

## **Radical Islam during transformation of Central Asia: state, experience and prospects**

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During the painful post-Soviet transformation of Central Asian societies, religion, along with ethnicity, plays an important role as an identifying marker, a tool of political struggle and one of the instruments of the political transition itself.

### **The process of re-Islamization and the creation of Islamist organizations**

In Central Asia the process of Islamic revival started during perestroika. For decades Islam had maintained itself in two forms: the official religion, tightly controlled and fettered by the regime, and the underground, informal Islam. After the demise of the USSR Islam, on the one hand, began to be used by the leadership of independent Central Asian republics as one of the instruments for shaping new identities in building independent states. On the other, it became a rallying point for those forces which stood for an alternative path of development to that chosen by the leadership of these

countries, a path involving Islamization of the state. Moreover, Islam began to be used more widely to express protest moods.

Islamic political organizations of radical tinge began to emerge in Central Asia in the early 1990s, with outside forces playing a significant role in their formation. These organizations promoted the process of re-Islamization which affected first of all Uzbekistan and also Tajikistan. Foreign missionaries, chiefly Saudi citizens of Uzbek origin, descendants of the basmachis, who arrived in towns of the Ferghana Valley, actively contributed to the propaganda of the ideas of radical Islam. Leaders and activists of the first Islamist organizations based themselves on the tradition of informal Islam. Almost all of them had been the students of teachers, imams and Islamic scholars of Central Asia—Hindustani, Mahsum, Rahmatulla qori and others—who were active in the underground back in Soviet times. Radical mullas managed to seize control over a number of mosques and to launch a sweeping propaganda campaign to disseminate radical Islamic ideas. More specifically, in Uzbekistan there appeared such radical Islamist organizations as Adolat and Islom Lashkarlari. In Tajikistan, the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), whose leader in 1992 briefly managed to enter a coalition government, quickly established itself as a force expressing the interests of one of the groups of regional elites at the turning-point of social and political transition. Soon the party was ousted from power, and the country found itself plunged into a bloody internecine war. In Uzbe-

kistan radical Islamists attempted to become one of the leading political forces and even succeeded in establishing actual control over several cities of the Ferghana Valley. Their activity was curbed by drastic government action, and the Islamists were driven underground. In 1996 they created the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which set itself the task of overthrowing the existing secular regime by force of arms and of creating an Islamic state in the country.

IMU militants used the experience acquired by them in the course of the civil war in Tajikistan, where they had taken part on the side of the IRP. In the meantime, a process of national reconciliation started in Tajikistan, accompanied by the IRP's slow transformation in the sense of deradicalization, by its acceptance of a status of a legal political force sharing power on a quota principle and virtually renouncing the slogan of the creation of an Islamic state.

In Uzbekistan, a further radicalization of the IMU, which, as a result of polarization among Islamists, was penetrated by the most extremist-minded supporters of political Islam, went parallel to this process.

Since the early 1990s another organization has started to operate in the region, a branch of the transnational party Hizb at-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI, the Islamic Liberation Party). It set as its main task the creation of an Islamic Caliphate. In so doing, the party proclaimed its adherence to peaceful, political methods of struggle and concentrated on the propaganda of its ideas and the creation of a ramified organizational infrastructure. In the first half of the 1990s, however,

HTI did not enjoy the support of any significant part of the population of the Central Asian republics, but gradually it succeeded in drawing new supporters into its ranks.

A group of Muslim youth that pioneered the IMU, inspired by the works of such ideologists of Islamic radicalism as the Pakistani Abul-Ala Maududi and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb along with the sermons of local radical imams, originally rallied around the concept of Musulmanabad. It was coined by Rahmatulla qori who advanced the following principles: (1) Central Asia belongs to the Islamic world and is a unified territory where Islam prevails; (2) relations between individuals are determined by Sharia; (3) all people in this territory believe in Allah and are ruled by the educated 'ulama. As conceived by Rahmatulla qori, Musulmanabad meant unification of various independent states located close to each other. The idea of Musulmanabad exhibited some features of similarity with HTI's concept of Caliphate. However, it was much more amorphous and could not pretend to become a self-sufficient political concept. Rather it was a certain general guideline for the followers of political Islam in Central Asia.

Amid the destitution of the population at large, growing socioeconomic inequality, the increasing authoritarianism of the power holders, appalling corruption and the absence of legal channels for the expression of protest sentiments, the activity of Islamist groupings has become perhaps the only means of social protest. Nor can one disregard the support the Islamists were regularly receiving from abroad, just

like the radicalizing influence of the situation in the Near/Middle Eastern region, in Afghanistan above all, where the victory of the Taliban movement and the stepped-up activity of Islamic radicals of the Arab world created a background favorable for the growth of support for radical Islamists in Central Asia.

### **The evolution of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan**

By the end of the 1990s, the IMU had increasingly begun to be geared to the use of violent, terrorist methods of struggle. It made several attempts to mount armed action against the regime in Uzbekistan, and also with the help of a terrorist act to physically destroy President Islam Karimov. However, all these attempts ended in failure and served as a pretext for a further clampdown in the country with reprisals against the Islamists and a section of the country's population sympathizing with them.

What was striking in IMU activity was the absence of a precise, well-developed ideological platform. However, one should hardly see in it just a criminal gang cloaked in Islamic ideas, as is done by some experts. Analysis of the available IMU documents allows one to say that within the organization there existed both a political and a military wing. The movement's ideologists tried to develop their ideological and theoretical base for the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan and the entire Central Asia. The movement retained those features which were characteristic of

the first Islamist organizations of the Ferghana Valley (in particular, Adolat), which is no wonder since the IMU was created precisely by those who pioneered them. Among these features the following can be named. First of all, the Islamic Salafi puritanism, the commandments of strict observance of the norms of Islam by the believers. Second, the claims to try to actually perform power functions in separate areas even before power takeover in the country (here analogies arise to Russia's region of Dagestan where the Salafis managed at approximately the same time to establish control over a number of villages and for a time to install their order there), having shown the population that Islamists are capable of eradicating crime and corruption. Third, the propagation of the ideals of social justice and equality. Fourth, the objective of the creation of an Islamic regime in the country based on the domination of Sharia. Some IMU documents allow one to judge on the concept of stages of Islamic jihad—political, military, economic and psychological. On the whole, the ideological-cum-theoretical basis of IMU activity remained undeveloped.

A tendency towards the use of violence was engulfing the IMU ever more, its regional obligations conflicting with its national agenda. This, on the one hand, naturally narrowed its support base inside the country and, on the other, had an adverse effect on mutual relations between the state and religion in Uzbekistan. Having been deprived of the possibility to continue participation in the armed struggle in Tajikistan after the national reconciliation achieved there,

IMU militants moved to bases in Afghanistan, but several times used the Tajik territory for transit to Kyrgyzstan and further to Uzbekistan, where they tried to pursue military operations. In 1999 they clashed with government troops in the south of Kyrgyzstan and in the Surkhan-Darya region of Uzbekistan.

These events, along with an attempt on the life of the Uzbek president in February, 1999, caused deterioration of Uzbekistan's relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, further widening the divergence of positions of these states in their policies in relation to Islam. The Uzbek authorities believe that the experience of national reconciliation, which for Tajikistan was a means of emerging from the civil war, stabilizing the situation in the country and national consolidation within the framework of a secular state where an Islamic party can take part in political life, is categorically unacceptable for Uzbekistan. Tashkent accused Tajikistan of indulging Islamic extremists, believing that the territory of that country is a source of threat to its national security. To secure the Uzbek-Tajik border, the Uzbek authorities not only virtually closed it but even mined a number of its segments. The Kyrgyz leadership was also castigated for its inability to deal a resolute blow to the militants who had penetrated on its territory for subsequent infiltration into Uzbekistan. Naturally, all this had a negative influence on the economic development of the Central Asian region and hindered the progress of cooperation between the Central Asian states. At the same time these states were building cooperation to counter Islamic extremism and terrorism.

After the events of September 11, 2001 and the beginning of the operation of the international coalition forces against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan the militants sided with the Taliban. The defeat of the regime resulted in a dramatic weakening of the IMU, many of whose leaders and militants were destroyed. Furthermore, the movement was deprived of its base at the borders of Central Asia. What remained of its groups moved to Pakistan, where they no longer had an opportunity of mobilization as had been the case in Afghanistan. In the world mass media rumors had it that IMU joined some other organizations to form a new movement—the Islamic Movement of Turkestan. However, even if this had taken place, it did not result in any appreciable growth of the organization's potential.

### **Ideological and political principles of Hizb at-Tahrir al-Islami**

Against a background of the IMU's gradual transformation into a purely terrorist organization in the Central Asian region, the positions of HTI, which at that stage dissociated itself from violence, were gradually growing. It would seem that the concept of world Islamic Caliphate was so Utopian that it could not attract to the party a large number of followers. Nevertheless, support for the party in the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s was gradually increasing.

HTI is simultaneously a transnational party and a community of practically autonomous national agencies quite loosely connected in terms of organization. All of them are

united by a single ideological and political platform: HTI is in much greater degree than IMU an ideological party. A significant part of its programmatic principles is contained in the works by the party's founder, Palestinian Islamist Taqi al-Din Nabhan (1909-1977). After his death they were complemented by theoretical works written by the following generation of the party ideologists. As any other Islamic project, the HTI concept is also based on the idea of the creation of an Islamic state, but as distinct from others, it aims at the creation of a world Caliphate as an ultimate goal. Historically, the emergence of this theory is closely connected with the antagonism between Islamists on the one hand, Marxists and secular nationalists on the other in the Arab world in the 1950s-1970s. It would seem that the obvious utopianism of the idea of the world Caliphate was to discourage the believers from supporting the party. The basic tendency of transformation in the region consists in the construction of national states. This presumes not so much integration which forces the states to relinquish a part of their sovereignty, as a certain setting apart, which is just what happens in reality. However, the craving of the population of the region for untrammeled movement of people, for the restoration of the lost economic, social and humanitarian ties is so great that even the Utopian transnationalism of HTI looks attractive. Even HTI's excessive involvement in the political realities of the Middle Eastern region has not frightened them off. If originally HTI found supporters among the population of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and

Kyrgyzstan (though in the two latter republics Uzbeks prevailed among its supporters), in the last years its influence began to spread to the southern regions of Kazakhstan as well.

In the theoretical precepts of HTI a critical attitude to such institutions of modern transformation as capitalism and democracy can clearly be discerned. For one, it is affirmed that the principle of free enterprise runs counter to Islam and consequently cannot be accepted by the believers. Moreover, the concept of human rights authorizes extramarital relations and sexual perversions, thereby challenging Islamic morality. Democracy, in the opinion of the authors of the party's theoretical principles, makes man the creator of laws in place of God and thereby becomes godlessness. Furthermore, they claim, as a result of the introduction of Western-style democracy people do not govern their life, they are dominated by a handful of influential people, while claims that equality, justice and ruler accountability are guaranteed have nothing in common with reality.

In the Tahriri criticism of capitalism and democracy one cannot but see the influence of the ideas of Marxism and Arab nationalism, from which the party in the past wanted to "take away" the popular slogans of equality and social justice. It is clear that in the agonizing conditions of the post-Soviet transformation of Central Asian societies these slogans will long retain their appeal, especially in the virtual absence of a secular left alternative. One cannot but agree with the opinion of the British authors A. Sidahmed and A.

Ehteshami on the influence of the contradiction between “the *absolutist* nature of Islamic ideology and the *relativist* character of democracy.” Opposed to each other here are a force considering itself as the “keeper of the divine covenant” and consequently pretending to a monopoly to the truth, and a system based on “relative truths and opinions.” At the same time all Islamic movements, not excepting HTI, are quite ready to use the fruits of democracy when it gives them an opportunity to act legally and work with the population.

### **Stages of struggle according to HTI philosophy**

Analysts considering nonviolence only as HTI’s tactical course, base themselves on separate tenets in the works of Nabhani and field data. According to the book *Caliphate* (*Khalifatlik* in the Uzbek translation), the party’s ultimate objective is the construction of an Islamic state on a global scale, but the struggle for realization of this objective is subdivided into certain main stages.

The first stage is the propaganda of the party’s ideas, the creation of its organizational cells, and the recruitment of the population into its ranks on the largest scale possible. The second stage begins when the idea of creating a Caliphate takes hold of the masses (as in the Lenin theory of socialist revolution). In this phase a bloodless revolution comes about, in the course of which the masses demand that the political leaders ruling the country voluntarily, but under po-

werful pressure of the people leave their posts. Finally, at the third stage there will be elections of the caliph, in which all adult Muslims, men and women will take part.

The removal of rulers from power is interpreted by a number of the researchers as a task inevitably requiring the use of force, hence the notion of HTI as an organization focused on power takeover, but at this preparatory stage just concentrating all efforts on winning the support of the population and on political mobilization.

### **The evolution of HTI influence**

For a whole number of reasons and especially due to the combat against terrorism waged all over the world since the end of 2001, HTI, in the opinion of a number of researchers, is faced with mounting difficulties, suffering a decline in activity.

Some observers believe that the influence of this organization among the people is falling, while in the HTI leadership squabbles and disunity are allegedly rampant. However, it is not ruled out that this is merely a camouflage which is called upon to help Islamic radicals to weather the times that are hard for them. The population of cities and villages of the Ferghana Valley—the main base of Islamic extremists—is intimidated by persecutions for the slightest sympathies toward HTI and other radicals, not to speak of direct assistance to it or joining their ranks. In addition, as a result of massive repression, members of radical Islamic or-

ganizations went deeply underground. The people concerned with difficult everyday problems no longer respond to the radicals' appeals the way they had done before. The risk has become greater, they do not perceive great benefit in supporting the Islamists and do not believe any more (as many of them had done before) that they will manage to build a just and prospering Islamic state, of which they have been saying for about fifteen years already. Nevertheless, sympathies with Islamic radicals have deep roots here, the Islamists remain the sole force posing a challenge to the regime, and protest sentiments are spilled over into support for the Islamists on the part and rituals of even those who cannot be called pious Muslims. According to the data of the Izhtimoi Fikr foundation, 97 percent of the indigenous population of Uzbekistan being Muslim, not everyone observes all the prescribed rituals. Mosques are attended mostly by old men and especially devout young people. Only every fourth of young people until 30 years of age performs rites prescribed by religion. But it is scarcely necessary to interpret this phenomenon as a decrease in religiosity. It would be more exact to talk about somnolent, latent religiosity—its open form has been discredited by the entire course of events in the country, the region and the world, and is also dangerous in view of the policies of the authorities who consider Islamic radicalism as the main threat for themselves and are consequently interested in decreasing religiosity in general. The somnolent, suppressed religiosity had already spilled over into a tidal wave of Islamism after the break-up

of the Soviet Union. A similar wave can emerge in Uzbekistan in the future as well.

There are grounds to believe that the decline in HTI activity does not mean its departure from the political arena. There are a few reasons why HTI (and, more broadly, the religious opposition) remains actually the sole channel for the expression of moods in opposition to the regime. First, the religious section of the population does not trust the official clergy which finds itself under strict tutelage of the authorities. Confidence in those who are oppressed by the powers that be, who invoke “true Islamic values” and suffer for the faith is traditionally high among this part of the population. Second, secular opposition parties have completely lost the possibility to act. Officially they are forbidden, they do not carry on any illegal work among the population, their websites are inaccessible to anyone but individual members of the intelligentsia. Furthermore, the leaders of these parties, living in exile, have practically lost touch with Uzbekistan, and know but little the problems of concern to the ordinary people. Third, of late the HTI leadership has for the first time begun to address the daily needs of the Uzbekistanis, to use social, economic and ecological problems in order to rouse opposition moods and gain popularity. Fourth, HTI has successfully used for political mobilization the anti-American and anti-British sentiment on the rise in the region since 2003 in connection with events in Iraq. In the new situation, HTI’s traditional anti-American and anti-Israeli

rhetoric, as a matter of fact alien to the Uzbekistanis who are rather tired of it, began to elicit a greater response. The slogans of solidarity with the unfairly aggrieved Muslims became even more popular since the Uzbekistani authorities supported the operation against Iraq (incidentally, neither did the secular opposition protest against the operation). The use of the situation in Iraq as an instrument of mobilization continues to this day. Fifth, HTI began to succeed in using interclan struggle in its interests. It is clear that it is precisely due to interclan antagonisms that members of groups considering themselves to have been bypassed in the distribution of government powers and in the realm of business can support the Islamists or side with them. In Uzbekistan it is believed that even in the country's government agencies there are "secret Wahhabi supporters," a nickname still carried by any Islamic oppositionists in Central Asia.

It is for this very reason that the authorities keep hunting after the "Wahhabis" in Uzbekistan with a vengeance, something which happens not only in kishlaks of the Ferghana Valley. Salafi literature is periodically detected and people suspected of its distribution arrested even in some central government institutions.

To put it differently, a certain decline in activity and a partial fall in HTI popularity do not mean a reduction in the party's potential. This is notably attested to by leaflets devoted to the internal problems of Uzbekistan, in which a more skilful manipulation of information material is discernible.

## **The Andizhan events and their influence on the situation in the region**

The events of May 13-14, 2005 in one of the towns of the Ferghana Valley, Andizhan, became a new turning-point in relations between the Uzbekistani authorities and Islam. As is well known, there were mass riots there, during which the rebels seized hostages and weapons. These riots were harshly suppressed by the Uzbek forces of law and order. Many people lost their lives, including civilians who went to a demonstration and bore no direct relation to the organization of the riots. Interpretations of these events and their assessment by the Uzbekistani authorities, human rights organizations and foreign governments of various states differ considerably. At the same time the establishment of truth would be vital for understanding the processes that take place today in Central Asia in general and in Uzbekistan in particular.

In the context of the subject under examination, it is important to note certain circumstances of the Andizhan events. First of all, they obviously contained an Islamic component, although the reasons that caused them should be sought in the socioeconomic and political domains. They were preceded by an arrest and trial of a group of 23 local businessmen indicted for belonging to the Islamist Akramiyya group. Experts pass various opinions as to whether it is possible to consider the Akramites as extremists, whether the work of the founder of that group currently being distributed contains extremist ideas and whether the convicted businessmen did in

fact belong to that group. A lot of authoritative Uzbek experts, including Bakhtiyor Babajanov, believe the Akramites to be a radical group. Nobody can say with confidence if they had branched off from one of the organizations earlier existing in the region (according to one version, ostensibly from HTI) or had arisen as an independent group from the outset. The authorities of Uzbekistan not only consider the Andizhan events as merely a result of Akramite actions, but also perceive in them a direct connection with international terrorist groupings. The version of a foreign connection was also supported by many Russian officials. At the same time, Western governments and an overwhelming part of Western public opinion are not inclined to support this version. While condemning rebel actions, they sharply reproach the Uzbek authorities with excessive use of force that led to the destruction of innocent people. Only separate Western experts support the Uzbek government's position. Among them, in particular, is the well-known British expert on Central Asia Shirin Akiner who talked to many people involved in the events on both sides of the barricades, including those serving time in local prisons.

The Islamist policy in the Ferghana Valley areas has always consisted in using the people's discontent with their distressing condition, the corruption of the power holders, the dominance of clans, and authoritarianism. Part of the direct organizers of the riot had arrived in Andizhan from the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, where Islamist groups may act virtually in the open. As for the convicted businessmen,

their implication in Islamist underground activity remains unproven. They themselves admit that they are zealous Muslims but deny their link with the Akramiyya group. However, in this connection, as stated by the Tahriris, the donations of the local population, including businessmen, form the main sources of their party's financing. The role of businessmen at least in financing Islamist activity cannot be excluded.

In the Andizhan events, the role of clan relations can also be discerned quite clearly. According to the data cited by EurasiaNet, the businessmen's trial was directly connected to the dismissal, in May 2004, of the khokim of the Andizhan region, Obidov, with whom the 23 arrested businessmen had maintained close relations. Obidov had kept the entire economy of the region under his control, and only those whom he favored could be successfully engaged in business. Initially, Obidov had been Karimov's favorite, but in the course of time the adverse situation in the region and corruption began to irk the president. Furthermore, the khokim also caused misgivings as he belonged to the Ferghana clan mistrusted by Karimov. Accusations of various personal abuses were brought against the khokim, and Karimov personally was present at the session of the regional council that displaced the khokim. The new khokim, Begaliev, started a purge in the regional administration and a persecution of businessmen with close connections to his predecessor. The steps taken against 23 Akramite businessmen were thus an element of a campaign to impose central control over this economically and politically important region and to put

things in order, using, among others, methods characteristic of the political system of that country.

In the Andizhan events, as in all previous crisis situations in Uzbekistan, the socioeconomic, religious, regional and clannish factors were closely intertwined. After the Andizhan events the country's leadership increased the pressure against informal Islam still more. Moreover, subjected to slashing criticism by the West for his actions during the Andizhan events and his refusal to agree to an investigation by an international commission, President Karimov responded by limiting his cooperation with Western states in the framework of the antiterrorist coalition. This could probably be explained not only by the fact that the Uzbek leader feels insulted by criticism, but also in much greater degree by his suspicions that USA and their allies would support the Islamic opposition in the country for the purpose of overthrowing his regime. It was no accident that Tashkent accused Western countries of complicity in the Andizhan events. In addition, Karimov probably reckoned that his close cooperation with the USA would foster a still greater mobilization by the population in support of his opponents from the ranks of radical Islamists.

### **The transformation of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)**

The IRPT gives us an example of deep transformation of a party initially geared to a power takeover for the purpose of constructing an Islamic state, not excepting the use of

armed force, into a parliamentary party focused exclusively on peaceful political action and accepting—at least in the mid-term—the conditions of the secular state.

The scenario, unique for Central Asia, of incorporation of an Islamic party together with its partners, the parties of liberal democratic orientation, in government as junior partners of secular forces was carried into effect due to an urgent necessity of overcoming the ideological and political split in society after the civil war, which coincided with the split among regional elites. The influence of external forces likewise played a significant role in the realization of this scenario. In this case, the interests and efforts of these forces also coincided, as distinct from the situation in the other republics of Central Asia, which became—albeit in a later period—an arena where the geopolitical interests of global and regional players came into collision. Significantly, Iran, despite its sympathies for Tajik Islamists, whom it had assisted, was guided by geostrategic tasks more important for it and closely cooperated with Russia in search of an acceptable formula for the settlement of the intra-Tajik conflict.

The IRPT has shown considerable political maturity, having actually sacrificed its narrow party interests in the name of restoring peace and stability in the country. However, its leadership was also fully aware that it lost the civil war, it did not have a chance of victory, while the Islamists' social base was gradually narrowing, as a substantial part of the population fasten the blame for the bloodshed that took place squarely upon them. The bloc of secular forces which

held the reins of government also displayed courage by coming to an agreement with the Islamists and the democrats.

The agreement put an end to internecine strife, but has not led to the establishment of a stable balance of regional forces in the country's state and political system. Their rivalry was channeled into latent antagonism within the framework of the existing system, which has generally demonstrated its stability and aptitude for renewal. In the IRPT leadership, educated elements belonging to the young generation of leaders began to play a growing role. In no small measure, they assisted in assuring a positive international reputation for the Tajik regime. The Tajik leadership led by Emomali Rakhmonov has managed not only to establish constructive relations with major global and regional powers, but also to achieve the realization of a significant number of objectives it had set itself. Thus Tajikistan is in relatively good standing with the international organizations in the realm of ensuring freedom of speech or the progress of financial and economic reforms. On Tajikistan's initiative, Russia has turned over state border control to it. The 201<sup>st</sup> motor rifle division which used to exercise peace-keeping functions has been transformed into a military base and is being withdrawn from the capital, the Russian companies have begun to make unprecedented investments in the country's industrial and energy sector and other domains.

The mistrust between former civil war adversaries and currently actual partners in a coalition has slowly been alleviated but cannot be finally overcome. The IRPT, on the one

hand, has actively used the chance of being transformed into a party of a parliamentary type, but, on the other, as a result of this it began to lose sympathies of the Islamic-oriented electorate, a portion of which began to turn to local HTI. The latter capitalizes on this, despite severe persecutions by the authorities and a powerful campaign for its discredit, in which the IRPT is also taking part. In the bloc of secular forces dominant in the country there is a group that seeks a final ouster of the IRPT from the ruling bodies, although its presence even now is much less than the initial quotas, while as a result of elections to the parliament of the republic it received an insignificant number of seats. It is the above-mentioned group that made attempts to enter into the constitution an article that would forbid the registration of any parties formed on a religious basis. For the moment, there is an ongoing cooperation, and new impulses to it have been given by the IRPT's active participation in actions to counter religious extremist groupings. However, the recent split in the party can dramatically weaken the political influence of moderate political Islam in Tajikistan.

## **Conclusion**

It is obvious that in the process of societal transformation the Central Asian regimes are faced with a necessity of assigning the place for religion in society and confront serious challenges on the part of political Islam.

A weakness of the authorities and the Islamic clergy loyal to it lies in their unwillingness or inability to carry on di-

alogue with that section of Islamists which rejects violence and is in the long term capable of positive evolution. In the difficult socioeconomic and political conditions generating protest moods among the population, political Islam remains the main, if not the only, attractive form of expressing these moods.