

Arkady Dubnov, “Why Are They Shutting Down the Only Islamist Party in the Post-Soviet World?” Carnegie Center in Moscow, 4 Sept 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/03/ru-61188/iflu>

Unofficial translation



Prayer in the Al-Tirmidhi Cathedral Mosque, Dushanbe/Photo: A.Zhukov & S.Zhukov/TASS

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The fight against Islamist extremism is not a new issue for Tajikistan. But somehow, the Tajik authorities have now decided to terminate the country's oldest political organization, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, the only legal Islamist party in the former Soviet Union.

The armed attack on a police station that killed [more than] five personnel of the Interior Ministry of Tajikistan was carried on early morning of September 4th in the Tajik town of Vahdat, 20 km from Dushanbe. This incident happened in the same town where on August 29th, Umar Bobojonov, a 23-year-old local resident, was beaten by police officers allegedly because he had a beard. Now the man is in the hospital. [Update: Bobojonov has since died.]

Outraged by the police high-handedness, several dozen people went in the streets of Vahdat on the same day, but the authorities managed to calm them down, assuring them that a trial will be conducted and those who found guilty will be punished. But such a trial is unlikely to be serious, nor the punishment harsh. Tajik authorities are occupied with a tricky business: to confront the threat of religious extremism and eradicate all of its signs, and, of course, the beard on a man's face speaks of him as an Islamist radical.

The fight against Islamist extremism is not a new issue in Tajikistan. But why has the country's leadership now launched an active campaign the result of which—as no one doubts—will be the shutting down of the country's oldest political organization, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the only post-Soviet legally acting party built on confessional basis? And why are not the officials in Dushanbe afraid of the explosive growth of radical Islamic sentiment in the

country after the demolition of the “dam” that the IRPT served as for many years, separating the moderate Islamists from the radicals?

Illegal & Flammable

Tajikistan’s Ministry of Justice has demanded a halt to the Islamic Revival Party’s illegal activities and threatened it with an ultimate ban. This decision seemed predictable as it followed the verdict of the Economic Court, which all of a sudden called back the fact that in the late 1990s, the party illegally acquired the building used for its office. Pertinently, the firefighters on the spur of the moment evoked concerns over the supposed violations of fire safety rules, and the office was closed and sealed by the authorities. The IRPT’s printing house also turned out to be “impure” and was shut because of “violations of the sanitary-epidemiological norms.”

Although deprived of the opportunity to accommodate the [Party] Congress it planned for September 15th due to the office shutdown, still, the party’s leadership decided not to give up. In the absence of their leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, who left the country a few months earlier, his allies held a press conference at Kabiri’s home and called for the authorities to “assist” them in the search for a new building for the IRP.

It was not in the script of the play, developed by the president's retinue, and therefore, the party members were pointed out to the illegality of their activities, since the IRP has lost its status as a republican party following termination of the party sections in 58 towns and districts of Tajikistan. Everything was preordained, since the members of the IRPT under pressure from the authorities were forced en masse to withdraw from the party in the provinces and countryside.

Path to Systemic Opposition

All the body language of Kabiri’s metropolitan associates, however, look at best as imitation of resistance of the moderate Islamic activists, who formed the backbone of IRPT’s membership and reflected the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of Muslim believers in Tajikistan [of the time]. The Islamic Party’s activities are nearing to an end. Long gone are the days when in the mid-1990s, the IRPT (it’s been in existence since 1974, when the late Said Abdullo Nuri, created a related underground cell) was the cornerstone of the Islamist-democratic United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was resisting the rule of the quasi-communist regime in the country.

The Peace Agreement signed in 1997 in Moscow between official Dushanbe and the Tajik Opposition to end the bloody civil war in Tajikistan legally recognized the UTO framework, and granted them the right to a 30% quota for representation in all of the republic’s authoritative bodies.

Since then, the regime of Emomali Rahmon, who has been in power since November 1992, has somehow tried to maintain a loyal relationship with the IRPT, keeping this policy even after the death of Master Nuri in 2006, its charismatic leader, who signed the Moscow Agreement. His successor, Kabiri,

(who turned 50 this year) managed to keep the party, making it part of the systemic opposition on par with the Communist Party.

Mutual understanding between the government and the IRPT was so good that the party leadership twice at the request of Rahmon was ready to remove references to Islam from its name. But then the president changed his mind, alleging that it would strengthen respect to the country where Muslims enjoy significant political freedoms.

In the 2010 parliamentary elections, the IRPT ranked second after the ruling Peoples Democratic Party and received two parliamentary seats, which were assigned to Kabiri and his deputy.

According to Kabiri, right after these elections, the pressure on the IRPT increased. “By the next parliamentary elections in 2015, our party had been considered not as a partner in the Peace Accords, and in construction of a stable Tajikistan, but rather as a competitor or a potential enemy of the Tajik people. There was a lot of stuff in the media, telling that our party was the source of the civil war in Tajikistan. The idea that the party is a threat to national unity and the future of Tajikistan was drilled into minds of the populace,” said Kabiri in an interview to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

According to the results of the parliamentary elections in 2015, it was announced that the IRPT received only 1.6% of the vote and was not eligible for seats in the Parliament. “For the second largest and the influential party in the country this was offensive,” said Kabiri. “But we did not make a tragedy out of it.” Then he, referring to the necessity of medical treatment, left Tajikistan with his family and settled down in Istanbul. It seems like it was the right decision, since the police in Dushanbe set forth on accusations of his illegal real estate deals, which took place many years ago.

Swing on Excellency

However, when other circumstances of the persecution of the Islamic Revival Party and its leader became known, they showed that the issue is not only in the official campaign of Dushanbe to fight the threat of Islamist extremism. It turns out that President Rahmon had other reasons to dislike Kabiri. In the Russian political practice, this would be called a “loss of confidence.”

This was due to the preparation for the presidential elections in Tajikistan, held in November 2013. Then to the surprise of many observers, Zaid Saidov, the former Industry Minister, who got the job on a quota of the Tajik Opposition under the Moscow Peace Accord, set in motion an active preparation to the participation in the elections. By that time, he was one of the most successful Tajik businessmen, who had numerous contacts abroad (he was a close friend of a well-known Ukrainian oligarch Dmitry Firtash, who until recently, owned a significant stake in Tajik enterprises). In April 2013, he announced the formation of his political party “New Tajikistan,” which supposedly was to have appeal for the middle class in Tajikistan.

Rahmon’s retinue perceived this as the most serious challenge to his authority since the Civil War. Saidov was a very popular figure in the country, he built a lot,

many received aid from him, Mahmadsaid Ubaydullaev the mayor of Dushanbe and the speaker of the upper house of the Tajik Parliament was considered to be his closest ally in power.

“New Tajikistan,” however, was not granted an official registration. Saidov, who had stayed abroad for a time, despite numerous warnings by friends and colleagues of the dangers of returning to his homeland, nevertheless ignored them and in May came back from Paris to Dushanbe. He was arrested right at the ramp. The charges against him included a variety of clauses, from abetting in the outbreak of the Civil War to sexual offenses. This was to prepare [Saidov’s] bewildered fellow countrymen to a lawsuit, which ended in December of the same year with a sentence of 26 years in prison.

The reason for such a harsh sentence was only the intention, albeit serious, of Saidov’s aim at the absolute power of Rahmon, who goes by “Janobi Oli” (His Excellency) in the country and who became aware of the IRPT’s willingness to support the ex-minister. That’s what the Tajik President could not forgive Kabiri for, especially when the inner circle of Rahmon was informed about the possible support for Rahmon’s opponent by some Iranian political and economic structures.

Moreover, these structures managed to convince Saidov, himself that this scenario is a legitimate transfer of power in Dushanbe supported by Russia, and therefore nothing will impede his return to Tajikistan. All this was very far from the truth and became the cause of dramatic denouement of the intrigue.

According to informed sources in Emomali Rahmon’s presidential administration, all these circumstances, in addition, caused the well-known estrangement in relations between Moscow and Dushanbe, which still have not been resolved. The fixed unwillingness of the Tajik leadership to speak out about its desire to become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union may be because of this unpleasant residue that still remains after the encounter.

On the other hand, Dushanbe, by shutting down the IRPT, with its newspaper which publishes with the slogan “The Party of God [Hizballah] is always victorious,” has a chance to draw dividends out of this—who knows, perhaps Tajikistan will be summoned now to join the international coalition against the Islamic State as recently the United States proposed the same to Uzbekistan. Unlike the other cases, where the U.S. very clearly pointed out to the unacceptability of Tajikistan to restrict democratic freedoms, there is no indication of it this time.

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