

# Kyrgyzstan's Islamist Blowback

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When he was arrested again two years ago, Ravshan Gapirov was not surprised. A popular defense lawyer for Muslims charged with extremism, Gapirov had long angered authorities in Kyrgyzstan who see Islam as one of the greatest dangers to the country's stability. He spent most of 2008 in prison, accused of supporting a banned pan-Islamist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and collaborating with his extremist clients.

Gapirov, director of the Justice and Truth Human Rights Advocacy Center in the southern town of Osh, struggles against a confounding system: because of Central Asia's strategic proximity to Afghanistan, the United States and Russia have supported dictatorships that, by banning even peaceful expressions of Islam, have pushed ordinary disaffected Muslims into the arms of radicals, some based in Afghanistan.

On April 7, after his security forces fired into a mob, leaving more than eighty dead, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev fled the capital, Bishkek. For the five years of his increasingly corrupt reign, he had attacked Islam as both a security and political threat. But he also hosted a US air base at the Manas airport outside Bishkek, established shortly after 9/11, and thus had an unflinching ally in his campaign, one that was willing to put aside its democratic ideals for a short-term strategic gain.

In Bakiyev's sudden and unexpected absence, former opposition leaders from disparate parties announced an interim government and slowly took control. But many of those leaders are tainted with scandal, having previously served with Bakiyev before leaving to form their own personality-driven opposition parties. The acting chair, Roza Otunbayeva, is loved in the West for her grandmotherly demeanor and fluent English, but she is suspected at home of being ineffectual. Other interim ministers are split on where their allegiances lie: with Russia, the former colonial master and driver of Central Asian economies, angry over the presence of American troops in its "near abroad"; or the United States, which most Kyrgyz see as primarily interested in keeping its air base.

Washington was quiet as Bakiyev murdered opponents, shut down media outlets, rigged elections and drove even moderate Muslims, afraid they would be targeted as terrorists, to practice their religion in secret. In private conversations, US officials acknowledged Bakiyev's appalling human rights record, but publicly they offered only tepid criticism and continued training his elite military units. Like other Central Asian despots, Bakiyev received lucrative American rewards for highlighting, or even exaggerating, the threat of terrorism.

US Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller underscored this support in October, at the opening of a Kyrgyz special forces complex in Tokmok, where she said, "Brand-new, modern military equipment—trucks, tactical gear, ambulances, night sights, body armor and much more—are arriving in Kyrgyzstan daily and being distributed to Kyrgyzstan's armed forces."

Central Asia is a region of varied religious traditions. Islam took root late among the Kyrgyz nomads and fused with local animist and mystic beliefs. But devotion to conservative forms is growing in the Ferghana Valley, a fertile basin of twisting, arbitrary and contested borders and overlapping ethnic groups: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan wrap around one another in puzzle pieces fashioned

by Joseph Stalin in the 1920s. The Kyrgyz portion of the valley is home to a large, alienated Uzbek minority. In the 1990s hundreds died in ethnic conflicts. Tensions endure.

Judging by the crowded mosques on Fridays and the number of women wearing hijabs on the streets, the valley is more observant than elsewhere in Central Asia. But locals here, like elsewhere, are still more likely to enjoy their vodka than their prayer, or see no problem indulging in both. Nevertheless, Central Asian governments are paranoid, full of atheist apparatchiks trained in the Communist Soviet Union. Only the Islam espoused by a network of state-appointed mullahs is tolerated.

From Bakiyev's perspective, "all Muslims are extremists," said Kara-Suu Imam Rashad Kamalov, whose father was gunned down in 2006 in an attack human rights observers attribute to the state security services. Because of the oppression, "more Kyrgyz are devoted to the religion and practice Islam," he told me. But tyranny will not work forever, he added. "After someone has experienced fear once, the fear disappears."

Already there is a precedent for radicalism and violence in the Ferghana Valley: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, bent on destroying the corrupt, despotic regime of Uzbek President Islam Karimov. Karimov's fierce crackdown in the 1990s drove the militant group, which grew out of a political movement, to Afghanistan and an alliance with Al Qaeda. IMU members fought alongside militants during the US invasion in 2001. The IMU's core membership is thought to be hiding in the tribal areas of Pakistan, waiting and plotting a return to Central Asia and their traditional base in the Uzbek portion of the Ferghana Valley. Some are probably hiding in Kyrgyzstan.

Pointing to the IMU, Bakiyev repeatedly said Kyrgyzstan faces a growing threat from international terror. With insecurity spreading into the previously quiet northern Afghan provinces, attacks throughout the Ferghana Valley have been on the rise, such as an assault in May 2009 on a police station in Khanabad, Uzbekistan, on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz frontier, and an alleged suicide bombing in nearby Andijan the following day.

Heightening the fear, the compliant Kyrgyz press eagerly reports the arrest of alleged activists, often those associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), a transnational group that seeks to establish a caliphate. While the movement forswears violence and has never been implicated in any violence, it is banned not only in Kyrgyzstan but throughout Central Asia, forcing members to practice underground. Observers such as Osh native Alisher Khamidov, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins, fear that, hidden from view, Hizb ut-Tahrir could prepare people to join violent groups if it is unable to offer a political solution. There are no accurate figures on membership, but informed estimates say it is 8,000 in Kyrgyzstan alone.

"If the state repression of religion continues at this pace and there are not political channels for representing Muslim grievances, we are likely to witness radicalization," Khamidov said, adding, "the Kyrgyz government is definitely exaggerating the threat of radical Islam."

The town of Kara-Suu is a natural hub for Hizb ut-Tahrir. Home to one of Central Asia's largest bazaars, it is divided by the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. Crossing it is difficult, even for ethnic Uzbek families separated by the border, and business is hurting. Moreover, little political opposition remains to offer ideological variety.

"They mention Hizb ut-Tahrir on television every day," a Hizb ut-Tahrir recruiter told me a few weeks before Bakiyev's overthrow. "One of our tasks is promotion, and this is a natural advertisement for us." He was hiding in the back of a station wagon with tinted windows, sandwiched between stacks of shipping containers in the Kara-Suu bazaar. "Our ideology is

spreading, and people are becoming more energetic because Bakiyev has moved away from the principles of democracy. It's a victory for us; we benefit from this."

While Hizb ut-Tahrir does not have an anti-Western agenda, he said, Western support for repressive governments in the region is boosting anti-Americanism and providing fertile ground for recruitment.

"They say they are building a democratic country, but at the same time they are violating the principles of democracy: freedom of belief, freedom of the press," said a Hizb ut-Tahrir member in Osh in March. "If they find a book they don't like in your house, they take you to jail. What kind of freedom is this?"

"We don't have machine guns; we have only ideas," said the Kara-Suu recruiter, explaining the group's methods and comparing Central Asia to czarist Russia in the years before the Bolsheviks seized power. "Who is in prison? Those who have been prosecuted and arrested by the government. And of course these people support us. Many revolutions started in prisons."

In October 2008 residents of Nookat organized the Eid al-Fitr festival marking the end of Ramadan, a holiday widely celebrated throughout Kyrgyzstan with the slaughter of sheep—and often a lot of vodka. Villagers say the mayor's office gave permission to celebrate in the town's stadium. Instead, town officials prohibited the celebration and dispersed the crowd. A protest followed in which villagers allegedly threw rocks, breaking windows in a government office. Thirty-two were convicted of inciting unrest and fomenting religious enmity. Sentences ranged up to twenty years.

"The authorities interfered in the process of investigation and in the courts. There was no evidence against the convicted. Witnesses were mostly people from law enforcement bodies. It was obvious that they were ordered" to testify, said an Osh-based lawyer who has represented defendants in extremism trials, including the one in Nookat.

Several unexplained killings in Uzgen and Jalalabad last summer further rattled Muslim communities and tested the state's credibility. Authorities say they liquidated terrorists infiltrating from Uzbekistan—perpetrators of a suicide bombing by an IMU splinter group in Andijan—yet provided little proof. Human rights activists allege the security services tortured and killed innocent farmers in a botched raid and elaborate cover-up. That several foreign human rights activists investigating the events in Nookat were expelled from Kyrgyzstan in 2009 further undermined faith in the authorities' version of events.

Yet while these abuses continued, the United States maintained its support for Bakiyev, calling him a partner in the "war on terror." Earlier this year Washington announced it would build a \$5.5 million anti-terrorism training center in the Ferghana Valley. Activists saw a connection between the US aid and Bakiyev's mounting crackdown. "The authorities don't care about their citizens' rights, about absolutely innocent people," said the Nookat defense lawyer, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. The crackdown is "to show that we have a problem with religious extremism and terrorism, because a lot of money is being allocated for that.... The money is being given to the Kyrgyz government by the United States and by the Russians."

Moscow and Washington, both concerned about Islamic terrorism, look the other way while repression continues apace in Central Asia. Moscow is also vying to build an anti-terror training center in the Ferghana Valley, and in this competition for strategic influence, the two are willing to overlook odious behavior. For the United States, that could be a mistake, warns a March report by the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. It argues that the Central Asian governments' overreaction is promoting radicalization, because "ongoing state-

sponsored violence has almost certainly claimed more lives, and surely maimed more fates, than the sporadic actions of a handful of terrorists.” The report cautions that US interests in the region, such as the base at Manas and overland transportation networks used to supply American troops in Afghanistan, make tempting targets.

Since the violent uprising of April 7, that message has gone unheeded. Washington appears most concerned about keeping the base open, worriedly courting Kyrgyzstan’s interim government of bickering former officials and apparatchiks. Many of these figures led the so-called Tulip Revolution of 2005. Now they are struggling to define their legitimacy. Some are angry with the United States for not speaking out against Bakiyev’s human rights abuses and have openly said Manas must be closed. It’s too early to tell how they will approach human rights, but already power struggles are apparent, and friends have told me they fear the recent upheaval just delivered more of the same, as the new leaders are all recycled from past governments.

Bloodshed is on many people’s minds these days—not just the kind Bakiyev left on the streets of Bishkek as he fled. “The authorities don’t know what they want to achieve. But in my opinion, it will lead to a very bloody revolution if it goes on like this. I am convinced that such a revolution is inevitable,” Gapirov, the human rights lawyer, told me a few weeks before Bakiyev’s downfall. When it comes to human rights and Islam, in a country known for its spontaneous uprisings, the new government and its foreign backers would be wise to listen.

**David Trilling**

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