

# **CENTRAL ASIA: ISLAM AND THE STATE**

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## CENTRAL ASIA: ISLAM AND THE STATE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To avoid future instability, Central Asian states need to re-examine their policies towards Islam and step back from reliance on repression. Seventy years of Soviet rule in Central Asia did not crush Islam but it had a profound effect in secularising society and political elites. Nevertheless, after independence there was a surge of interest in Islam, including the emergence of political Islamist groups seeking to challenge the secular nature of these new states. The heavy-handed repression of early manifestations of political Islam led to confrontation, violence, and the appearance of extremist and terrorist groups.

In Uzbekistan the first manifestations of Islamism were rapidly suppressed, and an all-out campaign against any Muslim political activity was initiated. Many Islamists fled first to Tajikistan and then to Afghanistan, where they formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an ally of the Taliban. High levels of repression continued inside the country, provoking widespread discontent and fuelling political Islam as a focus for opposition. There are at least 6,000 religious prisoners in 2003 but dissatisfaction with the regime continues to feed into Islamist sentiment.

In Tajikistan tension over the role of Islam in state-building was a contributory factor to the outbreak of civil war in 1992. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) led opposition to the former Communist regime but failure on both sides to compromise produced bitter fighting that continued until a peace accord was reached in 1997. That agreement legalised the IRP but in practice President Rakhmonov has gradually undermined its position in the political system. With the emasculation of the IRP, more radical groups have gained influence, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir which seeks

the overthrow of all secular states in the region in favour of a single Islamic Caliphate, although it claims to be committed to non-violence.

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan there has been much less interest in ideologies that challenge secularism. But non-traditional Muslim tendencies have appeared in both, and there is debate over the role of religion in society and in politics and over the limits to state interference in religion. In southern Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan, the growth in influence of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir has sometimes been exaggerated, but they do have a committed following.

In Turkmenistan Islam has only weak roots as an organised religion but President Niyazov has combined widespread repression of any independent religious activity with attempts to create a pseudo-Islamic spiritual creed centred on his own personality.

Central Asian governments have often resorted to old Soviet methods of control. In Uzbekistan this has been repressive in the extreme; in Kyrgyzstan much more subtle. All five regional governments, however, have two aims: first, to control any appearance of political Islam, whether moderate or extreme, since they consider independent expressions of Islam a threat to the constitutional order; secondly, to use Islam as a conduit to promote their own ideologies and campaigns, and in general as a tool of the state.

These attempts to control and manipulate Islam have taken different forms. Laws on religion are severely restrictive in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, while liberal legislation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is often undermined in practice. In all states in the

region, a government body responsible for religious affairs intervenes often in the internal affairs of religious organisations. In most states this body carries out registration of religious organisations, without which, in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan at least, any religious activity is a criminal offence.

State bodies also interfere formally or informally in the running of the Islamic hierarchy, often controlling what clergy may say in the mosque. The state has a considerable role in appointments of religious leaders. At the local level this is often exercised through the power of local authorities, while at the higher level the state seeks malleable figures who will not challenge the political leadership or act as an alternative power centre.

The results of this co-optation and control policy are mixed. Many imams are content merely to conduct rituals but some find government interference increasingly stifling and seek more freedom. The more the government controls it, the less authority the religious hierarchy has with believers, and the less impact it has in carrying government ideology to the population. Poorly educated clergy who parrot state ideology and refuse to stand up to the authorities have none of the respect informal leaders can gain, whether orthodox Muslims or followers of Wahhabism or other trends.

Levels of education and knowledge of Islam in the region are generally low. Religious education is seldom satisfactory. In Uzbekistan severe restrictions have pushed religious teaching underground. Mostly these underground schools teach traditional forms of Islam but the result of repression has been that the state in fact has no control over or knowledge of what is being taught. Where there is formal education, it tends to be intellectually weak, with little discussion of contemporary issues in Islam.

The security forces are tasked with tackling Islamic extremism but often interpret this in as broad a sense as possible. Frequently their repressive methods create unnecessary antagonism. In Uzbekistan, in particular, mass arrests of Muslims – many but not all members of radical political groups – have led to serious mistrust between authorities and the population and radicalisation of those who have suffered from a brutal police force.

In general, state responses to Islamist activity have been poorly informed and too often reliant on heavy-handed repression. In an environment of

widespread social decline and sharp falls in living standards over the last decade, Islamism has for some become an acceptable form of political opposition. In their fear of militant Islam, governments have too often worked to undermine authoritative moderate voices in the religious establishment, leaving the arguments against militant opponents to government puppets. Not surprisingly, many Muslims are tempted to turn to groups that seem to offer a more independent view of the government and world affairs.

For much of the population of Central Asia, Islam is not the central factor in their lives. Secularism has gone a long way in undermining religious norms, and the struggle to earn a living while battling with corrupt officials, closed borders and oppressive business environments looms largest. The danger is that without open political systems to channel discontent and with secular state structures failing to deliver economic and political development, Islamist groups may gain greater credibility and increasingly take over the role of opposition on a wide range of political, social and economic issues.

It is important for the international community and especially those states with significant strategic interests in the region, such as the U.S., to continue to support freedom of belief for members of all religions; to maintain a sharp distinction between groups using violence to promote Islamic ideas in politics and those accepting democratic norms; and to maintain the argument that undifferentiated repression against religious activism is likely to lead to more radicalisation rather than less. The alternative is increasing identification of the West with regimes that many Muslims see as not just secular, but actively anti-religious.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the Government of Uzbekistan:

1. Undertake a wide-ranging review of legislation on religion, reforming existing laws that violate international conventions on religious freedom and adopting new laws that should:
  - (a) permit religious education within mosques;
  - (b) expand possibilities for religious education within licensed madrasas;

- (c) provide clear guidelines on registration of religious organisations and allow appeals in courts against refusal to register religious groups; and
  - (d) liberalise censorship of religious publications, providing clear guidelines on what is not permitted and why.
2. Restore the credibility of the Muftiate among believers by increasing its independence.
  3. End primitive Soviet-style propaganda against non-traditional forms of Islam, which often only serve to further discredit government policies and appear to many as propaganda against Islam itself.
  4. Accelerate amnesties for religious prisoners, end the practice of seeking confessions before release, and provide social support for those released.
  5. End the abuse and torture of religious prisoners, which merely creates greater resentment in the wider community and support for radical groups.
  6. Introduce more religious specialists into government structures dealing with religious issues, provide training for all officials on religious affairs, and give believers opportunities to practice their beliefs in state service.

**To the Government of Kyrgyzstan:**

7. Adopt a new law on religion, setting out the range of controls that the government considers necessary, but balancing these against the demands for religious freedom in the constitution and international conventions to which Kyrgyzstan is party.
8. Undertake a review of Islamic education aimed at:
  - (a) encouraging better education for imams and other religious teachers, particularly in city mosques;
  - (b) improving education in madrasas and Islamic institutes, including by introducing into curricula more secular subjects that will provide possible work opportunities after graduation;
  - (c) promoting more study and research into political and social issues in Islam, focusing on contemporary issues, and modernising trends and ideas; and

- (d) developing more expertise on Islam within government structures and training for security officials.

**To the Government of Tajikistan:**

9. Consider establishing an independent Muftiate, or appointing more authoritative scholars to the present Council of Ulama.
10. Revoke unwritten bans on loudspeakers in mosques and other symbolic restrictions on the practice of Islam.
11. Avoid arbitrary decisions on closure of mosques or other religious institutions and revoke minimum population requirements for establishment of a mosque.
12. End low-level harassment of the Islamic Renaissance Party and permit it to operate freely throughout the country.

**To the International Community:**

13. Consistently press Central Asian governments to respect freedom of belief for members of all faiths and promote observance of international conventions regarding freedom of belief and religion.
14. Take a firmly critical line against governments that practice torture and other abuses of religious prisoners.
15. Consider widening exchange programs to include more religious figures, with the aim of improving religious education and demonstrating freedoms of belief.
16. Consider funding libraries, resource centres and other programs to provide access for people interested in religion to objective and mainstream literature and resources.
17. Engage where possible with Islamic institutions to promote greater awareness of the international community among their students and provide appropriate assistance, for example with literature, computer technology, and language classes.

**To the U.S. Government:**

18. Declare Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan “countries of particular concern” in the annual review of religious freedom.

Osh/Brussels, 10 July 2003



## CENTRAL ASIA: ISLAM AND THE STATE

### I. INTRODUCTION

The secular, Soviet-era elites that remain in power in much of Central Asia often have a simplistic view of Islam as either good (official, quietist Islam, with no political ambitions) or bad (any independent Islamic activity, particularly if it is critical of the political authorities). In reality Islam in contemporary Central Asia is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that is in considerable flux. While the region has historically been an integral part of the broader Muslim world, seven decades of Soviet rule produced many characteristics that it does not share with the rest of the Muslim world.

Much of the history of political Islam in the twentieth century passed Central Asia by, cut off as it was from the mainstream Muslim world by Soviet frontiers.<sup>1</sup> The traditional relationship between religious and secular powers in Central Asia had been largely mutually tolerant, based on the Islamic Hanafi school of law, which has

usually been marked by a quiescent attitude toward political power.<sup>2</sup> Few observers could predict what kind of Islam would emerge after 70 years of Soviet power.

The contemporary reality of Islam in Central Asia owes much to the Sovietisation of the region, and before that to Russian colonial policy. The Russian conquest of the region over the course of the nineteenth century brought many transformations, but did not alter the basic parameters in which Islam existed. In nomadic regions, the colonial regime encouraged measures that could promote Russification, while in the sedentary regions, on the other hand, it sought to regulate existing courts that operated on the basis of *sharia*. Wary of igniting opposition, it did not interfere overtly with education and religious practice.

The Bolsheviks transformed the social and political milieu in which Islam existed in Central Asia and cut short its modernising tendencies.<sup>3</sup> From 1927

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<sup>1</sup> In medieval times, Central Asia was much more central to Islamic intellectual development. Arab armies conquered the cities of Transoxiana in the early eighth century, turning the region into the frontier of the Muslim world. Over the next two centuries, the urban population converted to Islam and the cities very quickly became connected to networks of Muslim culture and Islamic learning. Indeed, some of the most important figures in Islamic civilisation came from Transoxiana: Imam Abu Isma‘il al-Bukhari (810-870) and Abu ‘Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (825-892), two of the most authoritative the compilers of *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet); influential jurists Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi (d. ca. 944) and Burhan al-Din Abu’l Hasan al-Marghinani (d. 1197), the scientist Abu Nasr al-Muhammad al-Farabi (d. ca. 950), and the rationalist philosopher Abu ‘Ali Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna, 980-1037).

<sup>2</sup> Sunni Muslims recognise four schools of law (*madhhab*) as equally authoritative. In Central Asia, the dominant *madhhab* was the Hanafi, the most liberal in its accommodation of tradition and promotion of a tolerant relationship between the religious community and the state, with political leaders not challenged for supremacy in the political realm by theological elites.

<sup>3</sup> This modernising movement was known as Jadidism. Inspired by similar modernist movements among the Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, as well as among Muslims abroad (above all, in the Ottoman Empire), the Jadids argued for widespread reform on the basis of Islam. They were particularly focused on education for Muslims, including women. They were at least sceptical of tradition and custom, but their critiques were firmly rooted in Islam. Only “real” Islam, they argued, could rescue Muslims from decay, and an aggressively modernist interpretation rendered Islam entirely compatible with progress and

onwards, the regime conducted a full-scale campaign against Islam. Religious properties were confiscated, madrasas and mosques were closed, their buildings requisitioned for more “socially useful” purposes (schools, clubs, warehouses), or, in many cases, destroyed. The *ulama* (clergy) were persecuted: large numbers were arrested and sent to forced labour camps or executed, and those who remained behind were forced underground.<sup>4</sup> In Uzbekistan, where it was the norm for women, the regime launched an intense assault against veiling in 1927.

There was some let-up during the Second World War, when an official Islamic establishment was established (under strict government control) to boost support for the war effort. This body – the Spiritual Administration for the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Dukhovnoe upravlenie musulman Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana, DUMSAK) based in Tashkent – controlled a small number of officially approved mosques and was allowed to run two seminaries for the training of “official” *ulama*.<sup>5</sup>

Official repression did not cause Islam to disappear from Central Asia but it did produce major transformations in its place in society and in what it means to Central Asians. The following transformations were the most significant:

- The campaign against Islam completely de-Islamised public debate by removing Islam and expressions of Muslim piety or moral values from the public arena. Even the observance of basic religious ritual was frowned upon. Anti-religious propaganda, on the other hand, became a staple of all means of socialisation, such as schools, the press, and the army.
- The abolition of formal religious education and the persecution of the *ulama* meant that

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modernity. Indeed, only modern kinds of knowledge could allow one to be a good Muslim. See Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport, Conn., 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union, From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London, 2000), provides a detailed study of the state's relations with Muslim spiritual administrations.

the transmission of Islamic knowledge and the observance of religious ritual were severely curtailed. Since no religious texts could be published, Islamic learning was pushed underground and transmitted largely orally. The closed borders also isolated Soviet Muslims from the broader Muslim world. Central Asia remained beyond the reach of much mid and late-century Muslim thought, including the phenomenon of “political Islam”.

As a result, Islam was effectively localised and rendered synonymous with tradition. Being a Muslim remained an essential part of local identity but it was adherence to customs and traditions, not observance of Islamic ritual, that defined one as belonging to Islam. A person was a Muslim because he or she was, say, a Kyrgyz, regardless of personal faith. It was entirely possible to identify as a Muslim and have no faith whatsoever, or indeed to be hostile to all manifestations of Islam.

These transformations made Central Asia radically different from its neighbours, such as Afghanistan or Pakistan, where Islam was never similarly assaulted. The only parallels with the experience of Soviet Muslims are to be found in Muslim communities in other socialist states, such as Yugoslavia, Albania, and China, although in each the period of official repression of Islam was much shorter.

As Central Asians began rediscovering their heritage after independence, Islam emerged as a major focus for people seeking for a new identity. Mosques were reopened or built anew, Sufi masters emerged, and basic religious education appeared again. Islamic literature also reappeared, from the wider Islamic world, some of it propagating very different tendencies in Islam, including ‘Wahhabi’ ideologies. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed renewed contact with other Muslim communities. “Missionaries” and other activists arrived in large numbers from Turkey, Pakistan, and the Arab world in the early years of independence.<sup>6</sup> Such contacts brought

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<sup>6</sup> This influx of external activists and groups has hardly been studied. On Turkish moderate Islamic groups, see Bayram Balci, “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam”, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 31, no. 2. 2003. Followers of Fethullah Gülen established a strong



about a certain pluralisation of Islam in Central Asia, as new sects and religious groups, many with no previous record in the region, appeared.

Many things, however, have not changed from the late Soviet period. The regimes in post-Soviet Central Asia remain highly ambivalent toward Islam. On the one hand, they seek to ground their legitimacy in an appeal to nationalism, couched very much in Soviet terms, but liberated from the strictures imposed by the Soviet regime. Islam to them represents the cultural heritage of their nation and as such has to be celebrated. In Uzbekistan, the government has staged several lavish jubilees marking the anniversaries of such Islamic figures as al-Bukhari, al-Marghinani, and al-Maturidi, who are all claimed as Uzbek national figures. Sufi traditions receive much laudatory attention as carriers of the nation's humanist traditions and contributors to "universal human civilisation". Kazakhstan has invested heavily to profile the mausoleum of Ahmet Yesevi in the city of Turkistan as the focus of reverence for all Turkic peoples.

At the same time, however, the new regimes remain resolutely secular and retain the local Communist Party elite's traditional hostility to Islam. Not only is there no religious instruction in public schools, but the regimes have kept Soviet-era mechanisms for control of religious activity. DUMSAK split into individual religious administrations in each country, but its successors remain in existence and are used to regulate religious practice.

The relationship between state and religion remains highly contested. Largely Soviet-era mentalities in political elites clash with newly assertive religious groups or individuals who claim a greater role for Islam in political and social life. This unresolved relationship between state and religion, both over the nature of the state in an Islamic society, and over the boundaries between

state and religion, has been one of the factors provoking conflict in many Islamic societies.

Radical movements propose Islamic alternatives to the modern nation-state, ranging from Islamist states inside existing borders, such as Iran, to the recreation of an Islamic Caliphate that would replace all present regimes in the Islamic world. Their methods of achieving a change in state structures and ideology also vary widely, but at least some groups are willing to use violence to achieve their ends. Similar threats have also emerged from political Islam to Central Asian states. Countering them will in large part depend on how these states develop their relationships with Islamic communities.

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network of schools throughout Central Asia, although many were expelled from Uzbekistan as a result of problems in Uzbek-Turkish relations. Most do not teach religion overtly, but provide a context in which religious belief is encouraged. On Saudi influence, Bayram Balci, "The role of the Turkestani (Uzbek and Uighur) communities settled in Saudi Arabia in the Development of Wahhabism in Central Asia", conference paper, Prospects for Democracy in Central Asia, Istanbul, 1-3 June 2003.

## II. UZBEKISTAN: REPRESSION AND RESPONSE

Nowhere has Islam become more of a political issue than in Uzbekistan, where much government policy in all fields is premised on a “struggle” against “Islamic extremists”.<sup>7</sup> Much of the state’s repressive apparatus and many of its negative economic policies have been attributed to the need to retain control over society, and particularly over religious elements in society that are viewed as an overt threat to the secular nature of the regime.

### A. CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

Much of this defensive attitude towards Islam dates back to the early 1990s, when a rapid revival in interest was matched by a rapid decline in state control over all aspects of life, and a sharp drop in economic well-being. Notably in the Ferghana Valley, historically a centre of Islamic piety, new Islamic groups sprang up, often emerging from illegal study groups that existed in Soviet times and often radically opposed to the secular state.

The primary axis of conflict has been between traditionalist “Hanafi” *ulama* and their so-called “Wahhabi” opponents. The latter is a term used locally in a broad sense to denote all *ulama* with a critical attitude to local customs and traditions. It does not necessarily imply a direct connection with Saudi Arabia and its brand of Islam. The “Wahhabis” are harshly critical of local customs, which they see as “un-Islamic”, and advocate strict adherence to scriptural behavioural norms. Some of the more radical seek to establish an Islamic state and imposition of some form of Islamic law. The traditionalist *ulama*, who remain an

overwhelmingly numerical majority, firmly oppose these pretensions and eschew politicisation.<sup>8</sup>

Attempts to set up a legal Islamic party in Uzbekistan were quashed by the authorities but smaller informal Islamist groups appeared, most notably in Namangan, where two groups, *Adolat* and *Islom lashkarlari* were founded in the Otawalikhon town mosque. These groups, consisting mostly of young men, sought to fill the vacuum left by the state, using so-called “Islamic militia” to keep order on the streets and imposing elements of *sharia* on the population. At a notorious meeting in Namangan in early 1992, crowds of Islamist supporters challenged President Karimov in person to legalise their structures.<sup>9</sup> The response was swift: in 1992 *Adolat* and other similar groups were outlawed and suppressed. Those who escaped arrest fled to Tajikistan, where they took part in the civil war, and eventually moved to Afghanistan, where they formed the core of what became the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

The appearance of Islamist groups challenging the secular nature of the state shocked the largely secular, Soviet-era elite, who had little concept of how to deal with political Islam. The security services carried out widespread repression, particularly against authoritative imams believed to be “Wahhabis”, who had attracted a wide following in the towns of the Ferghana Valley. Many Islamists were arrested but many ordinary pious Muslims seem also to have been caught up in the repression, particularly after a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 that were blamed on an alliance of Islamist groups and the secular opposition leader Muhammed Solikh.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This “struggle” is couched in exclusively Soviet-era terminology. See, for example, B. Babadjanov’s study of the March 2000 program of the Uzbek Muftiate, entitled “Program in defence of our sacred religion: on the struggle against fundamentalism and other extremist tendencies”, and B. Babadjanov, “Upravlenie musulman Uzbekistana I nekhafitskie gruppy: mir ili voina?” [The Directorate of Muslims of Uzbekistan and non-Hanafi groups: war or peace?], n.d.

<sup>8</sup> B. Babadjanov, “From the Struggle for ‘Religious Purity’ to Political Activism,” in Boris Rumer, ed., *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* (Armonk, NY, 2002), pp. 299-330.

<sup>9</sup> Some attribute President Karimov’s later harsh attitude to all Islamic organisation outside official structures as partly related to this meeting, when he faced unprecedented heckling and threats, particularly from one of the leaders of the Islamists, a young man called Juma Namangani, subsequently a leader of the IMU.

<sup>10</sup> There has never been an adequate explanation of the bombings in Tashkent, which killed sixteen people. Opposition writers almost unanimously claim the incident was staged by elements within the regime in an attempt to regain control for particular groups.

Exiled Islamist groups eventually set up base in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, from where the IMU mounted occasional ineffectual raids into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Although labelled an international terrorist group by the U.S. in 2000, it was much closer to a guerrilla insurgency against the Uzbek regime than a transnational terrorist organisation. It developed a more international outlook in Afghanistan, however, where it became an ally of the Taliban.

Much IMU infrastructure and capacity was destroyed during the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001. It may yet recover some influence in the region, but its role in challenging the secular states has been taken over by the non-violent radical group, the Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has gained a fairly small, but committed following in Uzbekistan as well as neighbouring states.<sup>11</sup>

## B. GOVERNMENT ATTITUDES

In the early years of independence, there was an attempt to co-opt the symbolism of Islam as a form of legitimisation of the regime. President Karimov went to Mecca and took the oath of office on the Koran. But there was no serious attempt to engage with Islam as a political force: the sole government response from 1992 onwards was repression of opposition, whether Islamic or secular, and increasing control over official Islam, following in essence the old Soviet system of religion-state relations.

The perception of a threat to the state from Islamist groups has also influenced wider government policies, promoting political authoritarianism, economic stagnation, and bad relations with neighbours. From 1999 onwards Uzbekistan introduced harsh border regimes with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, viewed as sources of potential

Islamist instability. The refusal to embrace economic reform has also sometimes been attributed to fear of Islamist revival. In reality, what has most stoked Islamist attitudes has been the corruption and economic despair engendered by the government's kleptocracy, which has maintained a semblance of social control through a limited welfare state and strict control over the private sector.

There are few specialists on Islam in the current political elite. There has also been a reluctance to look to other models of development that might have informed a more balanced religious policy. Officials consider that the Turkish model is far too liberal, permitting moderate Islamists to take power; Tajikistan's experiment in incorporating an Islamic party into the structures of government awakes similar fears. More independent voices that suggest alternative policies are sidelined. Analysts have produced reports for the presidential administration pointing out the danger of present policies but their conclusions have no impact on the real decision-makers. Instead, the political elite has turned to its Soviet background for simplistic answers to a complex problem.

## C. CONTROLLING ISLAM

As outlined above, the government has reacted to the growth in various strands of Islamic conviction outside the official Hanafi school with growing levels of control by the state and repression by the security forces. This system is well developed, and involves overlapping institutions of both security and government organs at all levels.

### 1. Legal restrictions

Apart from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has the most restrictive legislation on religious activity in the region. The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations<sup>12</sup> formally guarantees

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<sup>11</sup> See ICG Asia Report No. 58, *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003. The Kyrgyz government has alleged that IMU members were involved in two bombings, in Bishkek in December 2002, and in Osh in May 2003, but there is little hard evidence so far to support the allegations. It seems more likely that the explosions – which targeted a market in Bishkek, and an exchange booth in Osh – were the result of criminal disputes. There are, however, reports that several hundred Uzbek fighters from the IMU remain in northern Afghanistan, and they may yet re-emerge as a potential threat to stability in the region.

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the law, see G. Garrard Beckwith, "Uzbekistan: Islam, Communism, and Religious Liberty – An Appraisal of Uzbekistan's 1998 Law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations,'" *Brigham Young University Law Review*, Vol. 2000, No. 3; and Felix Corley, "Uzbekistan's New Legislation on Religion: An Assessment", Available in the ODIHR Religion and Law Research Consortium Documentary Library, at [www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org).

religious freedom but in reality violates many international standards. The law has been re-enforced by both the criminal and civil codes, anti-terrorism legislation, and a series of presidential decrees and executive orders.

The law on religion criminalises any unregistered communal religious activity; all private religious instruction is banned; all imported religious literature must be censored by the state; missionary activity is banned; wearing religious clothing or attributes in public places is illegal, except for clerics; and “religious political parties and public movements” are illegal.

An analyst argues that: “The thrust of the law is that religious activity is tinged with danger, being associated with fanaticism, coercion, terrorism and civil unrest, and that state control is the only way to preserve order”.<sup>13</sup> In many ways it reflects the general political beliefs of the Uzbek elite, who view state control in all spheres as the only method to ensure social stability and the preservation of their power.

The law on religion is backed up by an illiberal anti-terrorist law, adopted in 2000. In addition to all these measures, the Uzbek government also violates many other internationally and constitutionally-guaranteed rights connected with religion such as the right to expression, public assembly, due process and prohibitions on torture.

## 2. Government policy

Overseeing these extremely strict legal parameters for religious activity is primarily the formal responsibility of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers (CRA), currently chaired by Shoazim Minovarov. The CRA controls the Muslim Spiritual Board (Muftiate), which in turn controls the Islamic hierarchy, the content of imams’ sermons, and the publication of Islamic materials.

The CRA is not really a decision-making body, however. It merely implements policy, which primarily stems from the presidential administration and figures such as the State Adviser on Interethnic Relations and Religious

Affairs, currently Zukhriddin Husniddinov. More influential in actually setting policy is Hamidulla Karamatov, the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for social affairs. Karamatov, who has a reputation as a tough-minded politician with little time for liberal policy approaches, considers himself the leading government expert on religious affairs. His access to the president, and influence over the presidential administration, have laid the basis for much of government policy towards Islam.

One of the main functions is fulfilling legal requirements to register all religious communities. Registration is not merely a technical requirement: the criteria are very difficult to meet and arbitrarily applied.<sup>14</sup> Officially, registration is done through the Ministry of Justice with the approval of the CRA; in reality, a range of bodies might block an application, from local authorities, to the presidential administration, and of course the security services. The law provides broad powers for the state to decide arbitrarily.

Following the adoption of the 1998 law, thousands of mosques were closed by the authorities, having failed to meet the registration requirements.<sup>15</sup> Most mosques are now registered, although in towns of the Ferghana Valley there are reportedly still some that have not been registered. These are mostly small neighbourhood mosques – often little more than prayer rooms – used by older men who cannot travel the sometimes considerable distance to one of the few registered mosques left open. In most cases, the local police turn a blind eye, as long as there is no evidence of anything more than ordinary prayers being held there.

Even for registered mosques, there are further levels of local government control. Each provincial government (*hokimiat*) has a post for social affairs, which includes control over religious activities. In

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<sup>14</sup> The dossier should include an application with at least 100 signatures by Uzbek citizen members, the protocol of the founding meeting, rules and regulations, certification of an address and payment of the registration fee. All these documents should be submitted to the CRA and Ministry of Justice at the national level, as well as to any corresponding units at the regional level where a religious organisation wishes to practice. Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, Article 11: Registration of Religious Organisations.

<sup>15</sup> Before the law was adopted, there were reportedly more than 5,000 mosques in Uzbekistan; now there are just over 1,800.

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<sup>13</sup> Felix Corley, “Uzbekistan’s New Legislation on Religion”, op. cit.

Namangan and Tashkent there is a deputy *hokim* position, devoted entirely to “the struggle with religious extremism and fanaticism”. Beyond the levels of control and interference in religious life laid down by law, there is a wide range of interference in the religious sphere by officials who generally treat their administrative territory as their fiefdom, with little regard to the law. Local leaders feel free to dismiss or appoint imams as they see fit, often on the basis of kinship or because it gives them access to financial benefits.

Also at the local level, considerable responsibility is placed on the *mahalla*, or neighbourhood council, which is expected to report to the government what goes on in the mosque and the neighbourhood in general.

Some in the official religious structures accept this absolute government control as necessary and normal, partly because of old Soviet fears of political Islam, and partly because the system can be advantageous to those who conform. Nevertheless, among many more independent imams, and believers in general, discontent with the system is widespread. One imam said:

Many imams are unhappy with the situation. There has never been a time when imams and religious officials were so totally dependent on various state structures, which has become simply humiliating for them. We are controlled by the regional *hokimiats*, the SNB [National Security Service, the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs], chairmen of *mahalla* committees, the Muftiate....Even in the Soviet period the authorities consulted us, asked our advice, and in general just showed some respect and culture, although then there was also total control.<sup>16</sup>

This lack of respect from government officials towards believers and religious leaders is one of the most common complaints. ICG was told of many examples of representatives of the central or local government dealing with imams in the most humiliating way.

One elderly imam in Namangan complained that:

...the local administration has a habit of holding meetings when prayers should be

held and nobody is allowed to leave [the meeting]. They just care about their own time or are testing us on our devotion to the state.<sup>17</sup>

The same imam told of a meeting held in 2001 by a government security minister in Namangan, on the “fight against religious extremism”. According to one imam present, he berated a few imams who dared to leave to pray for ten minutes: “He scolded them like an older teacher scolds kids, although he was much younger than them. Even Russians never humiliated us in this way”.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The official Islamic establishment

The religious hierarchy is largely a duplicate of the Soviet-era system, with a Muftiate, headed by Abdurashid Bahromov, a figure with little authority among ordinary Muslims but who remains extremely loyal to the state. The Muftiate is entirely under the control of the CRA and has no scope for any independent action.

There are two important ways in which the Muftiate is used to control Islam. The first is through appointments of imams, which is carried out in informal consultation with local authorities, the security services and the CRA. Appointments seem to be dependent on the imams’ political views, rather than their religious knowledge. Corruption also plays a role, further diminishing the image of imams in the eyes of believers. In the opinion of one Muslim in Termez:

I studied in the madrasa myself and know how imams...are chosen. The main criterion is loyalty to the government, and readiness to pay bribes and give gifts to the Muftiate and state officials. Knowledge and morality does not interest them....Corruption and nepotism have moved from state structures into the sphere of religion.<sup>19</sup>

The other way the Muftiate controls religion is through the message that official Islam conveys, official *fatwas*, public statements, and control of the themes of sermons (*khutba*), traditionally delivered after Friday prayers. Imams are not permitted to deliver sermons on subjects of their

<sup>17</sup> ICG interview with imam, Namangan, April 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> ICG interview, Termez, April 2003.

<sup>16</sup> ICG interview with imam, Tashkent region, 2003.

own choosing but are provided with the basic themes of each weekly sermon by the Muftiate (with full knowledge of the CRA, of course). This is generally interpreted in a very pro-government way by imams, although perhaps less so than in earlier years. As one imam told ICG:

Some official imams conduct more neutral *khutba*, and they gain greater respect than pro-government imams. Now people choose which mosque to go to, people prefer to go to more independent imams, and therefore even official imams have become embarrassed to praise the president as fulsomely as happened often before.<sup>20</sup>

Even this can be dangerous for imams. It is easy for the chairman of the *mahalla*, for example, to decide that the imam in his neighbourhood is “too independent”. In one of the districts of Tashkent the chairman of the *mahalla* – a former KGB senior officer – ordered elders to write a complaint against the imam, with the aim of dismissing him by the “will of the local population”. When asked why he wanted the imam’s resignation, he admitted that he never visited the mosque himself but had heard that “this imam never praises our president during sermons.”<sup>21</sup>

Typical sermons address moral and religious issues, the origin of religious holidays and so forth. More political are the sermons related to secular holidays, when imams may talk about the benefits that Uzbek independence – and Karimov himself – has brought, including the freedom of religion, and how believers were repressed under Soviet rule. On Constitution Day, for example, imams discuss the Uzbek constitution and how because Uzbeks live in a secular state they must obey secular laws.

What they do not do is address the key issues in people’s lives: the injustice of government policies; the brutality of the security services; the corruption that has taken over so much of the state. These points can only be addressed in private: they are not discussed in newspapers or on the television. The only Islamic group that talks about them at all is Hizb ut-Tahrir, which explains some of the group’s popularity.

The overwhelming political restrictions on imams, the corruption and nepotism in the system, and the attempts to use them as tools of government propaganda, has severely undermined their authority in society. Arguably, this was the aim of the government, which in the early years of independence particularly targeted imams who had gathered popular support. But it has an obvious negative effect, with alternative informal leaders from outside the official system gaining much more credibility with the population.

#### 4. Control of religious education

Some of the most detrimental effects of Uzbekistan’s religious policies are noticeable in education, where extreme suppression of religious teaching has forced even orthodox Islamic classes underground, putting ordinary religious teaching on a legal par with secret study groups run by Hizb ut-Tahrir or other extremist groups.

Formal religious education takes place in a limited network of state-controlled institutions. There are just two institutes of higher education in Uzbekistan that teach Islam: the Tashkent Islamic Institute (named after Imam al-Bukhari) and the Tashkent Islamic University. The former produces Islamic scholars who go on to become imams, while the latter – effectively a secular institution – grants standard university diplomas. There are also ten madrasas around the country, mainly providing two-year courses for students.

This limited network of religious educational establishments is clearly not sufficient for the demand. The Hadicha Kuboro women’s madrasa in Tashkent has no more than 50 places per year, and there are about ten applications for every place. Given the demand it is not surprising that interviewees suggested that bribes for admission to madrasas were commonplace, ranging from U.S.\$400 to U.S.\$2,000 in the most prestigious institutions.<sup>22</sup>

Any other religious education is effectively banned. The amendments to the law on religion adopted on 5 May 1999 outlawed private teaching of religion and also banned teaching in mosques, except with the special permission of the Muftiate.

<sup>20</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, February 2003.

<sup>21</sup> ICG interview, local elders, Tashkent, January 2003.

<sup>22</sup> ICG interviews, teachers of Islam, Tashkent, February and April 2003.

Teaching in mosques was traditionally seen after prayers, during the traditional *Hatm*, the collective reading and explaining of the Koran after midday or Friday prayers in a mosque. However, the authorities have also sought to limit this phenomenon: a secret instruction of the MIA from March 1999 bans people from staying in mosques after last prayers.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, there are no lessons in mosques, and imams are not permitted to conduct private lessons for believers. These restrictions were a response to fears that imams were teaching Wahhabi ideologies or were sheltering Hizb ut-Tahrir activities but the evidence suggests that the restrictions themselves may be promoting radical and unorthodox tendencies. As one imam of a small mosque in Tashkent told ICG:

The majority of our Muslims are people with a very limited knowledge of Islam, which allows Hizb ut-Tahrir to interpret *ayats*<sup>24</sup> and *hadith*<sup>25</sup> as suits their political ideology. But the tragedy is that my colleagues and I are under the same restrictions as Hizb ut-Tahrir – just like them, we are also not allowed to teach legally. So in those conditions, of course extremist groups will grow regardless of repression.<sup>26</sup>

The ban on religious education is widely decried by many imams and seen as a major reason for the growth of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir:

Young people have an interest in Islam, but in the conditions of a ban on learning about Islam, there will always be a certain group of young people who will join Hizb ut-Tahrir because of their lack of education.<sup>27</sup>

In the absence of formal education in mosques, an old tradition of informal (and illegal) learning has re-emerged. This traditional form of learning, known as *hujra*, was widely practised in Soviet times,<sup>28</sup> and came from an older tradition of family

learning of Islam. In some cases *hujra* groups are conducted by imams, or by men who know the Koran well, sometimes with religious education. There are also women's groups, led by traditional women teachers of Islam, known as *otin-oyi*, or by wives of imams. There are also *hujra* where children learn the basic prayers and fragments from the Koran.

Although *hujra* is illegal, it is not always broken up by the authorities. According to one observer, there are two such *hujra*, conducted secretly, in a Tashkent *mahalla*. Occasionally the chairman of the *mahalla* turns up with the local policeman and warns those gathered, but generally they are left alone.<sup>29</sup> Other local leaders, however, may not be so sympathetic.

In most cases, these *hujra* are conducted within the teachings of the Hanafi school by respected imams, whose motivation is partly because they provide some small financial income, but mostly the Koranic prescription to pass on knowledge and the obvious demand for learning among Muslims. Banning private instruction had little impact on this desire for learning in the Soviet period and seems to have little effect now. As one private religious teacher commented:

However the state tries to ban Islamic education, nevertheless interest in religion is growing, and this problem needs to be resolved today. Through outlawing [education] the state cannot achieve its aim – the suppression of interest in Islam and frightening people away from Islam.<sup>30</sup>

The only result is that teaching is driven underground, into isolated groups, an ideal opportunity for politicisation of Islamic teaching, and the growth of radical Islamist ideas.

For people trying to find out about religion themselves, there are also strict controls on literature. The CRA has the final word on censorship of religious publications but a number

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<sup>23</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> An *ayat* is a verse of the Koran.

<sup>25</sup> *Hadith* – sayings attributed to the prophet Mohammed.

<sup>26</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, March 2003.

<sup>27</sup> ICG interview with imam, Surkhandarya province, March 2003.

<sup>28</sup> *Hujra* education was of course illegal in Soviet times, but in some areas, such as Tajikistan or the Ferghana

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Valley, local authorities often turned a blind eye to such activities, only cracking down under pressure from above. The Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan emerged from just such a study group, begun in 1977 on the outskirts of Dushanbe.

<sup>29</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, May 2003.

<sup>30</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, April 2003.

of government entities concerned with religion can veto publications they dislike. Religious books in some cases have been passed by the procurator's office to expert commissions, mostly consisting of scholars, who provide advice on whether the literature is "dangerous", "very dangerous", or "not dangerous".<sup>31</sup>

The result is a significant lack of religious literature for ordinary Muslims. There is little room for private enterprise to get involved in publishing religious material. A businessman in Namangan told ICG that the authorities recommended that he not "...invest in the sphere of religion if he cares about his professional future".<sup>32</sup> His friend from the city administration suggested that the government simply does not want people to become religious and therefore limits the number and range of materials on Islam, and the authorities are afraid that commercial sponsorship of Islamic literature will become fashionable and attract more business people to Islam.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, there is little literature available that undermines the claims of radical Muslim groups. Even respected scholar and former Mufti Muhammed Sodik Muhammed Yusuf has found it difficult to get his books published, despite his strong opposition to "Wahhabi" ideologies and groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>34</sup> In this information vacuum, any outside literature is welcome, regardless of the source or ideological basis.

## 5. State repression

Much everyday control over religion is the responsibility of the security forces. Primarily, in terms of mosques and local communities, this involves the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). The National Security Service (NSS) is also concerned, but generally at a slightly higher level,

or in a less open way, operating through informers.<sup>35</sup>

The level of repression against religious activists has been well documented by human rights groups.<sup>36</sup> The height of the arrests was in 1999 and 2000; since mid-2001 there has been a slowdown. Nevertheless, several hundred people were still sentenced to imprisonment on charges of belonging to illegal religious or politico-religious groups in 2002. The government has held two amnesties of religious prisoners, in August 2001 and December 2002, but both have been deeply flawed and have involved serious abuses of human rights.<sup>37</sup> Assertions that there has been significant improvement in human rights since the deepened relationship with the U.S. began in late 2001 are based on very slim evidence.<sup>38</sup>

The security provisions against religious activism pervade the whole of society. Neighbourhood police officers play an important role, although their attitudes to religious people are mixed. One religious woman comments: "Police officers vary a lot. Some treat religious people with respect; some simply hate us and humiliate us, partly on orders from above, but also because of their personal hatred of us".<sup>39</sup> In addition to neighbourhood policing, in each *mahalla* there are one or more so-called *posbon*, essentially officials responsible for

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<sup>31</sup> Such an expert commission was conducted in Samarkand University on 6 May 1999, at the request of the Samarkand Procurator's office, which had seized a number of books and journals during the arrest of two people suspected of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. The commission agreed that all the literature seized was "dangerous", and contradicted the Constitution.

<sup>32</sup> ICG interview in Namangan, April 2003.

<sup>33</sup> ICG interview in Namangan, April 2003.

<sup>34</sup> ICG interview, Muhammed Sodik Muhammed Yusuf March 2003, Tashkent. Two books of his were eventually published in 2003.

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<sup>35</sup> In the MIA, religious affairs are the primary responsibility of the Department of Struggle with Terrorism and Religious Extremism. In the National Security Service the Department for Struggle with Religious Extremism and Fanaticism has primary responsibility. The procurator's office also is widely involved in religious issues, although it has no specialised department.

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch has done extensive monitoring, in cooperation with local groups. See Human Rights Watch, "Religious Persecution of Independent Muslims in Uzbekistan From September 2001 To July 2002", 21 August 2002. The Memorial human rights organisation, based in Moscow, has also done considerable work in Uzbekistan.

<sup>37</sup> To qualify for amnesty, prisoners had to admit their guilt and seek forgiveness from President Karimov. Those reluctant to do so, were often beaten or tortured until they agreed. ICG interviews with amnestied prisoners, Uzbekistan, May and June 2003.

<sup>38</sup> For more detail, see ICG Asia Report No. 46, *Uzbekistan's Reform Program: Illusion or Reality*, 18 February 2003.

<sup>39</sup> ICG interview with unofficial Islamic teacher, Tashkent, February 2003.



reporting on any suspicious activities. They receive a state salary – about 25,000 soms [U.S.\$25] a month<sup>40</sup>, and are often former police officers. The *mahalla* and other overseeing organs rely heavily on ordinary people providing information on their neighbours. This system is wide open to abuse, since informants can use any type of information to blacken those who they wish to.

In mid-2002 in Bukin district in Tashkent, an informer told the neighbourhood policeman that “suspicious, religious people” often gathered at night in a neighbour’s house. A subsequent raid revealed that the meetings were of Hizb ut-Tahrir members.<sup>41</sup> In other instances, it can be just the malicious intent of neighbours: one religious man told ICG how he was nearly arrested after his neighbours told the police he was a Wahhabi because he did not allow his children to watch television late at night.<sup>42</sup>

Often the police use the campaign against Islamists to boost their largely unchallenged power. In theory, government repression is only aimed at radical groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. In practice, it seems that ordinary people get caught in the net, partly because of the excessive power of the police, who can create cases with no evidence.

An old man in a village in Surkhandarya told of ‘Anvar’, who disappeared one day in June 2001:

He was called to the police one day late in the evening, and since that time nobody has seen him. He was a very religious person, knew the Koran and the *hadiths* very well, but did not have any relations to terrorists or religious organisations. His brother ‘Ravshan’ also spent a year in prison.<sup>43</sup>

Was this part of a rather brutal but necessary crack-down on religious extremists? Not according to people in the village, who think that ‘Ravshan’ was arrested not on religious grounds, but because he did not stop to give a lift in his car to the local police chief; his brother ‘Anvar’ also allegedly suffered from this personal vendetta.<sup>44</sup> In a

situation where the police are outside any real control, they can arrest people for almost any slight personal grievance. The campaign against Islamists merely provides the necessary grounds for arrest.

Although the majority of those arrested were indeed members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an unknown number were either believers who got caught up in the mass repression by mistake, were individuals against whom the police had other reasons to bear grudges, or had some connection to Hizb ut-Tahrir, perhaps having attended one or two meetings, but were hardly activists. From an informal sample of 27 religious prisoners released in the amnesty in December 2002, six denied they had any membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir or other radical groups, claiming they were simply believers who got caught up in the repression. One said he was arrested because the police confused him with someone else. Another said he did not understand the different groups, but prayed five times a day. Not unnaturally, these ex-prisoners have little good to say about the government.<sup>45</sup>

For many policemen the campaign against Islam has become a source of income. One practising Muslim in Surkhandarya says:

My neighbourhood policeman, every time he sees me, calls me a Wahhabi, and threatens to put me in prison. The aim of his scare tactics is the receipt of constant bribes. He knows that I have a small business and so he tries to get me to pay him an “unofficial tax”.<sup>46</sup>

In other areas, bribes are given to allow the release of “suspected Islamists”; some who have been released under amnesties have been forced to pay to avoid being rearrested.

In theory, almost anyone who has a religious lifestyle can be arrested as a member of a banned political group. There are frequent cases where illegal leaflets, drugs or weapons have been planted on suspects. There is no independent judicial system, widespread use of torture ensures that confessions are usually forthcoming, and they are always accepted by courts. Abuse continues

<sup>40</sup> A good salary in Uzbekistan, where the average wage is about 20,000 soms per month.

<sup>41</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, May 2003.

<sup>42</sup> ICG interview, Tashkent, February 2003.

<sup>43</sup> ICG interview, Surkhandarya, April 2003.

<sup>44</sup> ICG interviews with villagers, Surkhandarya, April 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Among those interviewed on behalf of ICG, Hizb ut-Tahrir members willingly admitted their affiliation.

<sup>46</sup> ICG interview with a practising Muslim, Termez, April 2003.

after sentencing, with a stream of reports from prisons that torture, particularly against religious prisoners, is widespread.

The impact of repression is not simple. In some cases it certainly frightens people away from joining religious groups, indeed from practising religion at all. Some Hizb ut-Tahrir members emerge from prison, broken by their experience, and unwilling to show any interest in the group's activities. But in many cases it merely radicalises Muslims, creating a war mentality among them and also widespread sympathy for repressed Muslims, whether Hizb ut-Tahrir members or not.

#### D. CONCLUSION

This repression and control of Islam takes place in a context of wider government policies that have provoked social discontent. Declining living standards, lack of political freedoms, high unemployment, young men moving to cities to seek work only to be met by a corrupt and brutalised police force – all these have an impact on believers, forcing them more and more to choose between the state authorities and radicalised forms of Islam.

The policies of the government have successfully broken up some of the radical Islamist groups of the early 1990s; they have also managed to undermine any support for the government from moderate Muslims and as a consequence put the future secular orientation of the state into question. Even among moderate imams, discontent is rising.

The short-sightedness of the government is creating fertile ground for radical Islamist movements to emerge in the future. Political Islam in Uzbekistan clearly gained little initial popular support and would have probably disappeared fairly rapidly as society stabilised or could have been channelled into a normal political process. Instead of encouraging authoritative religious leaders to emerge to challenge non-Hanafi schools and promoting the kind of political pluralism that would have permitted secular opposition, allowed criticism to emerge through the media, and provided economic opportunities for young people, the government has increasingly driven itself into a dead-end from which it is difficult to see how it can emerge unscathed. As one religious leader put it:

If the negative tendencies in our society do not stop, and corruption, unemployment continue to grow, and the police continue to terrorise people, then in the place of state organs, underground anti-state structures will begin to emerge. This will happen not today, but when young people, who have passed through underground education in the humiliating conditions of suppression of Islam, and children, whose fathers sit in prison, mature politically. Then an explosive situation will arise.<sup>47</sup>

Few members of the political elite are willing to recognise the damage that their policies are doing. Largely content with the status quo that provides them exclusive access to resources and plenty of opportunities for self-enrichment, there appears to be nobody in the leadership who has a vision of how to create a state, society and religious community that can live in harmony.

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<sup>47</sup> ICG interview with an imam, Tashkent region.

### III. TAJIKISTAN: THE ISLAMIST COMPROMISE

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state with a legal Islamist party, and in many ways it has followed a very different path from those of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Yet, many of the same issues that face Uzbekistan have appeared, with growing government interference in religion, and fears that repression and interference will provoke radicalisation of small parts of the population.

The history of political Islam in Tajikistan has been sharply different from the rest of Central Asia. As in Uzbekistan, small informal study groups in the 1970s grew into more politicised groupings by the end of the 1980s. With independence, confrontation over the nature of the new state came to the centre of the political arena.

Much of the conflict that ensued was about regionalism and fights over resources, but a significant part of the opposition used slogans of Islamism to mobilise support. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan never had a clear concept of what an Islamic state might be, or indeed whether it should be implemented immediately or through a gradual reform of state institutions. In exile in Afghanistan, some IRP members moved in the direction of more radical transnational Islamism, but many who encountered the grim realities of Taliban rule retreated from some of their more extreme positions.<sup>48</sup>

When the IRP returned from exile to take up posts in a coalition government in 1997, the political situation had changed markedly. Popular support for political Islam as a solution to problems of economic collapse and social dislocation had shrunk rapidly. Many people, rightly or wrongly, considered the IRP the fomenters of the civil war. When parliamentary elections were held in 1999, it won just 8 per cent of the vote and received only two seats nation-wide. Although the figures may have been manipulated, there is little doubt that support for political Islam declined sharply during the 1990s. Indeed, social surveys conducted by the Sharq analytical centre document this decline. Support for the concept of religious-based parties ranges from 18.4 per cent among those aged 30 to

39, to just 10.9 per cent among the new generation, those aged 15 to 17.<sup>49</sup>

However, some of the IRP support has declined because the party has adopted a conformist position with regard to the government and is seen as having sold out to President Rakhmonov. This has left some rank-and-file members increasingly dissatisfied and has probably had some impact on the growth of alternative tendencies, including Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Most Islamic belief in Tajikistan is based on conservative, traditional Islam, which has little time for political activism. Freedom to worship and to gain religious education is sufficient for most believers. Many of the more politicised Islamists left Tajikistan after the civil war; others changed their tactics to adapt to the new situation. Nevertheless, the difficult socio-economic situation does provide the basis for social tensions that could in the future be manipulated by opposition Islamic groups. The other major danger is that the government's sometimes heavy-handed approach to Islam and its attempts to control religion may backfire and create opposition even from religious leaders who have no interest in politics.

#### A. GOVERNMENT ATTITUDES

While the peace agreement has been praised by international observers as a unique compromise between secular and Islamist political groups, in practice it looks much more like a victory of the former. The mentality of most political leaders owes much more to the Soviet legacy of religious control than to the compromise peace; the brutal civil war against those labelled Islamists has also left its mark in further sharpening antagonism towards political manifestations of Islam.

The peace accords assigned a 30 per cent quota of positions in the executive branch at all levels to the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the umbrella group led by the IRP. In reality, however, the IRP received positions mostly at lower ranks and well

<sup>48</sup> ICG interviews, IRP representatives during exile, May 2003.

<sup>49</sup> "Islam v obschestve I gosudarstve – dialog ili konfrontatsia", *O Sovmestimosti politicheskogo islama I bezopasnosti v postranstve OBSE: Dokumenti svetsko-islamskogo dialoga v Tadzshikistane*, Dushanbe 2003, p. 37.

below the targeted quotas. Since then, President Rakhmonov steadily decreased its representation so that by 2003 only a handful of IRP members and opposition figures had government positions. The leadership has also sought to marginalise the Islamists in other ways, manipulating the “war on terrorism” to put further pressure on the IRP.

In July 2002, after three Tajik citizens were arrested by coalition forces in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo Bay, Rakhmonov travelled to the northern town of Isfara, and made a significant speech, marking a shift in government policy on relations with Islam. He criticised the IRP as “engaged in indoctrinating people in a spirit of extremism, which may lead to a split in society”. He claimed that “extremism” was being propagated in mosques where IRP members were working as clergy and asserted that there were far more mosques than needed – allegedly more than twice as many mosques as schools.<sup>50</sup>

Following this speech, there has been a significant clampdown on unregistered mosques, many of which have been closed, and a number of imams have been dismissed for “political activities”. Many of the actions and allegations seem to be spurious, more an attempt to root out political opposition than seriously to prevent the growth of religious extremism. Indeed, the closure of mosques and dismissal of imams by government authorities has further distanced the state from religious figures and increased discontent among pious Muslims.

The government has used Islam symbolically as a tool of legitimation, but only selectively, preferring to employ historical symbols as the basis of a national idea rather than pan-Islamic concepts. At the same time, it has done little to defend its policy of secularism and has been equally unwilling to allow secular opposition groups to act freely if they seem to pose a threat to the power of the presidential group. There is only a limited number of specialists in government structures that deal with religion, and policy is often based more on prejudice and short-term concerns than long-term strategy with regard to religion and society.

## B. SYSTEM OF CONTROL

### 1. Legal restrictions

The law on religion is relatively liberal although it does contain restrictions on political activism by religious leaders, institutes controls on education, and regulates the content of literature. Initially, religious parties were banned, but as part of the 1997 peace agreement, the government formally accepted the presence of an Islamic party and amended the constitution to allow political parties with a religious foundation.

The stricter government policy that began to emerge in 2002 is likely to be reflected in a new law that the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) was in the process of drafting in mid-2003.<sup>51</sup> There has been little consultation on it outside the CRA on the grounds that the issue would be too divisive,<sup>52</sup> but it seems clear that it will contain some important new restrictions, including tighter regulations for registration of religious organisations and increased legal strictures against any politicisation of religion.

Suggestions provided by one prosecutor demonstrate the kind of issues that are likely to be addressed in new legislation. Some are sensible, such as increasing punishments for marriage to underage girls. Others are more controversial, including obligatory agreement with local authorities on appointments in religious organisations, much higher fines for unregistered religious activity or religious education, and arrest and imprisonment for polygamy.

In March 2003, the Majlisi Oli proposed several constitutional amendments, among them one revoking the provision that explicitly permitted religious parties.<sup>53</sup> After domestic and international pressure, the president rejected this proposal but

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<sup>50</sup> *Vechernii Dushanbe*, 19 July 2002.

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<sup>51</sup> The draft did not pass the first reading in the Majlisi Oli because of a dispute over registration with the Ministry of Justice, which insisted that it oversee registration rather than the Committee. ICG interview, representative of the Committee on Religious Affairs, Dushanbe, May 2003.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> The proposal to reword the phrase so that it referred only in general to political parties rather than to democratic, religious or atheist parties was more likely an effort to distract attention from the real issues surrounding the president’s term and powers, rather than a serious attempt to eliminate the IRP.

the increasing centralisation of power around his office seems to point to more marginalisation of the IRP and other opposition parties in the future.<sup>54</sup>

Legal provisions are only part of the policy towards religion. Lack of knowledge of legal procedures among both officials and the general population and the lack of a truly independent court system mean that many policy decisions are based on decisions by local authorities with little regard to the law.

## 2. State control: the registration issue

Although the peace agreement brought the IRP into the government, it did little to change the actual structures of government control over religion. Most of these are reformed versions of the old Soviet state structures and represent similar attempts to control religious activity in the interests of the state. The constitution stresses the separation of state and religion but in practice there is constant and everyday interference in religious affairs by state bodies.

The chief organ is the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), headed by Said Ahmedov.<sup>55</sup> But it is largely an executive body, and it is in the president's office that real policy is formulated. The main policy figure in the religious sphere is thought to be the influential presidential adviser on social and public organisations, Ibrahim Usmonov.

The primary official role of the CRA is to register mosques and other religious organisations, a process that provides considerable scope for government pressure on religious leaders. Legally, it is not entirely clear if registration is compulsory but it has come to be interpreted by government officials as a legal requirement and will probably be more explicitly formalised in any new legislation.

By 2003 there were 251 major mosques in the country used for Friday prayers, and a further 3,000 everyday mosques registered with the CRA;<sup>56</sup> a further unknown number of mosques were unregistered. The registration process is fairly arbitrary, and much depends on the relationship of the leadership of the mosque to the local administration. The most controversial aspect of registration is the disputed legal requirement that a Friday mosque should serve a population of at least 15,000. If such a mosque already exists, the CRA refuses to register a second in the area. This rule applies regardless of how many people use the mosque or whether there are large numbers of non-Muslims in an area. It is widely viewed as discriminatory by Muslims, since there is no such rule for other faiths.

The arbitrary application of this rule led to unrest in the northern district of Chorku and Isfara in 2002. The July 2002 speech by Rakhmonov sharply criticised the large number of mosques in Isfara district and claimed that some local IRP members were stirring up extremism through the mosques. By October the authorities had reportedly closed 33 of the Sughd province's 156 mosques for lack of registration.<sup>57</sup> Most controversially, the authorities closed a Friday mosque in the town of Chorku, which had three major mosques serving a population of around 30,000. That closure led to demonstrations that observers feared could end in violence.<sup>58</sup>

Alongside the closures, imams were forced to undergo an attestation process, in theory checking their religious knowledge, but in reality establishing their political views. In theory, it is up to congregations to dismiss their imam, but in practice it is usually the result of direct government intervention. As a result of the government checks, in early August 2002 ten imams were dismissed for being members of political organisations, mostly

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<sup>54</sup> See ICG Asia Report No. 51, *Tajikistan, a Roadmap for Development*, 24 April 2003.

<sup>55</sup> According to its chairman, its main tasks are: improving legislation in the area of religion; ensuring that government structures, public organisations, and religious organisations observe the laws on religion; and ensuring that religious organisations observe their own statutes and regulations; it also conducts training for state and security officials to ensure that "they relate to believers with the necessary respect". ICG interview, Said Akhmedov, Chief of Department of Religion under the Government of Tajikistan, 22 May 2003.

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<sup>56</sup> ICG interview, Said Ahmedov, Chairman of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers, Dushanbe, 3 April 2003.

<sup>57</sup> "Tajikistan: Further Mass Closures of Mosques", Keston News Service, 21 October 2002.

<sup>58</sup> Some of the controversy around mosques relates to the land they own. In Chorku officials claimed that mosques had been built illegally on state land, or even on land belonging to schools. Other observers claimed that the attempt to close one of the mosques was really an effort by a local business to seize the land on which the mosque was located.

the IRP. In Sughd region, mosques that register with the state sign an agreement, saying: "I will use our organisation only for religious ends, I will not be a member of a party, and will not assist them".<sup>59</sup> There have also been mosque closures in other parts of the country: in Vose district in Khatlon province, 48 of 89 prayer mosques were reportedly closed.<sup>60</sup>

The registration process is fairly complex and bureaucratic and gives the CRA and local authorities too much power to close mosques on political grounds. There are no real grounds for appeal: followers of a mosque can complain to the CRA, but it has no power to override local government.

If registration is thought necessary, it should be carried out on a non-political basis, with much less leeway for local officials to interfere. The largely meaningless restrictions on mosques according to the size of population seem to do little except cause resentment among believers. The incident in Chorku demonstrates the serious potential for tensions as a result of heavy-handed intervention by state authorities.

### 3. Religious structures

Unlike other Central Asian states, Tajikistan has no Muftiate; instead those responsibilities are placed on the Islamic Centre of Tajikistan, which though formally not part of the state is nevertheless controlled by the government. The Islamic Centre is led by the Council of Ulama (clergy) – which consists of 27 leading official Muslim leaders, who are elected every three years. In theory it controls and regulates all Islamic organisations in Tajikistan. In practice, it is completely subordinate to the government; its head, Amonullo Negmatzoda, is viewed as malleable by the authorities and enjoys little authority as an independent figure among ordinary Muslims.<sup>61</sup>

In theory, the Islamic Centre is responsible for the attestation of imams. In practice, this process is much more dependent on the position of local authorities. The appointment of imams is supposedly based on "discussions between local

authorities and the followers of a mosque".<sup>62</sup> In practice, the local authority has an effective veto. One deputy Imam in Dushanbe explained:

The decision on appointing somebody as imam will be considered positively only with approval of the local administration: a politically reliable candidate will pass the test of the Islamic Centre and get support from local *hukumats* [local authorities] without which even local elders will hesitate to recommend such a candidate. People choose which mosque to go to as in some mosques imams suffer weak proficiency, although they may be [politically] trusted clergy.<sup>63</sup>

The weakness of the Council of Ulama in asserting any independence from the state has provoked many Muslim leaders to seek the creation of a Muftiate, with a more authoritative figure able to assert the rights of the Muslim community. This is strongly opposed by the government, presumably from fear that such an institution would create an alternative centre of authority. But this may be a short-sighted policy. One member of the Council of Ulama warned that

...despite the benefits [the government] gained from establishing a weak religious organ instead of the traditional institution of the Muftiate, the government has given space for the emergence of other religious leaders with various theological interpretations, political ambitions, networks of patronage and financial power. They have groups of followers and these leaders are not always visible. Such a development will lead to the destruction of the national unity of Tajiks [around the] Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.<sup>64</sup>

Many official clergy, however, seem happy with the present structures. They are content to be able to carry out religious rituals freely, in exchange for giving outward loyalty to the state. They do have more freedom than imams in Uzbekistan, for example, and are not instructed what to say at Friday sermons. Most are distrustful of the IRP,

<sup>59</sup> ICG interview with an official, Isfara, January 2003.

<sup>60</sup> ICG interviews, Kulob, May 2003.

<sup>61</sup> ICG interviews, Dushanbe, April 2003.

<sup>62</sup> ICG interview, Said Akhmedov, Chief of Department of Religion under the Government of Tajikistan, 22 May 2003.

<sup>63</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, 22 May 2003.

<sup>64</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, May 2003.

seeing it as dangerously political. But this pliant position may not be true of new generations of religious leaders, particularly among those who have studied abroad and have a very different perspective on the relationship between Islam and the state. And it certainly does little to gain the trust of more radically-minded Muslims, particularly those in opposition to the government.

#### 4. Repression and the security forces

As in other Central Asian states, the security forces play a major role in religious affairs. But the environment is much more liberal than in Uzbekistan. According to one government official:

There are no problems with wearing a beard, [religious] clothing, or the *hijab* [head-covering for women] in public places, or visiting the mosque. We do not have lists in the MB [Ministry of Security] or MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] of religious people, and everybody is free to attend religious institutions. We understand that “forbidden fruit is sweet” and so do not outlaw what people have in a democratic country.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, the security services feel free to interfere in the lives of religious people where they perceive, rightly or wrongly, a potential security threat. Some religious figures claim that they are called in for questioning by the security forces, which give them verbal warnings about their behaviour;<sup>66</sup> others are afraid to speak to outsiders without official permission.<sup>67</sup> The Ministry of Security (MS) is widely believed to infiltrate religious structures.

There is a growing number of cases brought against former fighters of the Islamist opposition. The Ministry of Internal Affairs Department No. 8 investigates old cases of war-time crimes, despite the amnesty declared in the peace agreement of 1997.<sup>68</sup> The perception that the amnesty has been applied unevenly has led to a high level of

frustration among former combatants and opposition members. As one former fighter stated,

Police officers demand bribes of up to U.S.\$1,000 to stop investigation of crimes committed during the civil war. Despite the fact that the Islamic fighters were amnestied, police say that some of their crimes do not fall into the amnesty. Most former fighters are almost uneducated and cannot protect themselves. They are afraid of prosecutions.<sup>69</sup>

This may just be an increasing instance of random extortion by members of the MIA. But some suspect that the intention might be to cause fear among Islamists and make them politically inactive. Given that much of the public believes the Islamist groups were largely responsible for the war, there is little public outcry about such cases.

#### 5. Control of education

There are 21 madrasas and one Islamic institute in Tajikistan, all under the control of the Islamic Centre in Dushanbe. The Islamic institute is the main educational establishment in the country and is under fairly strict, though informal, control by the authorities. It has over 1,000 students but not all are drawn by a desire to become religious authorities: many admit they are attracted in part by the cheap entrance fees. Apart from religious education, they also study some secular subjects. Indeed many gain a second education in a field more likely to lead to employment after graduation.<sup>70</sup>

There is, however, a lack of suitably qualified teachers. A few older scholars received formal religious education at the Soviet madrasa in Bukhara but most were trained informally by elders or underground scholars. Few have much secular education, leaving them incapable of explaining the tenets of Islam in the kind of way that modern groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir can manage. As one Islamic teacher noted:

We are unable to teach about the greater *jihad* [inner struggle] or *ijtihad* [independent interpretation of the *sharia*]<sup>71</sup> at the madrasa

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<sup>65</sup> ICG interview, Said Akhmedov, Chief of Department of Religion under the Government of Tajikistan, 22 May 2003.

<sup>66</sup> ICG interview, Kulob district, May, June 2003.

<sup>67</sup> ICG interviews, Dushabe April 2003; Khujand, May 2003; Kulob district, May 2003.

<sup>68</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, May 2003.

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<sup>69</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, May 2003.

<sup>70</sup> ICG interview, Islamic institute, April 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Both are important issues in disputes with more radical tendencies in Islam. Most Hanafi scholars assert that *jihad*

because we don't have the pedagogical tools. Instead, we can only teach memorisation of the Koran and *hadiths*, rather than Islamic discourse.<sup>72</sup>

IRP Deputy Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri, who is among those concerned by the low quality of religious education in Tajikistan, said that lack of religious education reform may have serious negative consequences for society.<sup>73</sup>

One way out of this impasse has been to study abroad. Since 1992 some 1,500 Tajiks are believed to have travelled abroad for education at Islamic institutions, mostly to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. Some who studied in Pakistan are the children of Tajiks who lived in exile in Afghanistan during the civil war. Given the record of the madrasa system in Pakistan, and the concerns over the influence of Wahhabi ideas from Saudi Arabia, the government has increasingly attempted to control these graduates.<sup>74</sup>

However, many are far from infected by radical views. "I studied in a Deobandi school", admits one who had been a student in Pakistan for ten years, "but my views are Hanafi. Wahhabism is wrong for our way of thinking. What was important for me was the education, not the ideology".<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, others may have developed more of a political education; certainly the government thinks so. President Rakhmonov has emphasised the point:

If each graduate of these theological schools preaches Wahhabism, it will lead to a religious split and differences and may prepare the ground for destabilisation of the situation in the republic.<sup>76</sup>

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is about struggling with inner desires, rather than a military campaign against unbelievers, as asserted by many Wahhabi thinkers. Wahhabi schools of thought claim that *ijtihad* continues today, allowing any believer to interpret the holy scriptures independently. Hanafi thought claims that *ijtihad* has been completed.

<sup>72</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe 6 June 2003.

<sup>73</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, 23 May 2003.

<sup>74</sup> On the problems of the madrasa system in Pakistan, see ICG Asia Report No. 36, *Pakistan, Madrasas and the Military*, 29 July 2002.

<sup>75</sup> ICG interview, returnee from Pakistan, Dushanbe May 2003.

<sup>76</sup> Speech by President Rakhmonov, Isfara, 10 July 2002, *Asia-Plus*, 12 July 2002.

Government policy towards these students has been simple: almost none have been given positions in mosques. "The best protection for the government from the 'dangerous influence' of foreign trained imams is blocking them from access to positions of imams", ICG was told.<sup>77</sup> The problem with this tactic is that many of these students are better educated than local imams and teach at home in order to earn money. They are forced to work outside the system, and with little attempt to integrate them into existing structures, there is a danger that they will become an isolated group prone to radicalisation. Many madrasa students prefer these unofficial teaching groups to the rather limited education available from official sources.

The authorities have clamped down on official study abroad, and the Pakistani authorities themselves are sending many foreign students home. Private education is in theory illegal, but the old tradition of such education is very deep-rooted. Until the state-controlled education system is improved, and a more authoritative central religious organ is established, the attraction of unofficial education, from whatever source, will remain.

## 6. Social and symbolic issues

Social and symbolic issues relating to Islam are a cause of some tension in all Central Asian states, but these issues probably provoke particular discussion in Tajikistan.

According to government officials, there is no restriction on wearing religious clothing or beards or any other external attribute of Islam, and there is little official pressure, informal or otherwise on such issues. On an individual basis, cases of forcing women to unveil do occur, but as a relative of a victim said: "it is personal disrespect towards strict followers of *sharia* laws rather than an order from the centre to secularise them".<sup>78</sup>

Although there are no official restrictions on religious dress, the secular discourse of the government is very clear. The increasing popularity of Islamic dress among women was one reason given for the crackdown in Isfara in 2002.

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<sup>77</sup> ICG interviews, mosque, Dushanbe, May 2003.

<sup>78</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, May 2003.



At a nation-wide NGO conference in 2002, the president also reportedly appealed for women to wear Western-style clothing.<sup>79</sup> Religious dress is strongly discouraged in official structures, and officials are unlikely to be seen observing outward attributes of Islam, such as daily prayer rituals.<sup>80</sup>

Some restrictions seem to have little justification. The informal ban on the use of loudspeakers in mosques in Dushanbe was issued by the city mayor in 2002. It causes some resentment to believers, and there seems little reason for such a ban. The Imam-hotib (chief imam) of one of the mosques in Dushanbe expressed his concern that it is a signal of increasing government pressure on the clergy:

The informal ban on the use of loudspeakers in mosques in Tajikistan was issued by our secular government, which tries gradually to limit our influence and visibility in society. It has started resembling the behaviour of our bigger neighbour [Uzbekistan]. But not all imams follow the order from above. Some imams have the courage to disregard this oral demand. We believe this is a gradual seizure of our religious, historical and traditional rights and reasserting of power by the authorities.<sup>81</sup>

A significant part of the conflict over Islam comes from differences in attitudes to social questions, such as the position of women. Officially and according to the secular law, men and women are equal. In practice, culture dictates a subordinate position for women, and some men use their interpretation of Islam to reinforce this. One official, explaining the relative strength of political Islam among some men in Isfara, said:

Husbands have gone to Russia to earn money, and the wives and children are at home. And to stop them going on the wrong path, they want to control women. Make them sit at home.... From one point of view, that's good, but on the other hand....

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<sup>79</sup> ICG interview, conference participant, Dushanbe, September 2002.

<sup>80</sup> Religious rituals are actively discouraged in some official structures. One IRP official complained in an interview with ICG that the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe was more accommodating to believers who wished to pray than any government structures.

<sup>81</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, May 2003.

The question of women and Islam is a serious test of the government's commitment to secularism. On the one hand, there are occasional government programs – to promote girls' education for example – but in general, little attention is paid to complaints of domestic abuse, and cultural attitudes towards women are widely accepted and seldom challenged by government officials. For some Muslim men, international programs on women's rights, or those that establish women's credit unions, are perceived as a serious threat to their culture and religion.

There is only limited discussion of the real role of women in Islam, and little attempt to distinguish between cultural traditions and what are perceived as religious rules:

Many people are using Islam to define new roles for women, even though it's not recognised in the Koran. These roles are based on our culture and tradition and not necessarily connected to Islam. But, because of the lack of knowledge of many about our religion, they use it against women.<sup>82</sup>

Marriage, divorce and inheritance are just some of the issues that should be addressed to reconcile *sharia* and secularism in the lives of women.

*Nikoh*, or the Islamic marriage, is becoming increasingly common throughout Central Asia, particularly in rural areas.<sup>83</sup> While *nikoh* is growing in popularity and convention, proper conduct of *taloq* – divorce or separation – has found less of a following. In theory, Islamic divorces include protections for the former wife regarding property, alimony and the return of the *kalym* (dowry), as

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<sup>82</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2003.

<sup>83</sup> In fact, in connection with the rise in practice of *nikoh*, polygamy is also becoming more common, although all five Central Asian states forbid the practice. Many women see polygamy as a solution to their financial troubles, especially in Tajikistan, which had many widows after the civil war and a high level of migration. However, many people contend that it is mostly wealthy bureaucrats and businessmen who can afford multiple wives. Many women are not so supportive of the practice when it comes to themselves. As one commented to ICG, "Of course polygamy is a part of our Islamic tradition and it serves a very useful purpose to support poor, marginalised women". But when asked how she would respond if her husband were to take a second wife, she replied, "of course, I would kick him out of the house!".

well as stipulations for the welfare of the couple's children. Such prescriptions are frequently unknown and generally not observed. Many people suggest that the practice of *nikoh* (and, by extension, *taloq*) should be formalised so that it also falls under the jurisdiction of state legislation. Some couples marry only by *sharia*, ignoring secular marriage altogether, which creates difficult legal problems for women upon divorce.

This divergence between *sharia* prescriptions about family life and the secular law has the potential to become a controversial aspect of everyday life. There may be a need to recognise some aspects of Islamic and cultural practice in law, but the government needs to ensure that the rights of women are protected in reality and not just in theory.

## 7. Restrictions on social/charitable activity

Given the major socio-economic problems facing Tajikistan, it is not surprising that mosques also attempt to assist in social affairs. President Rakhmonov seems to have encouraged this role for mosques arguing that they should help build schools and hospitals, and give money for humanitarian relief.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, it does often seem that the religious community could do much more: many religious leaders, particularly those with political leanings, have profitable business interests but their charitable work is less noticeable. At the same time, the government is concerned by any expansion of influence of Islamic organisations beyond the purely religious field, and particularly into areas where they may be seen to supplant the state. An IRP member told ICG how his mosque had attempted to gather money to mend the road outside the mosque but the local governor intervened and refused to allow this, claiming it was interference with the local administration.<sup>85</sup> The social role of the mosque seems to be restricted to giving money to the local administration, whether voluntarily or not, to allow it to assist schools and hospitals itself.

The government is also concerned about the activities of foreign Islamic charities and has limited their freedom of action. Religious activists complain that while Christian charities are able to act fairly freely in Tajikistan in humanitarian affairs, Islamic charities are largely blocked from setting up.

## C. THE ISLAMIC RENAISSANCE PARTY

The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) occupies a strange position in this largely secular state. The only legal Islamic party in Central Asia, it has a very moderate stance on Islamisation of the state, having watered down its commitments to a point where they are virtually indistinguishable from those of other centrist political parties. Yet its very existence provides a level of political and religious pluralism that has contributed to stability in the country.

The IRP has a chequered history, first emerging from informal religious discussion groups in the late 1970s, and openly coming onto the political scene during the liberalisation of the late 1980s. It formed the backbone of the opposition to the Communist regime in the early 1990s, and led the armed opposition that fought against it in the civil war. It was always a conglomeration of interests – regional, political and religious – rather than a political party with a strictly defined agenda, and it has remained a coalition of different ideas and personalities. This has enabled it to adapt to changed circumstances and survive but ensures that it lacks a clear identity and purpose.

The 1997 peace accords brought the IRP back into open politics but forced it to compromise with the government on a wide range of issues. It no longer campaigns for an Islamic state. It is strongly opposed to violence and terrorism, and makes every effort to distinguish itself from radical Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or the IMU.

Nevertheless, the IRP represents a very mixed constituency, ranging from Islamists of various tendencies to those who are simply opposed to the government. It has two seats in parliament,<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Speech, President E. Rakhmonov to Majlisi Oli, 25 April 2002.

<sup>85</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, April 2003.

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<sup>86</sup> Muhammadsharif Himadzoda, first deputy chairman of the IRP, and Nasreddin Saidov from Sughd Province are deputies of the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Lower Chamber) of the Parliament.

several government posts, and an extensive grass-roots network throughout much of the country that is probably unmatched by any other party. Yet, its support base remains small, mainly located in rural areas, particularly in the Karategin Valley, and among Gharmis in the Kurgan-Tyube area. More recently, the party has made inroads in the south of Khatlon province and has been growing in popularity in parts of northern Tajikistan, notably around Isfara and Chorku.

Most Tajiks whether religious or not have little interest in political Islam. Many see the IRP as a vehicle for its leadership rather than a party fighting for the rights of Muslims in general. Co-option by the government has lost it considerable credibility, and there are divisions within the party on how far this process can go. While the leadership seems content with the position of a loyal opposition, more traditional party members want a more critical approach and a greater challenge to some aspects of the secular state.

The IRP faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it needs to retain its support base among traditional religious leaders; on the other hand, it also needs to retain good relations with the government to enable it to function, and this means compromising on public statements and campaigns against the authorities. Consequently, the party's program focuses mainly on survival in an increasingly difficult political environment. Government attitudes are still highly suspicious. Although publicly they may accept the party's constitutional role, in private many officials are much less accepting. In the security forces, in particular, there is widespread distrust, putting the IRP on a par with Hizb ut-Tahrir and other radical groups. A senior police officer told ICG: "The IRP and Hizb ut-Tahrir? I don't see the difference. From the very beginning they wanted to come to power through war".<sup>87</sup>

The Rakhmonov speech in July 2002 set the stage for a more confrontational approach with the IRP. So far the administration has held back from seriously considering banning the party, although the IRP faces frequent obstacles from local authorities in registering its branches and holding

rallies. International support for the IRP has been an important factor in limiting further closure of the political environment, and it will be needed in the future also.

#### D. CONCLUSION

Tajikistan's civil war gave many the impression that there was a serious risk of a major part of the population supporting an Islamic state. In reality, popular support for political Islam, and for the IRP in particular, is low. Partly this is a legacy of the war, and as memories of the conflict fade with time, it is possible that Islamist ideas may once more come back prominently to the agenda.

The gradual co-option of opposition forces by the government has produced a vacuum in which Hizb ut-Tahrir has attempted to expand its influence. It has grown particularly in the north of the country, among ethnic Uzbeks, but has also found support among some Tajiks in other areas. Its rapid growth as an alternative opposition is admired by some more radical IRP members but there has been little movement from the IRP to its ranks. Continued compromise with the government, however, or in an extreme case, a ban on the IRP, could lead to an outflow of members to more radical Islamist groups.

There is little doubt that President Rakhmonov has used the war on terrorism for his own interests, putting increasing pressure on the IRP and exploiting the fear of Islamic extremism to gain more power for himself. In much of this the international community has been at least complicit. It has given strong support for the continued role of the IRP in the political system, but offered little open criticism of Rakhmonov's increasingly authoritarian style.

The danger remains that an increasingly centralised political system, by co-opting most opposition forces, will create the basis for more radical forces to find support. Given the huge economic problems faced by Tajikistan, the widespread drugs trade, and its proximity to Afghanistan, the possibility of radical Islamic groups emerging once more to challenge the state has to be taken seriously. While there is little public support for such groups, the more the government tries to control religious structures and the more it associates secularism with the present political leadership, the greater the

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<sup>87</sup> ICG interview, Dushanbe, February 2003. This attitude is echoed by others, including some senior government officials.

danger that support will develop over time for a different type of constitutional system altogether.

#### **IV. KYRGYZSTAN: A NATION DIVIDED?**

Kyrgyzstan faces a very different challenge from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Especially in the north of the country, religious observance is quite limited, and many citizens are Muslims in name only. The south of the country is a different matter: here a large Uzbek minority has been the main support of radical political groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. The south in general is characterised by much greater religious observance. Ethnic minorities such as Dungans and Uighurs also have an active role in religious life.<sup>88</sup>

The government's attitude to religion is somewhat ambiguous. In laws and public statements it conforms to freedom of belief, but particularly when the security services are involved, it invokes the spectre of Islamic extremism as a major security threat. As a result, the state seeks to control religious organisations through direct interference with the Muftiate and mosques.

Religion is officially separate from the state, and religious parties have been outlawed since the early 1990s. However, religious movements, organisations, and structures have been allowed to operate largely unhindered. The early years of independence saw a rapid rise in interest in Islam, and it became briefly part of state symbolism. The first time he took office, President Akayev swore his oath on the Koran. The second time, five years later, he used the Constitution.

One official recalled: "At first there was a kind of euphoria, and a manipulation of Islam. In all the villages they built mosques. The club in our village was turned into a mosque. But now nobody goes there...."<sup>89</sup> In the Soviet period there were just 33 mosques in Kyrgyzstan; now there are at least 2,000.

Although the initial wave of interest has largely passed, there are large pockets of the country where Islam remains a major part of everyday life. Most Islamic activity is concentrated in the south, particularly in rural areas, but even there it is

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<sup>88</sup> There are about 42,000 Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan, and an estimated 45,000 Dungans.

<sup>89</sup> ICG interview, government official, Bishkek, February 2003.

predominantly the preserve of the elderly, with only a small proportion of young people visiting mosques or performing other external rituals.

In general, the traditional Hanafi school of Islam is practised throughout the country. Small groups follow other trends, such as Wahhabis, but they are relatively rare.<sup>90</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir has gained more supporters, particularly among ethnic Uzbeks in the south.<sup>91</sup> Other groups have appeared, influenced by students who have studied abroad. One of the most noticeable is the Tabligh group, mostly young men who studied at madrasas in Pakistan. Tabligh carry out what they call *Dawaa*, the call to Islam. They travel around the country in traditional Pakistani dress, knocking on doors or approaching people on the street and telling them to go to the mosque. They are particularly concerned about social and moral problems and claim to have a positive impact on issues such as prostitution and drug-taking.<sup>92</sup>

Since 1996 they have been registered in Kyrgyzstan, and they receive special permission from the Muftiate for their activities.<sup>93</sup> But they worry many officials, who find their dress and habits disconcerting. Some are concerned that they are not controlled strongly enough: "If the Muftiate controlled even 10 per cent of them, that would be good. The Muftiate gives just one of them a certificate, the rest of them join him".<sup>94</sup> Others find their ideas, particularly their attitudes towards women, of great concern. One interviewee claimed: "They say that if your wife doesn't pray, she should be beaten, and you should divorce her.

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<sup>90</sup> So-called Wahhabi groups in southern Kyrgyzstan are not particularly political. A group of women that studies the Koran regularly and is labelled Wahhabi by locals, has little time for the idea of an Islamic state. As one said: "We say, don't get involved in politics....If you get rid of [President] Akayev and put a Caliph or Mufti in his place, nothing will change". ICG interview, southern Kyrgyzstan, January 2003.

<sup>91</sup> See ICG Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit.

<sup>92</sup> Some religious officials are sceptical: "They do not go to drunkards, that's just fairy tales, they're lying. One policeman even specially took them to see some drinkers. But they ran away after five minutes....We have homeless children, do you think *Tabligh* goes and help them? No, Christians do though..." ICG interview, religious official, Bishkek, March 2003.

<sup>93</sup> ICG interview, Ravshan Eratov, Head of Division of Dawaa of Muftiate, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>94</sup> ICG interview, April 2003, Bishkek.

One woman came to me and said that after [Tabligh] came, her husband beat her up".<sup>95</sup> It is not clear how widespread this kind of attitude is, and in general negative attitudes to Tabligh are probably based on their 'otherworldiness' rather than the content of their teaching. The fact that they do not get involved in politics means that officials are not worried enough to restrict their activities.

More popular among young people – especially ethnic Kyrgyz – are new Christian sects, primarily imported by Western missionaries. In comparison with the usually elderly imam of a mosque, quoting in Arabic from the Koran, these young foreigners arrange summer camps, computer and English classes, and even discotheques to attract converts. This has the potential to cause friction in society, and some government officials are much more concerned about such groups in private than radical Islam. But so far there have been no formal restrictions on their activities, although officials try to ensure that they do not have too high a profile.

Nevertheless, even young people from secular backgrounds, including girls, take an interest in Islam, both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Among students at Islamic universities and institutes there are many young Kyrgyz, and they have also been among those who have studied abroad. These young people are generally a minority in their peer groups, but there is in some parts of society a reaction against rapid Westernisation and secularisation of society, and this has an impact on youth, too.

Thus, ten years after independence, society in Kyrgyzstan is very fragmented on religious lines, with radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, conservative Islamic leaders, and new Christian groups all competing for followers, while much of the population continues to follow a largely secular lifestyle. Beliefs are much in flux, and understandably government policies towards religion have frequently been mixed and often confusing.

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<sup>95</sup> ICG interview, April 2003, Bishkek.

## A. GOVERNMENT POLICY

Government policies in Kyrgyzstan are firstly a reflection of the overwhelming secular nature of most of the Bishkek-based elite. Ombudsmen Tursunbai Bakir-ulu may be exaggerating when he says, "I am the only politician in Kyrgyzstan who prays",<sup>96</sup> but not by much. Most political figures lead an entirely secular lifestyle and have little insight into religious affairs. This ensures that most questions of government control in the religious sphere are approached either through general liberal political beliefs (freedom of belief) or, increasingly, from the point of view of state security.

Until 1995 there was hardly any significant political consideration of religion by the state. This laissez-faire attitude gradually declined, particularly with the appearance of foreign Islamic missionary activity and of more radical forms of Islam in the south of the country in the second half of the 1990s. As repression mounted in Uzbekistan, many members of radical groups sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan and began to have an influence on the local population. By 1997 government officials were concerned. An official decree observed: "The low level of spiritual education of the local Muslim clergy, and the financial dependence of some mosques on foreign 'sponsors and philanthropists' create a fertile ground for the planting of ideas of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism".<sup>97</sup>

A debate began in government circles over how to control religious activities, both from the point of view of security and social stability and as a way of asserting government influence over society. That much of the new religious activism was seen among ethnic minorities, particularly ethnic Uzbeks, but also to a lesser extent ethnic Uighurs, added a dimension of concern for social stability.

A series of measures to assert more control over religious activity ensued, using both state structures and the security services, but there is still no coherent government policy. This somewhat confusing situation allows a good deal

of freedom in practice, and attempts by the government to control religious activity tend to fail through lack of resources, specialists or political will. But the discussions continue, not least over legislation.

### 1. Legal restrictions

There has been discussion of a new law on religion since 1995 but passage has been blocked by differences over fundamental positions on both state control of religion and the institutional role of various bodies, including the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA). The present law dates from 1991 and is viewed by many as too liberal, not providing sufficient powers to the state to control religious activity. It has in effect been superseded by a series of government decrees, making it largely useless for defining the rights and obligations of religious communities.

A draft drawn up by parliamentary deputy Alisher Sabirov is viewed by other officials as also too liberal. It gives no role to the SCRA and thus would limit government intervention. One official said:

Sabirov's project may defend human rights, ... [and] the OSCE may claim that we are violating human rights, but there are issues of national security here.<sup>98</sup>

In many ways, the government is happy to maintain the present situation, where a fairly liberal law sits alongside presidential decrees that allow for much stricter intervention by government bodies. But without a clear-cut legal framework, it will remain difficult to develop a healthy relationship between the state and religion, and too much leeway is given to government officials to act informally outside the law.

If a new law is adopted, it will likely tighten some aspects of registration and have a stricter approach to foreign religious sects and missionary activity. Religious parties will remain outlawed: there is not significant public support for them, although a few imams complain that it is discriminatory to outlaw Islamic parties.

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<sup>96</sup> ICG interview, Bishkek, 14 January 2003.

<sup>97</sup> Postanovlenie pravitelstva Kyrgyzskoi respubliky ot 17 yanvarya 1997 [Decree of Government of Kyrgyz Republic of 17 January 1997].

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<sup>98</sup> ICG interview, government official, Bishkek, April 2003.

## 2. State structures

In theory, the state does not interfere in religious affairs but in practice there is considerable control by a range of state organs, in particular over Islam. A government official admitted: "In Kyrgyzstan we say that the state does not interfere in the affairs of religion, but if there is an instruction from above, imams will carry it out completely".<sup>99</sup>

Several departments have some role but the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) is the principal government body. Chaired by Omurzak Mamayusupov, a close ally of President Akayev, its official function is to promote religious freedom and tolerance and oversee government policy.

SCRA's main role is in registration of religious organisations. This process is muddled and often unclear. Religious organisations can sometimes register as charities or NGOs, for example. The Church of Unification is registered as a public organisation in the Ministry of Justice but not as a religious organisation in SCRA. There are few outright refusals to register religious organisations, although Falun Gong is such a case due to Chinese political pressure. If a religious organisation refuses to register, it is also not clear what sanctions SCRA has to bring against it.

Registration was first introduced in November 1996, with the instruction to apply it to all mosques, churches, missionary organisations, and prayer houses. The decree had little impact, however. By 1997 officials claimed there were 600 mosques in Osh province, of which only 60 were registered.<sup>100</sup> Efforts to register mosques and restrict foreign missionary activity were redoubled, but in early 2001 security officials still claimed that "unregistered representatives of different religious tendencies freely operate in the republic" and that a "majority of such 'emissaries' represent a danger for the socio-political stability in the republic..."<sup>101</sup> In May 2003 officials said 85 per

cent of mosques were registered.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, of 51 in Osh city, only twenty are registered.

The other main thrust of state policy in the late 1990s was to clamp down on missionary activity by Islamic organisations. From 1996 to May 2000 677 foreigners came to Kyrgyzstan to do religious work, most (480) from Christian missions, and 176 from Islamic organisations. From 1999 foreign Islamic missionaries were effectively banned: the number from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan dropped to almost zero.<sup>103</sup> Privately, though, many are still able to come as teachers or business people, and there are still Arab teachers in universities who also teach Islam to students privately.

Arab charitable funds have always been active, although it seems they have come under more pressure in recent years. Nevertheless Muftiate officials say there are four or five foundations working regularly, giving money for mosque construction and education. Some officials are concerned by the character of these foundations, but few people have much knowledge of what they do. They tend to be secretive and gain influential support because of the money involved.

In much of Kyrgyzstan, and particularly in the south, informal methods of control are often more relevant than legal restrictions. Local authorities in some areas act largely as they see fit, with little regard for any central laws or regulations. In early May 2003, Asin Erenbayev, the head of Karadarya district, 30 kilometres west of Jalal-Abad, reportedly closed down six of the district's nine mosques and replaced the imam of the central mosque with his own candidate. There seemed to be no legal basis for his decision but he was quoted as saying that he wished to "control the mood of believers on 'his' territory". Among his complaints against the closed mosques was that imams had

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<sup>99</sup> ICG interview, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>100</sup> Similar figures were noted in Jalal-Abad, with only 68 mosques registered out of 157; there were no registered mosques in Naryn province, and many evangelical churches were also not registered. Many of the figures are contradictory, because at this time it seems local governments kept no exact figures on the numbers of religious organisations.

<sup>101</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs report on religious situation, 2001.

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<sup>102</sup> ICG interview, Omurzak Mamayusupov, Chairman of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, Bishkek, April 2003. In total there are about 3,000 mosques in Kyrgyzstan, although nobody has exact figures. In Osh province there are officially 528 mosques but officials believe there may be as many as 700. ICG interview, official, Bishkek, February 2003.

<sup>103</sup> ICG interviews, Bishkek, April 2003.

been arranging marriage ceremonies before the official state registration had taken place.<sup>104</sup>

This type of interference is fairly widespread, with local officials and informal leaders appointing their own people as imams in mosques and opposing appointments that do not suit them. This is not really part of any state policy, but rather a reflection of political norms and client-patron relations that are common, especially in the south.

### 3. Repression/security forces

Repression has been mainly aimed at radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, rather than others outside the official structures. Both the National Security Service (NSS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) Ninth Division are responsible for domestic security and play central roles in investigating religious groups suspected of extremism. They monitor mosques and missionary activity but often lack wide expertise in religious affairs.

The MIA keeps lists of suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. There have been dozens of arrests of its activists but sentences are relatively light by Central Asian standards. Nevertheless, police brutality is fairly common, and attempts to plant drugs or arms on suspected activists, and occasionally on Muslims outside any groups, are also widely reported. This does little to endear the police to ordinary Muslims although it reflects wider problems with the police experienced by the whole society.<sup>105</sup>

The security forces also investigate Uighur groups, which are often blamed for criminal activity and sometimes linked to Islamic extremism. A separatist movement has some influence among Uighurs, and there is evidence of links between Uighur communities, criminal groups, and Islamist groups. But the reaction of the government to such groups is much more based on the need to maintain good relations with China than any real assessment of a threat.

## B. THE RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY

Although the Muftiate is in theory independent, it is subject to considerable informal interference. Former Mufti Kimsambai conducted a fairly independent policy, refusing to work closely with the SCRA, which was apparently one reason for his removal (with active government intervention) in August 2002. He was replaced by a younger man, Murataly Djumanov, seen as more malleable.

The Muftiate suffers from a lack of professionals who can cope with the modern world. It has few young people, and is dominated by older imams with little ability to assert an independent line. They largely reflect the wider clergy, who are mostly elderly and lack formal education. There are no women employees, except one who works the computer.

The lack of secular education among employees of the Muftiate makes it difficult for them to work closely with the outside world. They have few contacts with international organisations or foreign counterparts. They publish only limited literature, and their newspaper is widely derided.

Disputes with state authorities are relatively rare. The average imam is not dissatisfied with the present system: his main concern is the freedom to worship and to have his mosque well attended. As one Jalalabad imam told ICG:

In Islam there is no opposition to the state and the authorities. We need to educate the people to be honest; nobody stops us from doing that. If they did ban us, we would also listen to Hizb ut-Tahrir...But now we have many mosques, we pray and we do not need anything else.<sup>106</sup>

This is echoed by other imams. Where there are conflicts they tend to be over issues such as appointments or the internal politics of the Muftiate. In theory, the Muftiate appoints and dismisses imams.<sup>107</sup> In practice it is not so simple.

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<sup>104</sup> Igor Rotar, 'Medieval Khan closes mosques', Forum 18 News, 22 May 2002, www.forum18.org.

<sup>105</sup> See ICG Asia Report No. 42, *Central Asia: The Politics of Police Reform*, 10 December 2002.

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<sup>106</sup> ICG interview, Jalal-Abad, 10 December 2002.

<sup>107</sup> In theory, the Mufti is elected by the Council of the Ulema, which consists of 25 members. Provincial religious leaders (*kazi*) are appointed by the Mufti. The leader of a Friday mosque, an *imam-khatib*, is appointed by the *kazi*, in coordination with the Muftiate. And the *imam-khatib* appoints mosque imams.



“In the appointments of imams, parliamentary deputies and officials and everybody else interferes”, admitted one official.<sup>108</sup> Each imam also has his connections among politicians, and uses them to build up his own power base.

Conflicts over appointments are seldom about ideology. In 2001-2002 in the village of Kenbulon two groups disputed who should be the imam, with many Dungans opposing a smaller faction – apparently supported by the Muftiate – that wanted to put in its own person. One official said the conflict was really over ownership of the profitable land attached to the mosque, which produced a good harvest every year. It was only resolved after the intervention of the State Secretary.<sup>109</sup>

Differences on issues such as the separation of religion and state or the political role of imams, are much rarer, at least in public. But there are voices calling for more political influence:

In Kyrgyzstan an imam can only teach in a mosque, and take part in religious rituals – that’s all. An imam wants more – he wants to expand his activity, in education, in schools, on television, on radio. Some imams know state affairs and politics well but if they start talking about it, immediately they start labelling them Hizb or Wahhabis.<sup>110</sup>

While these are generally isolated voices, there may be more private dissatisfaction with the secular state.

Some other religious leaders also oppose the separation of state and religion, but from a slightly different point of view. One suggested that the state should assist Islam, and in exchange imams should work in favour of the state. He pointed to Turkey, where imams are paid by the state and largely integrated into its structures. In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, there is not enough state aid:

The central mosque in Osh receives not a single penny from the state, but if the state were to finance at least chief imams, then it

would be in a position to demand something from them.<sup>111</sup>

This attitude, that imams can act as government ideological representatives, is widespread among officials and some clergy:

We should be supporting imams who work with the people. If they got paid, they would do everything themselves. The word of the imam is law...and imams should work with the people before things go wrong, and not after.<sup>112</sup>

Some officials would like to see this Turkish-style religious establishment, in which Islamic institutions would be funded and controlled by a government ministry. They consider the mosques a major channel through which the government should get its ideas to society. Soviet stereotypes often reappear, with officials occasionally comparing the network of mosques with the old party network that did so much to inculcate ideology. One local official told imams:

There should be unity among mosques. When we had a party system, there were chief party organs and local party organs – you need to do the same. The central mosque should be most important and the local ones like affiliates. All orders of the central mosque should be implemented.<sup>113</sup>

The state has few channels to influence people, and religion is an obvious potential means for impacting on public opinion. Officials attempt to use imams to tackle Hizb ut-Tahrir, criminality, drug problems, and other issues.

But it is not clear that this concept is viable. Not everyone considers imams authoritative figures, particularly city dwellers and young people. In crisis situations, the clergy are generally seen as representatives of the political authorities and often rejected. When the Mufti and his deputy attempted to intervene in the unrest in Aksy district in March 2002, they were shouted down and accused of having sold out to the government. If they are

<sup>108</sup> ICG interview, Bishkek, March 2003.

<sup>109</sup> ICG interviews, Bishkek, March, April 2003.

<sup>110</sup> ICG interview, Adakhandjan Hokimov, Imam of the Central Mosque in Jalalabad, deputy *kazi*, Jalal-Abad, 16 April 2003.

<sup>111</sup> ICG interview, Sadykzhan Kamalov, Head, Islamic Centre, Osh, April 2003.

<sup>112</sup> ICG interview, religious NGO leader, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>113</sup> Meeting of imams, southern Kyrgyzstan, attended by local officials, security officials, April 2003.

brought even further into the political system, it would seem they would lose even more authority.

There is little movement within this Islamic hierarchy. Sons often replace their fathers in mosques. Most imams are elderly and self-taught. It is very difficult for younger graduates of religious institutions to find work in a mosque: most are unemployed, working at the bazaar, or in the best case, teaching in a madrasa. Not a single graduate of the theological faculty at Osh University has managed to find work in one of the city's mosques.<sup>114</sup> This blocked generation of would-be imams could be a destabilising factor in the future, but at present there is no evidence so far that they are politicised.

Government officials would like to replace some older imams with younger, better educated ones. An NSS officer at a meeting of imams asked why they could not find work for young religious graduates. The imam explained:

The people don't accept them. People don't accept graduates of theological colleges, even if they are well educated. They don't dress correctly, they don't have authority. Even if they go around in a cap, like other young people, even that they don't like.<sup>115</sup>

Particularly in conservative, isolated regions in the south, these attitudes are widespread. One theological faculty managed to get six of its graduates appointed in village mosques through efforts of the local administration but many were rejected by the congregations.<sup>116</sup> In Ala-Buka district in Jalal-Abad province, only seven of 53 imams are under 35.<sup>117</sup> Better the elderly imam from your own community than a young graduate from elsewhere. Many young people do not want to work in a village mosque, where salaries are low and the only congregants are elderly village men.

This rather isolated religious leadership often has little to say to younger people with secular backgrounds. Hence the stress by many Muslims and officials on the need for greater religious education and development of a new generation of

imams better able to interact with a rapidly changing society.

### C. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Many officials interviewed cited religious education as Islam's primary problem in Kyrgyzstan. Poor teaching, the theory goes, allows other tendencies in Islam to gain ground. Poorly educated imams are unable to compete with more modern, radical movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. As a government official put it: "Illiterate youth goes to the mosque, where illiterate imams teach them. In five mosques you get five different interpretations of the same thing."<sup>118</sup>

SCRA figures demonstrate the low level of education among imams. In the rural district of Ala-Buka, in Jalal-Abad province, all 53 imams are self taught, without any formal religious education. Most are elderly.<sup>119</sup> In Suzak district, more than 90 per cent of 160 active imams have no formal religious education.<sup>120</sup> The situation in city mosques tends to be better, but even in Jalal-Abad, six of nineteen imams have no religious education, and only two have some higher secular education.

In most cases, of course, there is no particular reason why imams should have higher education. Mostly they preside over small country mosques and merely conduct rituals for those who come to pray, who are also mostly old men. In a wider sense, though, there is a problem for much of the religious hierarchy in dealing with contemporary problems and young people: the easy answers to complex questions, often with a modern scientific gloss, provided by groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir are often more attractive than the very traditional views of older imams.

For young people in cities, in particular, the imam is seldom an authority figure to turn to for resolving everyday problems. More often than not they are isolated from the real problems of the population, and their only answers are citations from religious literature. This lack of authoritative religious figures who could counter the influence of extremist groups is widely bemoaned in government circles.

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<sup>114</sup> ICG interview, Temir Zhorobekov, Dean of Theological Faculty, Osh State University, Osh, April 2003.

<sup>115</sup> Meeting of imams, southern Kyrgyzstan, April 2003.

<sup>116</sup> ICG interview, April 2003.

<sup>117</sup> Figures collated by the SCRA, relating to 1 September 2002.

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<sup>118</sup> ICG interview, Osh, April 2003.

<sup>119</sup> Figures collated by the SCRA, relating to 1 September 2002.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

There was not a single religious education institution in Kyrgyzstan until 1991 but since then dozens of institutes and madrasas have emerged. In 2003 there were nine Islamic institutes and 46 madrasas, though many of the latter exist only in name. The quality of education is by all accounts very low, although some do have teachers who have studied abroad.

Some Islamic institutions receive foreign funding, mainly from Arab charities. There is a Kuwaiti-Kyrgyz university in Bishkek. It does not teach religious subjects as such, although it teaches Arabic and jurisprudence, including *sharia* law.<sup>121</sup> Its many Arab teachers seem also to do some private teaching. Other funding from Arab foundations appears to be more ad hoc. The rector of the Islamic Institute of the Muftiate said that “charitable donations dropped sharply after 11 September”.<sup>122</sup>

There is also considerable assistance from Turkish foundations. The theological faculty at Osh University is funded by the Turks, and students also study in Turkey itself. Institutions funded by Turkey mix secular and religious subjects. Since only 30 per cent of their teaching is exclusively devoted to religion, they can provide official diplomas for graduates.

The Islamic Institute of the Muftiate has no official registration with the Ministry of Education, because it teaches mostly religious subjects. Students do not get a recognised diploma of higher education and therefore are unable to take jobs as teachers in schools for example.<sup>123</sup> The rector of the institute remains strongly opposed to introducing secular subjects into the curriculum, claiming that it would result in poorly educated imams. But the actual result, as he admits, is that most graduates are unemployed or end up working in the bazaar.<sup>124</sup>

Officials claim that the level of teaching is not up to standard. One said: “In the Islamic institute there are teachers who don’t know what Jadidism

is or what Sufism is”.<sup>125</sup> Graduates complain that they do not get teaching about different tendencies in Islam. Consequently they teach themselves, and the results do not seem to be entirely orthodox. Even when there are secular subjects, they do not seem to be well taught. “Students who studied philosophy don’t know anything”, a graduate said. “They don’t know a single philosopher. In the classes they just discussed Islam and that’s all”.<sup>126</sup>

Private universities have also begun to teach religion. The Batyrov Friendship of Peoples University in Jalal-Abad, which already taught Arabic, planned to open a theological faculty in 2003. Teachers are concerned to provide more than just religious knowledge. One said “In mosques imams do not know Islam very well and do not have any information about the outside world. We want them to know both the outside world and Islam”.<sup>127</sup>

A result of lack of good religious education has been a flow of students to other Islamic countries. Officials claimed that 300 have left officially, and 300 unofficially, but they admitted they did not really know the true figures. They are concerned about the impact of these graduates when they return. As an official in Osh said: “What can you expect from that kind of study, if their only textbook is the Koran? They will be fanatics”.<sup>128</sup>

There have been increasing restrictions on students travelling abroad to study, particularly to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. From 2000 the Interdepartmental Commission on Religious Affairs recommended that students only be sent to study abroad in “progressive Islamic countries, such as Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Jordan”.<sup>129</sup> Official attitudes are particularly negative about Pakistan, which is widely viewed by officials in the religious sphere as a backward country breeding Islamic militants. Pakistan has itself attempted to restrict foreign students from entering madrasas and has put many under surveillance or

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<sup>121</sup> ICG interview, Asan Ormushev, Rector of the Kyrgyz-Kuwaiti University, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>122</sup> ICG interview, Abdushukur-azhi Narmatov, Rector of the Islamic Institute under the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, April 2002.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>125</sup> ICG interview, government official in religious sphere, Bishkek, February 2003.

<sup>126</sup> ICG interview, graduate of Islamic Institute, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>127</sup> ICG interview, Kudratullo Mekhmankulov, teacher of Arabic, Batyrov Friendship of Peoples University in Jalal-Abad, Jalal-Abad, April 2003.

<sup>128</sup> ICG interview, Osh, February 2003.

<sup>129</sup> ICG interview, Bishkek, April 2003

expelled them.<sup>130</sup> But these attempts seem to have little impact, and government restrictions in Kyrgyzstan merely ensure that students leave privately and are more difficult to trace.

Students who have studied abroad find it difficult to find work in the religious sector. According to one source, there are at least 150 graduates of Turkish Islamic institutions in Kyrgyzstan, none of whom have found work in mosques. Some people claim that some returning students want political and religious change: "They [students who studied in Egypt] want to introduce a religious system like in Egypt, they want to make the Muftiate according to the Egyptian model, and so forth".<sup>131</sup> But it is not clear how widespread these sentiments are: most returnees seem happy to get involved in business or work as teachers or translators.

Beyond the educational institutions, there is little information about Islam. "There's no library, no television programs no radio programs, I have no idea what's going on in the Islamic world. I don't know what is going on in Iraq for example, from the Muslim point of view", complained one imam.<sup>132</sup> This is partly a question of providing more information on Islam but also a desire among some Muslims to get an alternative Muslim point of view on world affairs. This was particularly noticeable during the recent war, when there was considerable sympathy for Iraq and a desire for access to Arabic news channels such as Al-Jazeera.

Islam in Kyrgyzstan is significantly divorced from the Muslim intellectual debates in much of the Middle East and in the West. There is little discussion of issues such as state and religion, or democracy and Islam, and no attention paid to modernising tendencies within Islam.

#### D. SOCIAL ISSUES

Social issues are a potential source of dispute in future as part of the population takes on a much more Westernised, secular lifestyle while others, particularly, but not only, in the south, seek more codification of existing cultural and religious practice.

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<sup>130</sup> See ICG Asia Report No. 36, *Pakistan, Madrasas and the Military*, 29 July 2002, pp. 23-24.

<sup>131</sup> ICG interview, April 2003. Bishkek.

<sup>132</sup> ICG interview, Jalal-Abad, April 2003.

Then parliamentary deputy Tursunbai Bakir-uluu caused a stir when he introduced a bill in parliament to legalise polygamy. It was strongly rejected but the practice has grown considerably in recent years, although there is much ignorance about what it really is. An NGO worker asserted that it is becoming a problem: "It's banned by law, but allowed by religion. But a second wife can't even take the surname of her husband".<sup>133</sup> For many more secular officials, the idea is something from the past. A local official in Jalal-Abad said: "Now they [religious leaders] have four wives each. They don't let their wives out of the house. It's the sixth century, and they want to make that the law...it's going to be a problem."<sup>134</sup>

Weddings and family rituals are another source of dispute since secular law and cultural-religious practice do not match. Some purist Muslims reject local cultural traditions: "There is nothing in the Koran about having wakes after twenty and 40 days. There's no need for big expenses for funerals and weddings, it's better to let children eat. ...We're against alcohol at weddings".<sup>135</sup> But these attitudes are still rare. Purely Islamic weddings are uncommon. One imam could only remember about twenty in the last five years at his mosque.<sup>136</sup>

#### E. CONCLUSION

Kyrgyzstan's diverse religious communities generally coexist with considerable tolerance. In comparison with Uzbekistan, the state has retained a largely liberal approach to religious practice. But fears of Islamic extremism have provoked more attempts to control religion, often in an uncoordinated and haphazard way.

This partly reflects a changing society, in which beliefs are still in flux, and the government is struggling to respond to rapid change. Often officials fall back on old Soviet patterns of governance, seeking to use the mosques as a new form of ideological control. In practice, this is

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<sup>133</sup> ICG interview, Jamal Frontbek-kyzy, head of religious NGO Mutakalim, Bishkek, April 2003.

<sup>134</sup> ICG interview, April 2003.

<sup>135</sup> ICG interview, Women's 'Wahhabi' group, southern Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>136</sup> ICG interview, Adakhandjan Hokimov, Imam of the Central Mosque in Jalalabad, Deputy Kazi, Jalal-Abad, 16 April 2003.

unlikely to be effective: society is too diverse, and imams are not sufficiently authoritative.

Religious authorities themselves have considerable responsibility to promote enlightened forms of Islam that suit a largely modern state. There is little discussion of modernising trends within Islam, a closed mentality to younger graduates entering the religious hierarchy, and an often very conservative view on social issues and women.

Religious education needs serious attention to improve its quality. Students at Islamic institutions also need some exposure to secular subjects, not least so they can get a job after graduation. The Ministry of Education and the Muftiate need to work together to find a way of improving the quality of education and integrating it into the national system.

## V. KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan has had the most liberal policy on religious affairs of any of the Central Asian states, and until the late 1990s most officials saw little reason for more intrusive controls. However, the increasing activity of militant Islamic groups from Afghanistan and the rise in support for Hizb ut-Tahrir in the south of the country prompted a debate among officials on new approaches. The fear of the “Islamic threat” is widespread among officials and its potential to disrupt stability is sometimes exaggerated.

As in Kyrgyzstan, Islam plays a minor role in the lives of most ethnic Kazakhs, an important cultural element but with little apparent impact on everyday life. External religious observance is fairly rare, particularly in the large cities, though there is considerable regional variation. Traditionally, religious observance has been much greater in the south, around Shymkent, than in the north and west, where many who carry out Muslim rituals tend to be from ethnic minorities.<sup>137</sup>

In the south, there is greater religiosity among the ethnic Uzbek minority, and some suggest there has been a growth in ‘Wahhabi’ communities, mostly consisting of people escaping repression in Uzbekistan. However, local observers say their numbers are not great. A journalist claimed that in Sairam, a town of 30,000 close to the Uzbek border, no more than a few dozen might fit this description. In Turkestan, there may be a few hundred in a population of over 100,000. In other towns their numbers are probably even less.<sup>138</sup>

### A. GOVERNMENT POLICY

It is hard to identify any consistent government policy with regard to religion. Although there has been attempts to use the symbolism of Islam as part of state legitimisation, this has had little impact on state policy. Islam has, however, become a part of the search for a Kazakh identity, and is seen as an integral part of Kazakh culture. The main thrust of policy seems to be to interfere

<sup>137</sup> In cities such as Almaty, this tends to be the large Uighur and Dungan communities; in the west, there are also communities from the North Caucasus.

<sup>138</sup> ICG interview, Shymkent, June 2003.

to a minimal degree, unless there is a real threat to state security.

## 1. State bodies

Several government bodies deal with religion but for the most part the division of responsibilities among them seems confused. In addition to the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), headed by Amambek Mukhashev, there is a Board on Relations with Religious Organisations under the Government of Kazakhstan.

At the local level, *akimats* (local government bodies) monitor the activities of religious organisations on behalf of the federal government. In areas where ethnic Uzbeks live, *mahalla* committees have an informal role to monitor activities in the local mosque. In practice, local officials seldom have the requisite training to carry out such monitoring and are largely passive.

Only the Ministry of Justice, not the CRA, registers religious organisations. Most mosques are registered but this is a technical requirement, not an assessment of the doctrinal basis of organisations seeking registration as in other Central Asian countries. This worries some officials. One said: "This is good from the point of view of international law, but bad from the point of view of security".<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, others claim that there is little need for registration. One official in the religious sphere points out: "We don't have the function of registering religious organisations, but we have absolute power".<sup>140</sup> Indeed, state structures are quite capable of intervening in any way in religious affairs if they so choose, without the bureaucratic paraphernalia of registration.

## 2. Religious bodies

The Islamic community is led by the Muslim Spiritual Administration of Kazakhstan (DUMK), headed by Mufti Abdsattar Derbisaleev. He was appointed in 2002 and has a fairly strong reputation among officials, although he is criticised by some in the south, who claim he does not have adequate religious credentials. There seems to be little tension between the official religious leadership and the state, and the DUMK largely

conducts its internal affairs without regular interference by state bodies. There is little opposition to the Muftiate among religious communities, with the partial exception that some interviewees in the south expressed dissatisfaction that Derbisaleev lacked religious education.

DUMK does not control all Islamic religious organisations. Of 473 mosques in the southern province, 114 are not subordinate to it.<sup>141</sup> Most of these are among the ethnic Uzbek population, particularly in border regions such as Sairam district, where communities are particularly close-knit and often isolated from state structures. Officials admit they have little idea what goes on in such mosques; some observers suggest there have been "Wahhabi" preachers in some, mostly those who have escaped repression in Uzbekistan.

Within the DUMK system, all mosques are essentially branches of the central Muftiate, which appoints imams on the recommendation of regional imams (*bas-imam*), although even without this recommendation the Muftiate apparently has the power to name its own people. One religious leader complained: "even a village imam goes to Almaty to get appointed, directly to the Mufti himself".<sup>142</sup> There seems to be little democracy within the DUMK system but also little interest among religious leaders or officials in reforming it. The Muftiate provides recommendations for Friday sermons but only in general outline. Nevertheless, there were no sermons that discussed the war in Iraq, clearly the result of an order from above.

Most imams have only limited religious education, and have studied only inside Kazakhstan. This ensures that they are particularly loyal to local Islamic traditions and tend to reject foreign-trained students, who find it very difficult to gain appointments in mosques. Some imams in villages have only completed short courses in mosques.

## 3. Religious education

There is no ban on private religious education. Many mosques have courses for believers. At least six of Shymkent's 30 mosques offer such courses. Some imams are suspicious of religious teaching at home, claiming that poorly educated imams can

<sup>139</sup> ICG interview, government official, Shymkent, June 2003.

<sup>140</sup> ICG interview, government official, Shymkent, June 2003.

<sup>141</sup> ICG interview, government official, Shymkent, June 2003.

<sup>142</sup> ICG interview, Shymkent, June 2003.

introduce incorrect teachings; nevertheless, there are no restrictions on this.

Most courses have concentrated on teaching students how to read the Koran and on basic religious knowledge. Until the mid-1990s there was little discussion of socio-economic or political issues or other tendencies in Islam. The arrival of foreign missionaries added much greater pluralism, and larger educational establishments were set up, often financed by foreign sources.

There is no major madrasa, and many officials are concerned by the lack of a central authoritative religious institute. There are similar problems of education for imams as in other Central Asian countries: "their intellectual level has to be raised", said one religious leader. "You get someone with a doctoral degree coming into a mosque, and he meets an imam who is half-literate".<sup>143</sup>

There are, however, numerous other religious education institutions, many set up with funding from Arab countries or Turkey.<sup>144</sup> Some of these have caused concern. One observer noted:

Often children's homes are funded by one or other of the Arabic foundations. Girls and boys are taken into these homes, and into special closed schools. What goes on there nobody knows. When a state commission comes to check they only show them what they want to show them, and the commission gives its approval.<sup>145</sup>

Most teachers in these schools are from Arab countries but they are not considered missionaries. Officials are happy to allow such schools to operate, according to local observers, because they receive considerable financial benefit from connections to Arab foundations.

There is no real legislative basis for religious education, and no agreed system of licensing such institutions. Officials are seeking ways of licensing religious education, and indeed there probably is a

role for the Ministry of Education to play in establishing common standards. Officials do check study programs but are largely unable to enforce any restrictions on what they teach. An official claimed that "They write their teaching programs, but in reality they teach entirely different subjects".<sup>146</sup>

As in other Central Asian countries, there is concern over students who have studied in Islamic institutions abroad. Kazakhstan has a quota for 20 students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo but students no longer go officially to Pakistan. In 2002 President Nazarbayev ordered a recall from foreign religious institutions, but this seems to have only limited impact, with students still able to travel privately. Most who return, though, do not take up posts as imams, partly because they are viewed with suspicion by the religious establishment and partly because they prefer to work as translators or teachers where they can earn more money. Some go into business.

#### 4. Repression and the security forces

The National Security Council, chaired by President Nazarbayev, created a commission in 1999 to develop policies to combat religious extremism. The Committee for National Security (KNB) has said that fighting religious extremism is a top priority. In everyday life, though, there is little repression of religious activists. There have been very few arrests of Hizb ut-Tahrir activists.<sup>147</sup> There is no legislation allowing convictions for simply giving out literature or following non-traditional Islamic tendencies.

Nevertheless, there is considerable informal control and monitoring by the security services. The police check on the kind of sermons that imams are preaching and on whether mosques are licensed. Some imams are thought to provide information to the security services on any "unreliable" colleagues.

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<sup>143</sup> ICG interview, religious leader, Shymkent, June 2003.

<sup>144</sup> In the southern city of Shymkent alone there are three major religious institutions, a Kazakh-Kuwaiti university (now known as the Southern Kazakhstan Pedagogical Academy), a Kazakh-Arab university, and the southern Kazakhstan pedagogical university.

<sup>145</sup> ICG interview, journalist, Shymkent, June 2003.

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<sup>146</sup> ICG interview, official, Shymkent, June 2003.

<sup>147</sup> In 2000 Bakhytzhon Zhumabaev was arrested as a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir and passed to the Uzbek authorities, where he was sentenced to twenty years in prison. In October 2000 four members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were arrested in Turkestan. In October 2001 three alleged members were arrested; two were subsequently released, one died; In April 2002 two further members were arrested, and more arrests followed in April 2003.

In general, though, Kazakhstan is probably the least repressive of the Central Asian states with regard to Islamic activists. This may change, if Hizb ut-Tahrir is considered to be a growing threat. But while it remains small and its activities limited, it is unlikely to attract the kind of repression seen elsewhere in the region.

## B. CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan does not face a serious problem with religious extremism, although the growing number of adherents of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the south may be cause for future concern. As elsewhere in the region, there is concern about the educational level of clergy, and there is an undoubted need for more coordination in the religious education field and more monitoring of educational institutions, particularly those financed from abroad. It seems unusual that Kazakhstan does not have a central madrasa: such an institution would be in a good position to provide a modern education for imams and perhaps counter the attraction of study abroad.

The generally secular nature of society is likely to be strong enough to resist any future challenge to the nature of the state from Islamist groups. Overreaction by authorities to a perceived Islamic threat would likely backfire. But increased training for officials in religious affairs would be useful, particularly in the south, and greater monitoring of the situation in the southern border regions is probably necessary.

## VI. TURKMENISTAN

### A. RELIGION AND THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

As in most political affairs, Turkmenistan has taken a radically different course from other Central Asian states in its policy on religion. There is effectively no separation between state and religion. President Niyazov has promoted his own personalised pseudo-religion as the official religion of the state.

Although Sunni Islam is the official religion of ethnic Turkmens, most incorporate shamanistic beliefs dating from the nomadic period of their history to create their own form of popular Islam. The government has encouraged this, while taking strict control of all organised religious activity.

Niyazov has spent millions on constructing huge mosques and religious buildings. There were only four mosques in Soviet times, but an estimated 318 were in operation in 2003.<sup>148</sup> But many mosques are primarily aimed at his own glorification, rather than the religious needs of the people. Few Turkmens go to mosques; mostly they pray at home, or visit sacred sites. Pre-Islamic rituals combining shamanistic, Manichean, Zoroastrian, Nestorian and Parthian elements are still observed.

More radical forms of Islam found little ground in Turkmenistan, although the government has suppressed any sign of external influence, expelling hundreds of foreign Muslims, mostly Iranian teachers, in 2000. Some have suggested that young people could be attracted by more radical forms of Sunni Islam, largely as a result of repression and socio-economic decline, but there is little basis for it in traditional religious beliefs.<sup>149</sup>

In place of religious pluralism, Niyazov has developed a pseudo-religious cult centred on his own personality. His book, the *Rukhnama*, is not only the main text for schoolchildren and university students but is also read in mosques and

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<sup>148</sup> U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2002: Turkmenistan".

<sup>149</sup> Michael Fredholm, "The Prospects for Internal Unrest in Turkmenistan", April 2003, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Defence Academy, UK.



treated on a par with the Koran. He has apparently made enquiries in the Islamic world about the possible reaction to declaring himself a new prophet of Islam.

### 1. Laws on religious belief

Although the Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief, the practice of any religion is severely restricted, except for two officially registered groups, Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox.

The 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organisations also guarantees freedom of belief but requires all religious activity to be registered by the Ministry of Justice. A 1995 amendment requires religious groups to have at least 500 members in each locality in which they wish to register in order to gain legal status.

In practice, this means that – unlike Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox believers – members of the Armenian Apostolic, Baptist, Pentecostalist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i and Hare Krishna churches are unable to register and are therefore severely persecuted. Naturally, any Muslim community wishing to establish an independent congregation is similarly outlawed.

### 2. Official structures

The main government body used to control religious affairs is the Council (*Gengesh*) for Religious Affairs (CRA) under President Niyazov. Although described as playing an “intermediary role” between the government bureaucracy and registered religious organisations, it is purely a controlling organ for the state.

There is little distinction between the CRA and the religious hierarchy. It is chaired by the Imam of the Goek Tepe Mosque, and the three deputy chairmen are the Mufti of Turkmenistan, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and a government representative. The CRA controls the activities of official clergy through Turkmenistan's Muslim Religious Board, which employs all Muslim clerics. According to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the CRA oversees the “selection, promotion, and dismissal of all

Sunni mullahs and Russian Orthodox clergy”.<sup>150</sup> This strict control structure provides no opportunity for legal religious activity outside the boundaries set by the state.

### 3. Repression

The main instruments of repression are the National Security Committee (KNB) and the regular police. The KNB is particularly involved in monitoring Muslim clergy and unofficial religious activity.

Any clergy opposing the government or propagating religious ideas not in conformity with the official position risk dismissal or worse. In 2000 police arrested Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych, an Islamic cleric who had criticised the government. He was sentenced to internal exile.<sup>151</sup> There is no scope for any political opposition in general, and particularly from within religious structures: Muslim clergy are required to accord due respect to Niyazov and the *Rukhnama* during services.

Unregistered religious groups face constant harassment and sometimes arrest. In November 1999 security forces destroyed a church belonging to the Seventh Day Adventists in Ashgabad, and members of the congregation have been regularly harassed ever since. Baptists have also faced constant pressure and sometimes been detained. In April 2002 the government closed all Sunday schools run by the Bahai. The U.S. government reports a sharp drop in cases of harassment of Christians in 2002, and in January 2002 Shageldy Atekov, a Baptist who had been in prison since 1999, apparently because of his religious beliefs, was released. Nevertheless, there is no sign of real liberalisation, and the situation is unlikely to change while President Niyazov remains in power.

### 4. Religious education

In June 2001 Niyazov ordered the closure of a madrasa in Dashawuz, the last independent Islamic

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<sup>150</sup> International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, “Religious Intolerance in Selected OSCE Countries in 2000”, report to the Seminar on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the OSCE Region, The Hague, 26 June 2001, p. 28, available at: [www.ihf-hr.org](http://www.ihf-hr.org)

<sup>151</sup> Jean-Christophe Peuch, “Turkmenistan: Leader tightens grip on unofficial Islam”, RFE/RL, 28 June 2001, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

education facility in the country.<sup>152</sup> The Theological Faculty at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat is the only academic institution to conduct Islamic education and limits admission to fifteen students each year.

All education establishments are forced to study the *Rukhnama*, the basis of Niyazov's cult of personality. It is a mixture of folk sayings, Turkmen history and pseudo-spirituality that lays the basis for an effectively alternative state religion. Its use in mosques on a par with the Koran is in direct contradiction with Islamic teaching, and must cause considerable difficulty to clergy and other believers.

## B. CONCLUSION

There has been only sporadic international attention to the religious repression in Turkmenistan. The U.S. has remarkably never named it a "country of particular concern" in its annual reporting on religious freedom, despite the effective outlawing of any independent religious activity, whether Christian or Muslim.

The OSCE has repeatedly pointed to Turkmenistan's violations of its commitments under the OSCE conventions on freedom of belief, but this has had no obvious impact. In 2002-2003 ten member-states attempted to put pressure on Turkmenistan through a reporting system known as the Moscow mechanism. It came to little, however, and has not been followed up by the Dutch chairmanship in 2003.

Despite Turkmenistan's egregious violations of international norms on religious freedoms, it does not attract the same opprobrium as other states with similar records. Yet, there is a clear danger of serious instability in the country at least whenever President Niyazov leaves the scene. In any social upheaval, it seems likely that at least a small portion of the younger population will find solace in more radical religious thought, including groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, and possibly Wahhabi versions of Islam.

## VII. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community can play only a limited role with respect to the thorny issue of religion and state in Central Asia. Nevertheless, while agreeing that freedom of belief and protection of security are not incompatible, it needs to confront the most extreme levels of repression against religious activists head-on. The policies in particular of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan constitute not just an issue of morality, but also a direct threat to future stability and security in the region. The international community has paid little attention to Turkmenistan's consistent repression of religious freedoms. Its criticism of the government in Uzbekistan seems to have been tempered on occasion by the belief that many of those arrested are radical Muslims. Repression of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, however, does little to enhance security in the long run, in fact is probably counter-productive since torture and abuse of victims is creating a radicalised underclass that will eventually have an impact on the political system.

There is a need for greater education in religious affairs in all the countries in the region, for both religious figures and officials. Many of the latter, with a Soviet or secular background, have only limited understanding of the reality of differing schools of thought in Islam, and frequently fail to promote policies sensitive to the beliefs of Muslims. Often these are symbolic issues – the use of loudspeakers in mosques, opportunities for prayer in official establishments, attitudes to religious people working in state institutions, and so forth – but they set the pattern for increasing distance between the state and religion.

The OSCE and other international organisations could usefully help narrow this education gap as well as further develop a network of experts and researchers by offering programs on subjects such as Islam and democracy in institutions like the new OSCE Academy in Bishkek. These might aim to encourage dialogue on modern tendencies in Islam, for example, by introducing Central Asians involved with religious affairs, including those in the State Commissions, to Muslim democrats from the Middle East and elsewhere.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Visitor programs for religious leaders are also constructive. Imams and other religious leaders who have travelled in the U.S. on State Department programs have generally come away with useful new insights into Islam in the West and the realities of Islam in a democratic state. Such programs, the underlying purpose of which is to demonstrate that Islam can coexist with democratic values and that secular states do not have to be anti-religious, should also include younger students at Islamic educational institutions and officials.

Islamic educational institutions seldom have relations with international organisations or Western embassies. If they have any foreign links, it is normally with the Middle East, but even these have been cut back in recent years. The result is a rather isolated education offering students little chance to experience the outside world. Interested governments and their assistance agencies should make more effort to interact with these institutions. The Islamic Institute in Tashkent has discussed using foreign teachers of English, which would give young students of Islam an important chance to learn about the West at first hand rather than through the prism either of official ideology or radical Muslim literature.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Some Western literature on Central Asia suggests that it is a potential Afghanistan, racked by religious conflict and threatened by extremist groups. The reality is much more nuanced. The actual grounds for challenges to the states in the region from political Islam are rather low, although there is undoubtedly a small part of the population, particularly in the Ferghana valley, that rejects the concept of a secular state. But these groups are small in proportion to the rest of the population, most of which subscribe to the official position of their governments that religion and the state should be separate.

Islamic identities are very much in flux in Central Asia. Many young people view religion as a step backwards and seek fulfilment in increased interaction with the West, learning English and acquiring education and work abroad. Far fewer view political Islam as the future.

This growing distance between different social groups may pose a challenge for the future stability of Central Asia. The best way to overcome the differences is for states in the region to work much harder at justifying their claims to be secular and democratic respecters of religious freedom. It is not surprising that increasing numbers of Muslims associate democracy with high levels of corruption, huge gaps in wealth between the elites and average citizens, and widespread social upheaval.

All the states of the region interfere in some way in religious affairs. The least interference is in Kazakhstan, which has maintained liberal legislation on religion and faces little serious threat to its stability from radical Islamic groups. In Kyrgyzstan, too, although there is a small but significant growth in radical Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, most people have little time for politicisation of religion. In both states, socio-economic development and political liberalisation, combined with effective governance, would probably undermine even the small support extremist groups have gained.

In Tajikistan the rapid expansion of interest in political Islam in the early 1990s has largely faded, with war-weariness underpinning general reluctance to allow violence to reappear in national life. Support for the IRP is relatively low, and the

leadership of the party has long rejected the notion of any real move towards an Islamic state. Instead, it is focused on maintaining a legal Islamic party in an increasingly hostile environment. The state's attitude to independent expressions of Islam has become increasingly illiberal, a development that threatens to increase support for more radical opposition.

Uzbekistan seems unlikely to change its repressive policies significantly in the short term. It has used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as the basis for a wide range of policies that have undermined both the political system and the economy. It is most in danger of provoking opposition to the secular nature of the state from opposition movements. It has already faced an armed Islamist movement, the IMU, and has a significant internal peaceful opposition in Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Some argue that liberalisation in Uzbekistan would lead to a growth in Islamist sentiment, resulting in a threat to the nature of the state. There is no reason why this should be. In the first place, what evidence there is suggests that real public support for Islamic governance is weak and fragmented. Secondly, much of the support for such ideas stems not from religious piety but political exclusion and discontent with widespread corruption and economic failure. Thirdly, effective liberalisation should occur within the framework of effective governance, providing legal limits to political activity and stressing initially liberalisation for secular political parties and in the economy.

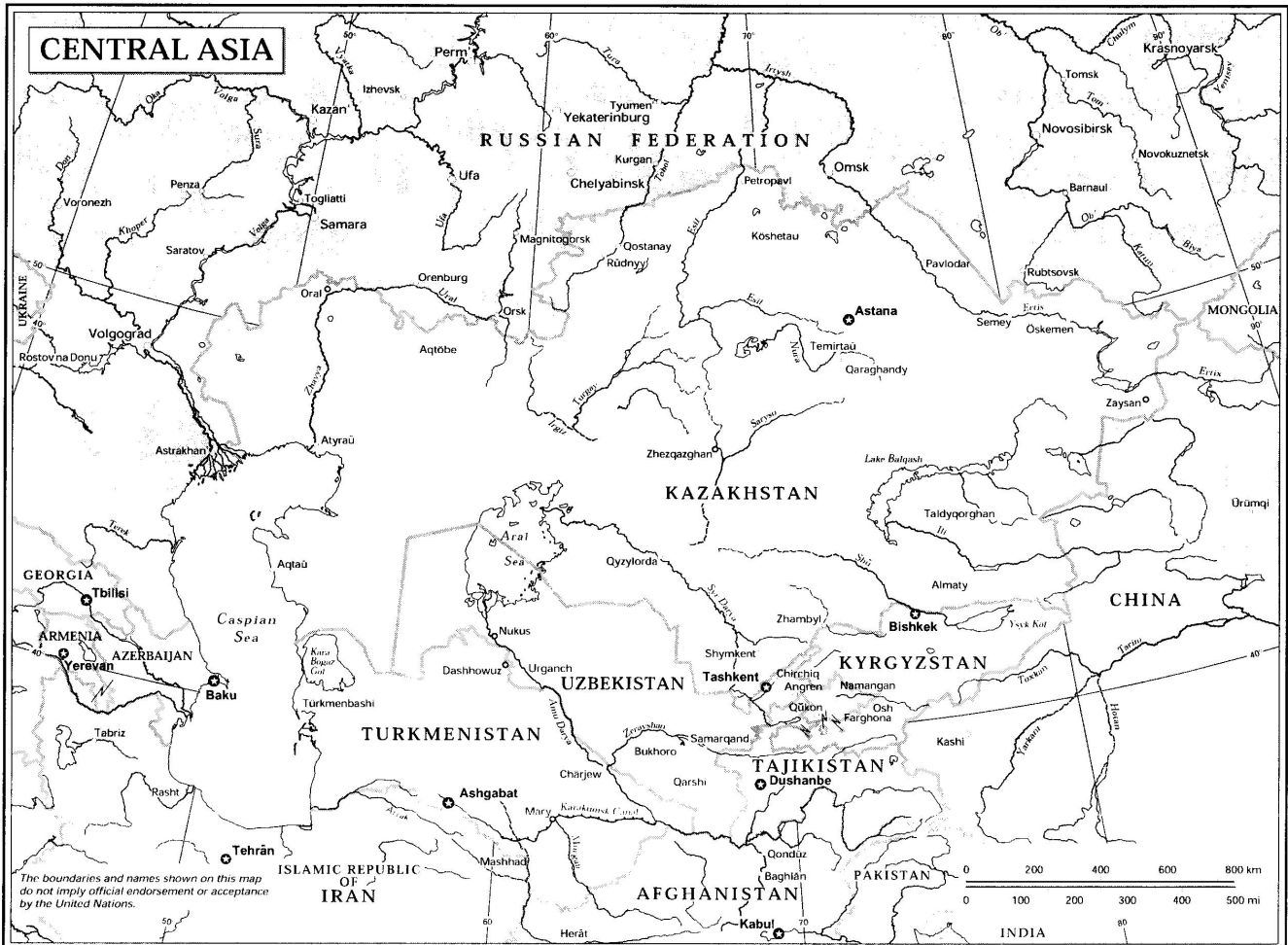
Economic liberalisation is unlikely to provide significant impetus for Islamic radicalism to emerge. Those aspects that provoked radical opposition in Egypt or Iran – corruption, Westernisation of morals, criminality – are already present in the system and are likely to decrease not increase under a carefully planned liberalisation program. The problem is that the longer that reform is postponed, the greater the likelihood that it will eventually take place not under state control, but as part of a wider political and social breakdown.

The relationship between state and Islam is important to the future of all these societies but it is not formed in a policy vacuum. Of great importance for the future of Islam in Central Asia will be a whole range of issues related to political, social and economic development. If extremist Islamist solutions are to be avoided, the leaderships of the region's states need to follow policies that undermine support for extremist groups, namely political liberalisation, economic reform and effective governance.

**Osh/Brussels, 10 July 2003**

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA



## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 90 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, [www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org). ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, Moscow and Paris and a media liaison office in London. The organisation currently operates

twelve field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogota, Islamabad, Jakarta, Nairobi, Osh, Pristina, Sarajevo, Sierra Leone, Skopje and Tbilisi) with analysts working in over 30 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents.

In *Africa*, those countries include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone-Liberia-Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; in *Asia*, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir; in *Europe*, Albania, Bosnia, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; in the *Middle East*, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in *Latin America*, Colombia.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Foundation and private sector donors include Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation Inc., John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, John Merck Fund, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Open Society Institute, Ploughshares Fund, Ruben & Elisabeth Rausing Trust, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Sarlo Foundation of the Jewish Community Endowment Fund and the United States Institute of Peace.

**July 2003**

## APPENDIX C

### ICG REPORTS AND BRIEFING PAPERS\*

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#### AFRICA

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##### ALGERIA\*\*

*The Algerian Crisis: Not Over Yet*, Africa Report N°24, 20 October 2000 (also available in French)

*The Civil Concord: A Peace Initiative Wasted*, Africa Report N°31, 9 July 2001 (also available in French)

*Algeria's Economy: A Vicious Circle of Oil and Violence*, Africa Report N°36, 26 October 2001 (also available in French)

##### ANGOLA

*Dealing with Savimbi's Ghost: The Security and Humanitarian Challenges in Angola*, Africa Report N°58, 26 February 2003

*Angola's Choice: Reform Or Regress*, Africa Report N°61, 7 April 2003

##### BURUNDI

*The Mandela Effect: Evaluation and Perspectives of the Peace Process in Burundi*, Africa Report N°21, 18 April 2000 (also available in French)

*Unblocking Burundi's Peace Process: Political Parties, Political Prisoners*, and Freedom of the Press, Africa Briefing, 22 June 2000

*Burundi: The Issues at Stake. Political Parties, Freedom of the Press and Political Prisoners*, Africa Report N°23, 12 July 2000 (also available in French)

*Burundi Peace Process: Tough Challenges Ahead*, Africa Briefing, 27 August 2000

*Burundi: Neither War, nor Peace*, Africa Report N°25, 1 December 2000 (also available in French)

*Burundi: Breaking the Deadlock, The Urgent Need for a New Negotiating Framework*, Africa Report N°29, 14 May 2001 (also available in French)

*Burundi: 100 Days to put the Peace Process back on Track*, Africa Report N°33, 14 August 2001 (also available in French)

*Burundi: After Six Months of Transition: Continuing the War or Winning the Peace*, Africa Report N°46, 24 May 2002 (also available in French)

*The Burundi Rebellion and the Ceasefire Negotiations*, Africa Briefing, 6 August 2002

*A Framework For Responsible Aid To Burundi*, Africa Report N°57, 21 February 2003

##### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

*Scramble for the Congo: Anatomy of an Ugly War*, Africa Report N°26, 20 December 2000 (also available in French)

*From Kabila to Kabila: Prospects for Peace in the Congo*, Africa Report N°27, 16 March 2001

*Disarmament in the Congo: Investing in Conflict Prevention*, Africa Briefing, 12 June 2001

*The Inter-Congolese Dialogue: Political Negotiation or Game of Bluff?* Africa Report N°37, 16 November 2001 (also available in French)

*Disarmament in the Congo: Jump-Starting DDRRR to Prevent Further War*, Africa Report N°38, 14 December 2001

*Storm Clouds Over Sun City: The Urgent Need To Recast The Congolese Peace Process*, Africa Report N°38, 14 May 2002 (also available in French) *The Kivus: The Forgotten Crucible of the Congo Conflict*, Africa Report N°56, 24 January 2003

*Rwandan Hutu Rebels in the Congo: a New Approach to Disarmament and Reintegration*. Africa Report N°63, 23 May 2003

*Congo Crisis: Military Intervention in Ituri*, Africa Report N°64, 13 June 2003

##### RWANDA

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\* The Algeria project was transferred from the Africa Program in January 2002.

## APPENDIX D

### ICG BOARD MEMBERS

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