

THE HIZB UT-TAHRIR THROUGH THE EYES OF KYRGYZ JOURNALISTS

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The Hizb ut-Tahrir movement is getting stronger in the Kyrgyz Republic. And while journalists report about them, the content and the tone of the coverage can either change or manifest the perception of the movement among the readership.

In his book, «The Memorable Decade», President Akaev paid much attention to the Hizb ut-Tahrir religious movement, which is considered the major ideological force behind international terrorism in Central Asia. «The Hizb ut-Tahrir party's activities, which also extend to Kyrgyzstan, are outlawed in the majority of Muslim states,» he writes. «Structurally, it follows an almost military discipline and it acts in secret, guided by the rules of underground activity. Experience has shown that repressive methods of opposition to religious fanatics frequently do not achieve their purpose. It is preferable to counter the terrorists' ideological weaponry with a more perfected tool than force. The ground from under religious extremists should be removed with the power of intellect, belief and education.»

However, the state prefers using repressive means of struggle, because the authorities do not possess any power of intellect, belief and education. «A young person joining the Hizb ut-Tahrir party can learn much from its members,» writes Aleksei Sukhov, Res Publica correspondent in southern Kyrgyzstan. «Members of the party not only study religious issues, but problems faced by society, the economy and politics. Our govern-

ment officials are not qualified to deal with these questions, and as a result the authorities cannot oppose this movement. Their own weakness naturally irritates them and compels the state to use strong fighting methods.»

The official Islamic clergy cannot help the authorities either. In the Osh region, for example, 80 %

ments, even within the framework of the Koran or Sharia.»

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a threat because it represents real opposition to the authorities

The most dangerous element of this illegal religious party is its opposition to all Central Asian political regimes. Leaders of the republics have justified their actions, when they see this party and underground religious organization frequently acting more efficiently than their legal political opposition. «Hizb ut-Tahrir is both a religious movement and a

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of imams and mullahs have no higher education and many of them only know basic surahs of the Koran and some Islamic rites. The depths of Muslim doctrine remain outside the mullahs' understanding. Official theologians are incapable of argument, and are afraid of open religious debates where they are doomed to obvious defeat. According to Turat Akimov, political analyst at the Info-Center Bishkek, the Kyrgyz muftiyat cannot match representatives of the Hizb ut-Tahrir's in religious matters. The Muslim clergy simply have no convincing counter-argu-

political party,» believes Turat Akimov. «With its religious background the movement can apply for a secular status as well. It does not hide its political goals and claims for power. Hizb ut-Tahrir aspires for the creation of a new state with new laws in Central Asia. However, all the legal opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan have this same goal.» According to Aleksei Sukhov, the activities of the Hizb Ut-Tahrir party are an attempt to gain power. Party members openly declare their position, and are ready for open dialogue as well as for open conflict with the state. The authorities are afraid of

losing the peoples' doubting trust.

Journalists associating with representatives of the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement do not see them as religious maniacs, cut-throats or virulent fanatics, but rather as calm, competent and logically minded, despite the fact that they occupy the lowest rungs of the state's social hierarchy.

They do not, however, try to present themselves as better than they actually are.

«Hizb Ut-Tahrir members give the impression of being people who soberly assess the state's real condition,» believes Ernis Mamyrganov, Director of the Osh Mass Media Resource Center. «This

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commands respect. The first impression one gains when conversing with them is one of competence. However, the interest they attract represents the main danger for the state.» According to Turat Akimov, Hizb ut-Tahrir has the support of foreign think tanks. «Although it is not the highest ideologists who usually meet with journalists, but mushrifis (chiefs of groups (cells) composed of five persons), they look like well-prepared people. They behave with sincerity, which always positively influences journalists. A correspondent will doubt that these people are as dangerous as the authorities assert.» However, journalistic sympathies are not reflected in the mass media. «I wrote about

Hizb ut-Tahrir without sympathy, but just how I saw them,» said Aleksei Sukhov. «I should feel an aversion towards them, because one of the party's goals is the creation of a pure Islamic state, the Caliphate, in which everyone should be Muslim. Those who do not accept Islam will pay a «djizian» tax and serve the Muslims. I should feel disgust towards them, but the way Hizb ut-Tahrir is attracting more and more of the population, and how professionally it acts, leads me to admire them.»

POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY

Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideologists may apply to qualify as professional political technologists. The movement competently varies its tactics for attracting the population in the different countries of the region. The party's work in Uzbekistan is based on focusing attention on the violation of human rights, the limits placed on religious freedom and persecution for religious belief. In Kyrgyzstan they concentrate on the economic crisis and corruption amongst the authorities.

«Hizb ut-Tahrir is really enjoying increasing popularity amongst people,» believes Ernis Mamyrganov. «The movement appeals to an Islam that teaches that everyone should be equal. But in fact there is no equality! The people see how top government officials live and how the rest of us do. Hizb ut-Tahrir tempts people by claiming «This is unfair, but we can change it.» For the majority of the population, who do not understand big politics, this sounds convincing. The movement's missionaries have the weapon of belief and use it perfectly.»

«Involving new members in the movement, the Hizb ut-Tahrir speculates on the weaknesses of the state,» Aleksei Sukhov states.

«Unemployment, low salaries, the economic crisis, and Kyrgyzstan's weakness in the international arena. The authorities cannot reject this. The state is incapable of giving people even the basics: work and wages. The jobless get irritated and seeks consolation in religion, whereupon Hizb ut-Tahrir presents them with the appropriate religious literature.»

BIASED MEDIA?

Representatives of the Hizb Ut-Tahrir movement understand that the media represents advertising and the way to put forward their ideas. However, they do not thrust themselves upon the media. «The media is mad for sensational news, so any reports that the authorities have detected a Hizb ut-Tahrir cell become a top news item and gives rise to interest in this clandestine party,» believes Turat Akimov. «It is both reasonable and pragmatic that Hizb ut-Tahrir is glad for any representation in the media. The movement relies on its intellectual possibilities and is ready for debate. It is even ready to apply for official registration and become legalized, although being banned has already provided for guaranteed interest, not on the part of journalists.»

However, Central Asia's media does not discuss the real image of those bearing Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideas. Newspapers and television channels have no balanced approach to the forbidden movement. The media persistently repeat the cliché that Hizb ut-Tahrir's members are terrorists and extremists who wish to destroy the existing regime and establish an Islamic state in Central Asia, and this is all the authorities want to talk about. Giving details about the reasons and methods of work of the banned party means giving rise

to doubts and promoting its popularity amongst the population. «The media is means of influencing the people's consciousness,» believes Ernis Mamyrganov. «If media employees appear involved in the movement, then, either by implication or indirectly, they will promote the growth of the party's influence.»

«There are a few journalists, who know and write about the subject,» says Aleksei Sukhov. «Some are afraid to write, others simply do not want to be involved. By reporting on the Hizb ut-Tahrir I attempted at all times to be balanced, and confirm my conclusions with opinions, sources and facts. In order to make this movement clear to society, we should write about it with honesty and in detail, instead of categorically presenting it as an unequivocal threat. Our state information policy spreads fear about the party.»

CREATION OF AN ENEMY

The authorities do not ban writing about the Hizb ut-Tahrir, but imposes their own ideas about the religious opposition on the media. Kyrgyzstan's information market is not large, and there is a lack of experts qualified to talk on this issue. The media has therefore accepted the position imposing by the authorities. Citing President Akaev's book, government controlled media reports on the forbidden party as the main ideological force of international terrorism. Opposition newspapers agree with the authorities (a unique phenomenon!), that Hizb ut-Tahrir is dangerous, and offer no alternative opinion.

Incidentally, the terrorist attacks in the US, and the large-scale anti-terrorism operation in Afghanistan, has given Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service an active

influence in the information field. Through numerous briefings, this - until recently «off limits» - organization has been reporting the discovery of Hizb ut-Tahrir's extremist leaflets and other printed materials, and revealing the existence of more underground terrorist cells. According to the official information policy, Hizb ut-Tahrir must only be painted in a negative light because it represents a real contender for power and is the more successful competitor in the struggle for the peoples' souls. Thus the official media forces in-

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tensity and stimulates danger by presenting the party as more powerful and influential than it really is. There is, however, no open debate in society. The authorities can find no convincing counter-arguments for discussion and try deny Hizb ut-Tahrir's representatives access to the tribune. But the intellectual dumbness and active violence on the part of the authorities has created an image of the religious movement as martyrs and fighters for faith. The Hizb ut-Tahrir movement becomes stronger by convincing itself that the state is weak and shouts about the threat of religious extremism because of powerlessness.

«By being aware of official information policy, according to which the Hizb ut-Tahrir is considered an anti-state party, journalists cannot write about it objectively,» says Turat Akimov. «However, the party's representatives realize that any journalists will write articles one-sidedly because they are under pressure from the state's

point of view. Nevertheless, the movement will never miss an opportunity to talk to any journalist. A journalist cannot express his feelings in press or on television, but in private contact with colleagues, relatives and his family he can honestly recount what impression he had from a conversation with one of the movement's representatives. In this way, Hizb Ut-Tahrir achieves its goals.»

By closely scrutinizing the Hizb ut-Tahrir phenomenon, experts have drawn a parallel between religious and political opposition to the state. «Let's take an example of political opposition, in the form of political prisoner, Felix Kulov, a major opponent of the authorities,» says sociologist Sultan Tynaev. «Despite his image as a criminal, even according to official records, Kulov is rated second only to President Akaev in terms of popularity. People take a subconscious interest in him, as «persona non-grata», despite his guilt or innocence. Not everyone is ready to openly support Kulov, but most people sympathise with him. Almost the same can be said of religious opposition. People may or may not believe in the danger of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but at heart they argue about their reasons...»

EDUCATION IS NEEDED

For the last two years in the Osh region there have been 47 reported incidents of Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets distribution. 37 legal proceedings were instituted and 49 people have been convicted. «Ten years ago the militia arrested only about a dozen members of this banned party,» said Ernis Mamyrganov. «This year about 6 thousand people have been arrested in only one region, Jalal-Abad. The growth of Hizb Ut-Tahrir numbers is a threat to the state. It is there-

fore urgent to put the state counter-propaganda machinery and fight in motion and that the education policy be changed.»

The number of Kyrgyz members of the banned party is not big, and Hizb ut-Tahrir even incorporates the Slavs.

However, experts doubt their ideological membership. Some people believe they are well paid for smart examples of how nonbelievers become faithful Muslims. «The party aims for integration and denies any inter-ethnic enmity, and this automatically extends the basis for its growth,» said Sovetbek

Tolonbaev, a councilor with the Osh regional prosecutor's office. About 92 % of Hizb Ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan are ethnic Uzbeks. The experts explain this phenomenon by citing the rapid growth of Uzbeks' religious self-consciousness and their traditional religious nature. However, this figure does not only include the religious constituency. After Uzbekistan's transition to Latin fonts no more textbooks were supplied for ethnic Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan, and the majority of children in Uzbek schools use old Soviet textbooks that contradict reality. Because of

its economic weakness, Kyrgyzstan is unable to provide Uzbek schools with textbooks in Uzbek, nor can the state provide the Uzbek population with printed newspapers in their native language. This information vacuum is filled by Hizb ut-Tahrir's printed material. The deficiency of news about the world, politics, culture and religion for Kyrgyz Uzbeks is replaced with leaflets and brochures about Hizb ut-Tahrir. Thus, the Kyrgyzstan authorities themselves help their opponents, with their own weak educational, social and national policies.