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Radical Islam Uzbekistan

Preventing Radical Islam and Conflicts in Uzbekistan

If one thing hasn't changed in Central Asia and especially in Uzbekistan after US War on terrorism, it's the authorities fear of " Hizb-ut-Tahrir" and " IMU" - Islamic movements banned in all Central Asian countries, with its headquarters in Europe, that strives to recreate an undivided Muslim caliphate, encompassing all Muslim lands.

Soon after Uzbekistan gain independence after Soviet Union's collapse, Uzbekistan like other 15 former Soviet countries began its own way in socioeconomic and democratic development. As we can see from 1991 till about 1998 Uzbekistan achieved some progress comparing other four Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Great potential of Uzbekistan like rich natural resources, industrial and agricultural sectors and human resources (Uzbekistan is most populous country in Central Asia and during Soviet period was fourth most important country in whole Soviet Union) and other factors helped Uzbekistan to become the first country in Central Asia in the early stages of Independence.

It is still the region's most militarily capable and populous country, and large Uzbek minorities live in neighboring states. But those great reforms of too corrupt and repressive government were short term and self interests of President, his family and too much corrupt centralized Government and their authoritarian rule showed that Uzbekistan could not achieve those ideal results, which were promised before by President.

Socioeconomic decline caused and still causes many conflicts inside country and Uzbekistan's unequal relations with its neighbors and efforts trying to be dominant country in the region resulted many conflicts among other Central Asian Countries.

Uzbekistan is multinational country consisting majority of Uzbeks and 85 percent of the country is Muslims (99 percent Sunnites). My great fear is that soon after Uzbekistan President's rule ends, who has been on the post more than 18 years, a civil war for Uzbek throne will be began by Fundamental Islamists Groups and main Governmental clans and it may last long time spreading to other Central Asian states and could be bloody.

That the conflict in Uzbekistan poses a threat is largely a result of government policies that have led to a combination of authoritarian rule, economic decline, social discontent, and a polarized political arena in which radical Islamist groups have begun to occupy an important underground role. These domestic pressures are played against a backdrop of poor relations with neighboring states, and in a region characterized by instability and may cause many conflicts.

Authoritarian Regime

The government is highly centralized and personalized around President. Uzbekistan has neither any opposition nor democratic parties. Uzbekistan is now considered as one the ten most repressive and authoritarian countries in the world and the situation is becoming more and more severe.

Evidence continues to mount that Uzbekistan's " unique state-construction model" is falling apart. However, now after recent Andijan (an east city of the

country) massacre in 2005, where thousands of people led by mainly local businessmen protested against President's brutal regime, the President showed no intention to leave his post killing hundreds of innocent civilians.

Decisions are largely made by President only and parliament is nothing but a puppet show. There is widespread evidence of human-rights abuses by the security forces against political opponents of the regime. Media has no democracy and the main role of media is propaganda and informing people that Uzbekistan is achieving great results in development and plays great role in International arena, and praising the President for his merits.

Besides, the fact is that one cannot get access for Independent Internet web sites which shows the real picture. Any International media, organizations, and NGOs criticizing Uzbekistan is banned and prohibited in the state.

Elections are held both to the presidency and to parliament do not meet international standards of free and fair elections. OSCE and other International Organizations refused many times to participate in elections announcing all elections of Uzbekistan against democratic standards.

However, the first election for presidency after independence was fairly democratic, but still taking into account the fact that current president Mr. Karimov was at that time a First Secretary of the Communist Party of the state (same as President of a State), the elections were viewed as not free and fair by international observers.

After independence Mr. Karimov encouraged anti-Russian nationalist sentiment and millions of Russians and many other nations fled Uzbekistan. Activities of missionaries from some Islamic countries with absence of real

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opportunities to participate in public affairs contributed to popularization of radical interpretation of Islam. In 1999, 2000, and 2004 some terroristic acts were held in Uzbekistan and even an attempt to kill President but President Karimov nearly escaped an attempt.

The government blamed the “ Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” (IMU), “ Hizb-ut-Tahrir”, “ Wahhabism” and other Radical Islamists Groups in the attacks. In result of law-enforcement operations, thousands of people were suspected and imprisoned.

During the early stages of independence, many observers considered Uzbekistan’s relative socio-economic and political stability to President Islam Karimov’s authoritarian policies. Despite the country’s often abysmal human rights record, and over the protests of human rights organizations and increasingly repressed opposition groups, most international financial assistance (including security aid) has continued to flow.

Ironically, in past the Uzbekistan government’s frequent abuses out of concerns regarding Islamist radicalism in the region, the international community has inadvertently helped create exactly the conditions that it has always feared the most. Growing political repression and poverty now provide a fertile breeding ground for violence, instability and increasingly active Islamist extremist groups. The authoritarian approach has at best postponed, but not defused, economic and political crisis.

It requires relatively enormous financial, human and other resources for the government of Uzbekistan to maintain authoritarian rule and keep control over competing internal factions based on regionalism, ethnicity, and

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patronage networks. The establishment of near absolute power by the executive branch has only been achieved through a brutal crackdown on moderate voices and through power-sharing arrangements with leftover Soviet-era bureaucrats in the “ power” ministries.

Tashkent’s authoritarian domestic approach has sparked a political crisis marked by mismanagement, the emergence of a strong Islamist opposition, broad economic dislocation, endemic corruption, growing dissatisfaction with the government, poor relations with neighbors and continuing regional turmoil.

Radical Islam

Thus as mentioned before, Uzbek government’s eliminating all oppositions and democratic leaders created exactly the conditions that it has always feared the most. Socioeconomic decline, human rights abuses, corrupted government acts and other factors caused many people who are tired of government to follow only existing leaders - Radical Islamists Groups leaders.

Two major groups opposed to the regime have been active after independence. These are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and “ Hizb ut-Tahrir”. Main ideology of these groups is almost the same: to overthrow the President’s regime and to create a “ Caliphate” - Islamic State according to “ Sharia” (Islam Constitution) not only in Uzbekistan but also in some other Central Asian countries.

The main difference of these two Islamic groups is that Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a military violent group, while Hizb-ut-Tahrir is more a

politic group and against violence, which is based on Islamic Ideology. However, both of them are considered as Radical Islamist Groups.

IMU - Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The unrest that led to the formation of the IMU began in late 1991, when some unemployed young Muslims seized the Communist Party headquarters in the eastern city of Namangan, incensed at the mayor's refusal to give them land on which to build a mosque. The men were led by Mr. Tohir Yuldeshev, and Mr. Jumaboi Khojaev.

Mr. Yuldeshev, a 24-year-old college drop-out, was a well-known “ mullah” in the Islamic underground movement, while Mr. Khojaev was a former Soviet paratrooper who had served in Afghanistan where he was said to have developed a high regard for the “ mujahidin” against whom he fought and revitalized his Muslim faith.

The group led by Yuldeshev and Khojaev, who later adopted the alias Juma Namanganiy, after his hometown (Namangan city), were members of the recently formed Uzbekistan branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). Disillusioned at the IRP's refusal to demand the establishment of a Muslim state, these men set up their own splinter movement, “ Adolat” (or Justice) which called for an Islamic revolution in Uzbekistan.

President Karimov banned “ Adolat” party in 1992, arresting many of its members. The group's leadership fled to Tajikistan, enlisting with the IRP there. With the outbreak of that country's civil war, Yuldeshev moved to Afghanistan, later beginning a networking odyssey around the world's Islamic states, visiting Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and

Turkey. He also met with various intelligence agencies, requesting funds and sanctuary.

He received both from Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence, and was based in Peshawar from 1995 to 1998. It has been claimed that Yuldeshev was also funded by intelligence services and Islamic charities in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. He also met with Chechen rebel leaders during the first Chechen war of 1994-96, as well as establishing underground cells of the " Adolat" party across Central Asia which would be crucial in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) campaigns five years later.

Meanwhile, Namangani fought in the Tajik civil war, establishing a reputation for himself as a daring fighter and becoming a revered and charismatic leader. When the war ended, Namangani at first refused to accept the ceasefire. Eventually he was persuaded to do so, settling with his family and some fifty of his men at a farm in the village.

Here he began working in the transportation business and, it has been alleged, first became involved in heroin smuggling as a way of feeding his growing camp of followers, which attracted many of Central Asia's Islamic radicals, disaffected at the ceasefire in Tajikistan which many viewed as a sell-out. Proceedings from drug smuggling were also used to finance the group which, in 1998, became known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). This connection with drug trafficking has continued, and the organization reportedly handles 70 percent of the heroin and opium traffic through Central Asia.

The IMU's creation was announced from Kabul by Namangani and Yuldeshev, the latter having settled here by this time as a guest of the Taliban.

Yuldeshev was also given a residence in Kandahar, where Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's spiritual leader, and Osama bin Laden also lived. By now Yuldeshev had met Bin Laden, who recognized the Uzbek as a potential ally in Central Asia, a region where al Qaeda had few contacts and cultivated him as such.

Namangani and Yuldeshev decided to move their operations to Afghanistan in 1997 in the face of fresh crackdowns in Uzbekistan, provoked by a series of bloody murders attributed to the Uzbek Islamic extremists. Moreover, the ceasefire in Tajikistan made it an unreliable sanctuary, while the Taliban made natural allies for Yuldeshev and Namangani, not least in that Uzbek President Karimov was supporting the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

The United States believed that bin Laden supplied most of the funding for setting up the IMU, with some Uzbek and Tajik officials saying the al Qaeda leader encouraged Yuldeshev and Namangani to organize such a the group in the first place, which declared a “ jihad” against the Uzbek government and sought to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan.

The organization is also believed to have received funding from Saudi sources, including some close to Prince Turki al-Faisal, the head of Saudi intelligence. The IMU, like the Taliban and al Qaeda has no overarching political manifesto, being more interested in implementing “ sharia” not as a way of creating just society but simply as a means to regulate personal behavior and dress code for Muslims - a concept that distorts centuries of

tradition, culture, history, and even the religion of Islam itself." The organization also lacks the "legitimacy" of the Tajik Islamicists, drawing its idea of Islamism from foreign sources, namely, Saudi "Wahhabism" and the Taliban's version of "Deobandism".

Central Asia's Ferghana Valley, where the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik borders converge, has been the main area for IMU operations, and the organization has launched punitive campaigns here in 1999, 2000 and 2001, which have affected all three countries and disrupted relations between them. There were some fights between Uzbek military forces and IMU units came through borders of Tajikistan and Kirgizstan. Uzbekistan responded by laying mines on much of its border with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have led to the deaths of scores of local people. Moreover, Uzbek Air forces bombed a village in Kirgizstan which was occupied by IMU warriors. These and other events led to disrupted relations among Central Asian countries.

In addition, the IMU was responsible for a series of car bombings in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent which killed many people in 1999, as well as numerous kidnappings. The group also fought in the civil war in Afghanistan, and is currently fighting alongside Taliban and al Qaeda forces. Pakistani sources claim that the IMU may have supplied bin Laden with fissile material for manufacturing an improvised nuclear explosive device.

More recently, significant numbers of IMU fighters were involved in the battle in the Shah-I-Kot valley, and there is little doubt that the organization has suffered heavy losses at the hands of U. S. and coalition forces. There has also been speculation that Namangani was killed in earlier U. S. air raids.

If so, his death did not stop his men putting up fierce resistance at Shah-I-Kot. Moreover, the IMU's power base lies not in Afghanistan, but in the Ferghana Valley itself, a region the organization has found to be a fertile recruiting ground, largely due to the brutal and counterproductive reprisals of the President Karimov regime. It may well be there that any final showdown with the remnants of the group that poses the greatest threat to Central Asia's security will take place.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation) stands apart from better known radical Islamist movements by its apparent opposition to the use of violence. But its views are highly radical, advocating the overthrow of governments throughout the Muslim world and their replacement by an Islamic state in the form of a recreated " Caliphate".

It has grown quickly in Central Asia and been met with a heavy-handed repression that threatens to radicalize members still further and sow the seeds of greater Islamist extremism in the region.

Hizb ut-Tahrir first emerged among Palestinians in Jordan in the early 1950s. It has achieved a small, but highly committed following in a number of Middle Eastern states and has also gained in popularity among Muslims in Western Europe and Indonesia. It began working in Central Asia in the mid-1990s and has developed a committed following inside Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.

Estimates of its strength vary widely, but a rough figure is probably 15-20,000 throughout Central Asia. Its influence should not be exaggerated - it has

little public support in a region where there is limited appetite for political Islam - but it has become by far the largest radical Islamist movement in the area.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is not a religious organization, but rather a political party whose ideology is based on Islam. It aims to re-establish the historical “Caliphate” in order to bring together all Muslim lands under Islamic rule and establish a state capable of counterbalancing the West. It rejects contemporary efforts to establish Islamic states, asserting that Saudi Arabia and Iran do not meet the necessary criteria. According to Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic state is one in which Islamic law - Sharia - is applied to all walks of life, and there is no compromise with other forms of legislation.

Hizb ut-Tahrir claims to reject violence as a form of political struggle, and most of its activities are peaceful. In theory, the group rejects terrorism, considering the killing of innocents to be against Islamic law. However, behind this rhetoric, there is some ideological justification for violence in its literature, and it admits participation in a number of failed coup attempts in the Middle East. It also has contacts with some groups much less scrupulous about violence. But despite the allegations of governments, there is no proof of its involvement in terrorist activities in Central Asia or elsewhere.

Government responses have been contradictory and often ineffective. In much of the Middle East, the organization is banned from acting openly, and many of its members have been imprisoned. Central Asian governments have taken particularly harsh stances, with Uzbekistan leading the way by arresting and sentencing thousands of members to long prison terms. In

some other Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Hizb ut-Tahrir acts more or less openly, as it does in much of Western Europe.

Wider policies of governments in Central Asia have probably contributed to the growth of Hizb ut-Tahrir, particularly in Uzbekistan. Repression by the Uzbek government has given it a certain mystique among some of the population, and the lack of alternative forms of political opposition or expression of discontent has ensured that it has attracted members from the mass of those opposed to the regime for political reasons.

Poor economic policies have further undermined support for the government, and induced discontent among traders - a key Hizb ut-Tahrir constituency. Uzbekistan's restrictive border regime has also increased support for a group that advocates a universal Muslim state, with no national distinctions.

For a small but significant group of predominantly young men, Hizb ut-Tahrir gives an easy explanation for their own failure to achieve change in their personal lives, in society or in the state system. It provides young men with some meaning and structured belief in an era of otherwise confusing and difficult social change. It also offers occasional material benefit and social support in states characterized by extreme poverty and social breakdown.

Repression of its members, and often of those merely associated with them, has radicalized the movement, and had an impact on wider societies. Given the radical ideas of the group and the conspiratorial nature of its political struggle, it is understandable that governments are concerned about its impact on stability.

But too often governments in the region, particularly in Uzbekistan, use Hizb ut-Tahrir as an excuse for their own failure to carry out political and economic reform and for continuing suppression of religious activity outside narrow official structures. Too often the international community has turned a blind eye to this repression. The West, and the U. S. in particular, is in danger of damaging its reputation in the region by close association with Central Asian dictatorships.

Concern over Nuclear Terrorism

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia and especially Kazakhstan with Uzbekistan played an active role in the development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) due to its massive reserves of uranium tapped for fissile material. As the Soviet Union collapsed, the Soviet military-industrial complex left behind significant amounts of WMD as well as poorly guarded reactors and facilities for uranium enrichment.

These facilities have been of increasing concern for the states in the region, as well as the United States, as nuclear weapons and material could get into the hands of terrorists or rogue states. The Institute of Nuclear Physics in Tashkent has been considered as especially vulnerable to terrorism due to the presence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the country and their ties to Al Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin-Laden's top deputy, reportedly bragged that they would send their people to Moscow, to Tashkent, to other Central Asian states, and they negotiate, and Terroristic groups would purchase some suitcase nuclear bombs. The truth behind this could be disputed, but the fact remains that the United States have since 9/11 invested large sums to prevent such a development in Central Asia.

Clans Warfare

The Samarkand and Tashkent (two biggest cities of the state) clans are believed to be the most powerful on Uzbekistan's political scene. And it looks like the rivalry between the two has deepened lately. President Islam Karimov, a native of Samarkand, a former finance minister in the Uzbek Soviet republic, came to power in 1989 with the support of the head of the Samarkand clan.

Since the early days of independence, Karimov - not wanting to damage his own position - has attempted to achieve a balance of power among different political groups. However, that has fueled rivalries even more.

Actually, President Karimov benefits from the rivalry most of all. He can be calmly sitting in his office, watching, and feeling very safe. What happened recently to top officials, and what is likely to happen to many others is nothing but clan rivalry.

The rivalry between the Interior Ministry (MVD) and National Security Council (SNB) (former KGB) is typical in ex-Soviet countries. But in Uzbekistan this rivalry has deepened lately. One is inclined to think that all processes are driven by inter-clan relationships. The two strongest clans for the time being are the MVD and the SNB. They compete and fight with each other all the time.

Does President Karimov, who has skillfully maintained the balance of power among the clans for several years, have full control over the situation? Or has he been influenced by those clans?

Analysts say that Karimov doesn't have full control. President Karimov benefits from the rivalry among the clans. However, he is playing a dangerous game, as one of these clans is likely to overthrow President Karimov and put in power someone from their clan instead of him.

I don't know how long this agony will last, but society could explode any moment, triggered by some insignificant event that will then have a chain reaction. People are on the edge. The authorities haven't grasped the situation. They don't understand how strong people's despair is and what the people are capable of doing at this moment. But within more than 16 years of Independence any conditions for a peaceful and democratic handover of power have not been created, statehood remains clannish, and no politicians with public personas have appeared in the last 16 years.

Conclusion

Closed political systems, lack of freedom of speech, lack of economic progress, socioeconomic decline and unreformed and brutal security services all contribute to the growth of radical opposition groups.

In order to avoid future conflicts the followings should be implemented by the Government of Uzbekistan such as:

Decentralization, the delegation of power to a lower level, and the expansion of the power and opportunities for local self-governance bodies and local government authorities in Uzbekistan today must be combined with the establishment of judicial oversight independent of executive bodies, the strengthening of the role of civil-based organizations and the development of an independent mass media.

Without the simultaneous development of all the aforementioned components, decentralization and the promotion of local self governance may result in continuing management by the authorities of the local community organizations, limiting the citizens' participation in local governance. Such a reduction of people's participation in community actions is likely to increase social tension.

The government should permit secular as well as religious opposition groups, including the " Birlik People's Movement" and the " Erk Democratic Party" and other Islamists Parties, to register as political parties. Moreover, government should to allow Representatives of Islam to join and actively act in the Parliament.

The government should allow human rights groups of Uzbekistan to register officially as non-governmental organizations and should direct the security services to stop intimidating their staff.

More resources should be channeled directly into improving national living standards, rather than enlarging the already considerable role of regional police and military forces.

The constitutional right to practice religion in private and public, freely and without interference, should be upheld. The government should implement the constitutional separation of state and religion and end its practice of designating state-sponsored Islamic leaders.

The separation and equality of the executive, judiciary and legislative branches declared by the Constitution should be upheld.

The government should combat unlawful practices by security agencies, such as the harassment of journalists and human rights activists.

The International Community

The International Community has a key role to play and it is in the security interests of the international community to ensure that political opposition to unpopular regimes does not by default coalesce into a more militant group, with a more violent and dangerous agenda than the present-day some Radical Islamists Groups.

The international community, in particular the United States, the European Union nations and Japan, must be more discriminating in their response to the problem of Islamist extremism, recognizing that unquestioning support for secular dictatorships only antagonizes Central Asian Muslim communities, thus encouraging extremism and an anti-Western orientation.

Government donors to Uzbekistan should make it clear that their assistance will be predicated on political liberalization, including such measures as registering opposition parties and human rights organizations to encourage the establishment of a legitimate political opposition and an unhindered civil society.

The U. S. Russian and Chinese governments should withhold security assistance until Uzbekistan's human rights record, including performance of the security services, improves significantly, and, in keeping with the International Religious Freedom Act, should condition the future of the Joint Commissions on Uzbekistan's efforts to combat human rights abuses based on the religious convictions of its citizens.

The United States, the EU and Japan should demand investigations into the case of the Human Rights Defenders and other Political “ Enemies” of Uzbekistan who are right now in jails of Uzbekistan or were killed by regional police and military forces.

The international financial institutions should condition their aid on the Uzbek government making considerable progress in opening the economy, developing the rule of law and fostering democracy.

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