; there were 1,600 Wahhabis among them; 650 members of radical Islamic movements of all sorts; around 200 representatives of secular opposition (from the former Birlik and Erk parties); about 4,500 Hizb ut-Tahrir members,[5] the republican emir (head) of the party among them arrested in the spring of 2002, as well as heads of some of the larger groups. The law enforcement bodies closed 15 clandestine printing shops and stemmed the flow of illegal religious literature coming to the country from abroad.

To undermine the positions of Islamists the authorities have enlisted the loyal mullahs and imams who work with the faithful; the official clergy has been instructed to convince the faithful during Friday prayers (the most important prayers which attract crowds) that domestic and foreign policies are absolutely correct and that ordinary people should reconcile themselves with them and concentrate on their families and everyday concerns. This improved the situation among the clerics; starting in the mid-1990s they have been receiving secondary and higher religious education in the republic. The share of unreliable (from the viewpoint of Tashkent) imams of the "Soviet school" and those who in 1991-1994 studied abroad has dropped. (Today nearly 80 percent of the imams were educated in the republic in post-Soviet times.)

By the first half of 2004 there were 1,987 official mosques in the republic and about one million active faithful who perform all religious rites and rituals. The authorities, however, have not yet been able to completely eliminate religious extremists: there is always a danger of their revived influence under a new and active leader. This may happen if the economic reforms underway in the country will not improve the standard of living of the nation's majority.

One can say that by the late 1990s the republic acquired a fairly strong Islamic opposition, which proved unable, however, to topple down the regime. The Islamists limited themselves to the task of setting up a separatist Islamist enclave (patterned on similar structures in Chechnia and the Kadar Zone of Daghestan) in the parts of the Ferghana Valley, which belong to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

[5] Quoted from the leaflet of Hizb ut-Tahrir distributed in Tashkent in February 2003.

President Karimov is convinced that in his country the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is manifested in its attempts "at undermining people's confidence in the state that is carrying out reforms; destroying stability, ethnic and civil harmony very much needed while the country is moving toward better life. The Islamists have resolved to discredit democracy, the secular state, the multiethnic and multiconfessional society."[6]

The measures carried out by the leaders of Uzbekistan and the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan helped contain the Islamist onslaught. The Uzbek citadel is standing; the country defended itself and its Central Asian neighbors.[7] It is too early to say that the Islamists have lost their positions: in April 2004 Tashkent and Bukhara were shaken by terrorist acts, while the Islamists mastered new tactics—female suicide bombers. This is a dangerous method of which Russia is unfortunately well aware.

It is not easy to stem the numerical growth of the radical terrorist movements, yet the struggle against them should be brought to its logical end. This is what the leaders of independent Uzbekistan want.

- First, the country should complete modernization of its social, political, and economic life;
- second, it should pool to its side the informal religious leaders;
- third, it should continue its struggle against the Islamists seeking a civil war;
- fourth, it should help the international community in its efforts to stabilize the situation in Tajikistan and Afghanistan in order not to allow extremists to turn the countries into a toehold of another religious expansion against Central Asia.

[6] Interview with Shoazim Minovarov, Chairman of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, Tashkent, 24 February, 2004.
[7] See: I. Karimov, op. cit., p. 44.