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# Political Islam and Social Movement Theory: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan

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## Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous and landlocked country, with a population of five million (UNSKR, 2003, p. 9). The great majority of the people live around the periphery of the country, near its borders and away from the massive mountain ranges that occupy most of the central area of the country. The Tian Shan mountain range creates natural divisions and the peripheral areas have closer links with neighbouring countries than with each other. The capital Bishkek, lying in the north of the country, has strong links with Kazakhstan. The second largest city after Bishkek, Osh, is located in the south of the country on the edge of the Fergana Valley, which stretches into Uzbekistan.

The vast majority of today's Kyrgyz are Muslims of the Sunni branch, but Islam came late to the country. Arab armies, invading from Baghdad, brought Islam to Kyrgyzstan probably in the ninth century (Asanova, 2004). At that time, Kyrgyz tribes lived in the upper Yenisei basin in Siberia and they began migrating south into present-day Kyrgyzstan from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. Islam was introduced to the Kyrgyz tribes probably between the tenth and twelfth centuries. By the end of the nineteenth century most of the Kyrgyz population had been converted to the Muslim religion. However, Kyrgyz people generally practise Islam in a specific way influenced by earlier tribal customs.

As in other parts of the Central Asian region, there are strong signs of Islamic resurgence in Kyrgyzstan. Islamic resurgence is a broad intellectual, cultural, social, and political movement throughout the Muslim world, and political Islam is only one its components (Huntington, 1996). The term 'political Islam' is used throughout this article because my analysis is limited to a study of the political elements of the Islamic resurgence in Kyrgyzstan.

*Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (The Party of Islamic Liberation) is among the most feared Islamic groups in Central Asia, but it is also, apparently, the least understood. Hizb ut-Tahrir is not a religious organisation, but rather a political party whose ideology is based on Islam. The group aims to reestablish the historical caliphate in order to unite all Muslims in a single state. It has sought to advance its cause by widespread dissemination of propaganda. Unlike the Taliban and Wahhabist movements, which

likewise advocate a strict interpretation of Islam, Hizb ut-Tahrir does not oppose modern technology and uses the internet to spread its message.

Most studies of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia are descriptive analyses of its history, ideology, structure, or goals.<sup>1</sup> This article is an attempt to incorporate the study of Kyrgyzstan's political Islam, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, into social movement theory. Drawing on fieldwork, I will show how social movement theory can be utilised to address a wide range of questions about the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan.

I begin with a description of political Islam in Kyrgyzstan, focusing on Hizb ut-Tahrir. Then I examine how different social movement approaches can help explain the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. Social movement theory incorporates various dimensions of collective action, including responses to structural strains, mobilisation of resources and responses to political opportunities. Although most studies of social movements focus on one or another of these approaches, I will employ them together in relation to the emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, I will suggest that the party's ideology can be understood as a powerful and integrative basis for collective action.

### **Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan**

Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, a famous Islamic scholar and judge in the *sharia* (Islamic law) appeal court in East Jerusalem. Its original members were mainly Palestinians from Jordan and Syria, although the movement quickly found supporters in North Africa as well. The party is today active in Western Europe and the USA, but it is banned in almost every Muslim country in the world. Hizb ut-Tahrir probably became active in the Central Asian region in the mid-1990s; regional governments have responded with repressive measures against its members.

Long years of underground existence have taught its supporters rigid discipline: members of the organisation are divided into small groups and people from different groups often do not know each other. It operates through a network of secretive party cells reminiscent of the underground network the Bolsheviks employed as the groundwork for their successful seizure of power in Russia in October 1917.

In Kyrgyzstan the group has been mostly active in the southern provinces of Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken. In 2002 the state authorities reported that there were 49 incidents of dissemination of religious literature and 41 criminal cases; in 2001 there were 112 and 86 respectively. In 2000 there had only been 11 prosecutions, the majority of which were in Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces (ICG, 2003, p. 37). No one can say with any certainty how many members and sympathisers Hizb ut-Tahrir currently has in Kyrgyzstan, but most observers agree that their number is growing. Some sources estimate that there are approximately 2000–3000 Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Kyrgyzstan (Official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). A well-informed religious leader has even suggested that in terms of numerical proportions there are more members of this group in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan (Kamuluddin, 2004). The party seems to have even more sympathisers, with a Kyrgyz security official claiming that about 20 per cent of the population in southern Kyrgyzstan supports the party (Kyrgyz security official, 2004).

The party makes heavy use of leaflets, printed in Russian, Kyrgyz and Uzbek, which advocate the establishment of the caliphate and *sharia* law. The leaflets

concentrate on social problems and corruption amongst the authorities. Some leaflets also deal with problems faced by Muslims in other countries (for example Uzbekistan and Chechnya). Because of Kyrgyzstan's high literacy rate, the dissemination of its literature has been a successful way of spreading the Islamic message.<sup>2</sup> In August 2001 Hizb ut-Tahrir members circulated an open letter to President Askar Akayev, the parliament and the judiciary inviting them to reply to ten questions. Among other things, they were asked whether they considered themselves Muslim, whether they recognised the Quran as the only true constitution, and why they associated with nonbelieving nations – a reference to western states. The party asked for an official response within 15 days: unsurprisingly no Kyrgyz executive responded (Babakulov, 2001).

Kyrgyzstan's policy on Hizb ut-Tahrir has been relatively lenient. A first offence usually warrants a police warning and fine. A subsequent offence may result in a prison sentence of two to five years (Arzymatov, 2004). Most cases are prosecuted under Articles 297 (Public calls to violent change of the constitutional regime) and 299 (Fomenting national, racial and religious hostility) of the Criminal Code. All religious organisations must register with the State Commission on Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice in order to obtain status as a legal entity. Hizb ut-Tahrir has not yet attempted to register as a religious organisation, claiming instead that it is a political party. In recent years, following the armed incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in southern Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000, the government has increased its efforts to monitor and restrict any Islamic group that can present a threat to national security.

Some Kyrgyz officials have pressed for tougher legislation to cover radical Islamic activities. In October 2003 the chief of Jalal-Abad National Security Service, Kalyk Imankulov, expressed his concern about the increasing threat posed by Hizb ut-Tahrir and noted that the group had been successfully recruiting women and young people, including school-age and college students (Toursunof, 2003). During a workshop on fighting against terrorism and religious extremism held in Osh in May 2004 the governor of Osh Province Naken Kasiyev expressed anxiety over the growing strength of Hizb ut-Tahrir. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan's ombudsman, Tursunbai Bakir Uлуу, has questioned whether the party's ideas are in fact as threatening as the government claims. He has argued that adherents of Hizb ut-Tahrir should not be harassed by the authorities merely because they want to restructure society radically. In his view, the group has not actually broken the law, and other parties (for example the Communists) also would like to restructure society (RFE/RL, 2003). The government should therefore legalise the group (Official from the office of Ombudsman, 2004).

The authorities' ambivalent response to Hizb-ut-Tahrir is shown by the contradictory comments of Omurzak Mamayusupov, the chairman of the State Commission on Religious Affairs. Mamayusupov declared on Kyrgyz television on 19 February 2002 that members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir were 'citizens of Kyrgyzstan just like everybody else' and he could see no obstacles to registering the party. However, he distanced himself from his own remarks when he declared in Bishkek on 21 March 2002 that the 'party's aims contradict the constitution of Kyrgyzstan and therefore the party cannot be registered' (KNS, 2002).

Concern over the volume of illicit Hizb ut-Tahrir literature in circulation was definitely behind the decision in November 2002 to set up an expert commission, subordinate to the Clerical Board of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims, which will approve all Islamic literature printed and distributed in Kyrgyzstan. The Board works in

conjunction with the Interior Ministry and the State Commission on Religious Affairs (Carlson, 2003).

Although there is broad agreement that Hizb ut-Tahrir is a potential destabilising force and little support for legalising its activities, there is less agreement on what to do about it. In the past senior officials have been quick to lump Hizb ut-Tahrir together with the IMU or other terrorist groups, in an attempt to discredit it.<sup>3</sup> This merely undermines government propaganda as there have been several occasions when officials initially blamed Hizb ut-Tahrir for terrorist or other violent attacks, but were subsequently forced to retract. Such statements undermine trust in the authorities and boost those who claim that the government manipulates the issue. Although there was some exchange of literature between Hizb ut-Tahrir and IMU, it appears that its leadership has no other connection to terrorist organisations (Hallisey, 2004).

### **Social Movement Theory and Political Islam**

A social movement may be defined as a collective attempt to further a common interest or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions (Giddens, 1997, p. 511). A revolutionary social movement aims at radical change, but not always by radical methods (Kammeyer *et al.*, 1990, p. 660). Three characteristics differentiate social movements from other types of collective behaviour (crowds or mobs, for example): a higher degree of internal organisation; typically longer duration, often spanning many years; and the deliberate attempt to reorganise society itself (Macdonis, 2001, p. 615). By these definitions, Hizb ut-Tahrir is a revolutionary social movement since it evidently has all the necessary characteristics: the party has a pyramidal structure of command; it has existed for about half a century; and it aims at radical change but by peaceful means.

Despite Kyrgyzstan's unique features, therefore, it is still possible to analyse Hizb ut-Tahrir in that country using the same concepts found useful in analysing social movements in other parts of the world. Three major theories explain circumstances in which social movements arise: structural-functional theory, resources mobilisation theory and political opportunities theory.

#### *Structural-Functional Theory*

This theory assumes that system equilibrium is a natural societal condition. In every organised society societal demands are accommodated by institutions that address various interests to produce optimal policies. From the structural-functionalist point of view, system disequilibrium derives from external structural strains that produce grievances and undermine the efficacy of existing institutions, resulting in social frustration and political disorder. This theory claims that structural strains (for example an economic crisis) produce psychological grievance, which in turn produces collective action. In other words, social movements provide a mechanism for alleviating psychological grievance derived from structural strains.

Some scholars have argued that social and economic factors can explain the popular support for political Islam.<sup>4</sup> With the break-up of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has experienced a process of deindustrialisation. Subsidies from Moscow were suddenly cut and industries linked to Russian markets have collapsed. The Kyrgyz government has strongly favoured free market economics and privatisation. In the short term at least, these policies have pushed up prices and created very high

levels of unemployment. In 2002 government figures indicated that 52.4 per cent of the population in Osh, 44.1 per cent in Batken and 54.9 per cent in Jalal-Abad lived below the poverty level (UNSKR, 2003, p. 46).

Such poverty, coming after the economic security of the Soviet era, undoubtedly gives rise to a widespread sense of grievance. Security services in southern Kyrgyzstan claim that 90 per cent of Hizb ut-Tahrir members are unemployed (ICG, 2003, p. 19). Hizb ut-Tahrir has provided a rather simplistic view on economic policy, favouring the abolition of the 'corrupt Capitalist economic system' (Hizb ut-Tahrir, 1998, p. 18). For the majority of the population, who do not understand economics, this sounds convincing. On the other hand, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir minimise the role of economic grievances in the emergence of the party (Member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, 2004).

Political strains can also explain the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. The state can play an important role in shaping intersocietal relations. In Kyrgyzstan, politics are characterised by a winner-takes-all element. The lion's share of the benefits of state largesse in the forms of appointments and subsidies goes to the region, clan or ethnicity in charge of the state. As a result, a group of 'losers' is created who feel disenfranchised by the process (Martin, 1999).

The Uzbek minority is concentrated in the southern Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad provinces where Hizb ut-Tahrir has been most active. In fact, almost all those Hizb ut-Tahrir party members arrested have been ethnic Uzbeks (Member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, 2004). The Kyrgyz security sources claim that party membership is 90 per cent ethnic Uzbek, 3–4 per cent ethnic Kyrgyz and 4–5 per cent ethnic Uighur (ICG, 2003, p. 18). These figures show that there is an ethnic dimension in the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. With their community estimated to account for around 14 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population, Uzbeks have emerged as the country's second largest ethnic group, far outstripping Russians (10.7 per cent), though far behind Kyrgyz (66.9 per cent) (UNSKR, 2003, p. 39).

The representation of ethnic Kyrgyz at senior and intermediate levels of government is disproportionately high, giving credence to perceptions that career opportunities are limited for those who are not ethnic Kyrgyz (Bouyjou, 2004). The percentage of Uzbeks in government and politics does not correspond to their percentage of the population. According to a human rights activist, although at least 50 per cent of Osh city population is ethnic Uzbek, only 8 per cent of public jobs are held by members of that community (Mahmoudov, 2004).

The historic and cultural differences between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek peoples – descendants of nomadic and agricultural cultures respectively – run deep. In June 1990 discord between Kyrgyz and Uzbek erupted into disastrous turmoil in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley, in and near the city of Osh. The so-called trigger factor was the news that the local administration was going to distribute plots of land to landless Kyrgyz at the expense of the Uzbek community. Violence resulted in the death of hundreds of people and ceased only after the arrival of Soviet troops.<sup>5</sup> Against this unfavourable background, the Uzbeks are struggling to find ways to express their identity.

In a 2002 survey conducted by the Preventive Development Programme of UNDP Kyrgyzstan, 7.4 per cent of the respondents in the Kara-Kulja district, 5.1 per cent in the Aravan district and 13 per cent in the Uzgen district of largely Uzbek Osh province gave affirmative answers to the question about cases of discrimination against ethnic minorities' rights. In Jalal-Abad province, also populated by a large number of ethnic Uzbeks, the figures were 10.4 per cent of respondents in the Bazar-Korgon district, 15 per cent in the Nooken district, 20.6 per cent in the Aksy district

and 7.9 per cent in the Ala-Buka district. In the southernmost province of Batken the figure was 18.6 per cent of respondents (PDP, 2003, pp. 11–29). Members of the ethnic minorities alleged discrimination in hiring, promotion and housing, and alleged that government officials at all levels favoured ethnic Kyrgyz.

The internal administrative borders within the Soviet Union were never precisely drawn and people were free to move across them with passports. The flow of resources, notably water from Kyrgyzstan and energy from Uzbekistan, was controlled by the central government. In the postsoviet period, however, the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has become the focus of serious tensions. The Uzbek government has now imposed strict tariffs and controls, partly in retaliation to Kyrgyzstan joining the World Trade Organisation and partly because of tensions over resources (Felch, 2004). Hizb ut-Tahrir's vision of a single Islamic state in the Central Asian region is appealing to ethnic Uzbeks who feel isolated from their compatriots in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The inequality between the northern and the southern provinces has also generated political strains in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>6</sup> Both regions have roughly two million people, but northern Kyrgyz are more russified and less observant of Muslim religion than Kyrgyz in the south. Throughout the Soviet era Kyrgyz politics was dominated by groups from the northern region.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this decades-long privileged relationship, northern Kyrgyzstan secured most of the investment and by the late 1990s had a far higher standard of living than the southern provinces of the country. In 2002 the per capita income in Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken provinces was about half of Bishkek's (UNSKR, 2003, p. 46). Regional inequalities have produced grievances among southerners; they feel that northerners are living in better conditions and environment. Hizb ut-Tahrir presents Islam as an ideology of change aimed at bringing about the reconstruction of Kyrgyz society.

### *Resource Mobilisation Theory*

This theory claims that social movements are unlikely to emerge without necessary resources. This approach argues that grievances are a crucial but not sufficient condition for the rise of a social movement. In fact, there are grievances everywhere in the world, many of which never lead to the formation of a social movement. The real question, then, is what besides grievances is needed for the emergence of a social movement? According to the resource mobilisation theory, social movements must be able to mobilise key resources if they are to emerge. Its focus, therefore, is on how social movements recruit and mobilise individuals (a movement's leadership usually offers incentives to entice people to join the group), raise money, train members and so on. Rather than viewing social movements as consisting of angry individuals who join together in response to structural strains, this theory approaches them as rational, organised manifestations of collective action (Wiktorowicz, 2002, pp. 195–96).

In the Middle East and North Africa, Islamic movements have often been mobilised through the structures of professional and student associations or through Islamic nongovernmental organisations such as charity societies and cultural centres. In Kyrgyzstan there is no evidence so far that Hizb ut-Tahrir has extensively penetrated such associations and organisations. However, it appears that the mosque, which is the central institution for religious practice in southern Kyrgyzstan, has been utilised as a mobilising structure by Hizb ut-Tahrir. Within the mosque the party activists can organise study groups and recruit new members.

According to the State Commission on Religious Affairs, as of June 2003 there were an estimated 1600 mosques in the country, of which 1042 were registered (BDHRL, 2003). In the early 1990s Islamic charity organisations from abroad funded the construction of some mosques in southern Kyrgyzstan (Jorokulov, 2004). Many clergymen educated in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Algeria and Pakistan have arrived in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>8</sup> Some of them popularise Hizb-ut-Tahrir ideas and recruit new members in their sermons. In March 2002 Khalilo Marasulov, an imam from one of the city mosques, was detained by law-enforcement authorities in Osh. The imam had distributed leaflets of Hizb ut-Tahrir with appeals to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. At the same time, most Muslim clergymen, who follow the traditional Islam, are against Hizb ut-Tahrir. They believe that the party's activity contradicts Islamic laws. In some mosques entrance is barred to those who declare themselves to be Hizb ut-Tahrir members.

The party is relying more on social networks and informal institutions. Through a loose web of personal relationships, study circles and informal meetings party activists mobilise outside the boundaries of formal institutions. In southern Kyrgyzstan, for example, men often form close groups – whether linked by kinship or not – that meet regularly for meals or social events. Such informal networks have been used as resources by the group for political purposes.

There is only speculation about the financial resources of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan. Hizb ut-Tahrir is a real transnational movement with considerable support among young Muslims in Western Europe and a large organisational base in London. A recent classified report from the Kyrgyz State Border Guard Service alleged that the financing of party activities is coming from drug trafficking and Persian Gulf sources (Kirgizskaya, 2004). A senior military officer claimed that group members receive payments (Officer of the Kyrgyz armed forces, 2004). Moreover, it appears that the group provides funding for legal support for arrested members (Kahn, 2004). Although it is very difficult to verify such information, it is clear that that the group has some financial resources.

### *Political Opportunity Theory*

This theory focuses on the environment outside social movements in order to explain the rise of those movements. This theory sees grievances and resource mobilisation as necessary but insufficient elements of movement emergence. It argues that social movements appear when political opportunities open up. These opportunities could emerge when the existing institutions fail to respond to some larger social change (for instance an economic depression) and/or when there is some internal division amongst those in power. According to this approach, social movements are an extension of politics by other means and can be analysed in terms of conflicts of interest just like other forms of political struggle.

In Kyrgyzstan there are few checks and balances restraining the political elite. There is no independence of the judiciary from the executive. The absence of a strong opposition, a robust political party system and independent media all reflect and reinforce the fact of political repression in Kyrgyzstan. According to a Freedom House analyst, citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic cannot change their government democratically (Kahn, 2004). Hizb ut-Tahrir has found a growing constituency as political exclusion deepens and increasingly challenges the legitimacy of the state.

Moreover, political repression coincides with the exclusion of the minorities. Although the role of the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan's political life was enhanced



after the Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan declared independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991, Uzbeks have had political grievances concerning their ability to participate in government. Even in those areas in which Uzbeks constitute a majority, mayors and governors are usually Kyrgyz appointed by the central government. In theory, Uzbeks can compete for any post in the country. In the 2000 presidential elections, for example, Anvar Artykov, an ethnic Uzbek, put himself forward as a candidate. However, he was disqualified after failing to pass an exam in the Kyrgyz language (RFE/RL, 2000).

In 1991 some southern leaders proposed radical structural changes in the administrative division of the state to address the imbalance of power (Huskey, 1993, p. 409). In the postsoviet period, regional differences in political behaviour have been ever more significant. In October 1994, for example, a referendum organised by the presidency on the reform of the parliament was endorsed by the northern regions, but popular support for the constitutional amendments was much lower in the south. A similar pattern marked the 1995 and 2000 presidential elections, when Akayev received his lowest support in the southern regions. As the possibility for ethnic Uzbeks to go through formal or electoral channels decreases, the popularity of Hizb ut-Tahrir among them can be expected to increase.

A combination of all three perspectives could provide an explanation about the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan:

1. It has provided people with a mechanism for alleviating grievances derived from structural strains in Kyrgyz society (the structural functionalism perspective);
2. It has mobilised necessary material and human resources (the resource mobilisation perspective);
3. The party faces an environment that offers political opportunity (the political opportunity perspective).

### **The Role of Hizb ut-Tahrir Ideology**

For the most part, social movement theory has downplayed the role of ideology in mobilising collective action. Ideology encompasses ideas, beliefs, values and symbols, which can motivate individual participation and give coherence to collective action. Ideology typically provides a critical analysis of the larger society, an idealised sketch of a positive alternative, and some suggestion as to how the problematic present may be replaced with a preferable future (Wilson, 1972). Ideology often performs multiple functions, including transforming vague dissatisfactions into a politicised agenda and providing a sense of collective identity.

Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan provides a good test case of the importance of ideology in mobilising the population. The content of Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology is based on a selective interpretation of Islamic theology and history. Hizb ut-Tahrir has extensively used religious theory and passages from the Quran to mobilise support. It is through the diffusion of Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology that grievances become politicised, that people develop a collective identity rooted in religion, and that people reinterpret their social environment as consisting of potential movement resources.

The globalisation of capital, along with human migration, has menaced the age-old kinship and extended family system which is the backbone of Kyrgyz society. The process of change is leading to a fundamental conflict between tradition and modernity. The emergence of political Islam in Kyrgyzstan is a natural outcome of a

declining society that is looking for an alternative option to the western-oriented secular state. Culturally, western civilisation embraces the concept of individuality; however, this can be viewed as contradictory to traditional Islamic values that uphold the notion of the *umma*, the Muslim community. Political Islam is filling the ideological vacuum in Kyrgyz society produced by the collapse of communism (Komarover, 2004).

The party provides its members with some meaning in an era of otherwise confusing and difficult social change. At the lower level members are organised in *daira* or *halka* (cells), normally of five people. Membership in such close-knit groups, which provide mutual support, fits well with traditional regional social patterns. Hizb ut-Tahrir aims at the creation of a sense of collective identity and a feeling of solidarity that engenders a sense of obligation on the part of party members. In this way, members are willing to make sacrifices for 'the cause' and to take risks to help their comrades in the group. Moreover, ethnicity is not emphasised by supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir, who instead promote Muslim solidarity (Member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, 2004).

The party argues that the root of mounting social problems in Kyrgyzstan lies in a lack of religious fidelity, corrupting secular elites, ceding to western manipulation, and the absence of a strong universal Islamic community. It calls for a return to an idealised religion-based community and promotes a utopian view of an Islamic state in which social problems such as corruption and poverty would be banished by the application of *sharia* law. The rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir has coincided with the rapid growth of religious self-consciousness among the Uzbeks. Following the Soviet period, Kyrgyzstan is involved in a quest for religious identity, which shows itself in renewed interest in religion. Since the official Islamic clergy cannot match the better educated representatives of Hizb ut-Tahrir in religious matters, the group finds it relatively easy to convince young people in particular (Mahmoudov, 2004).

Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology is founded on two pillars. The first is Islamic law, based on the conviction that the *sharia* should regulate all aspects of human life – politics, economics and ethics – which are tied together in Islam. The second is the Islamic state, because a proper society can be achieved only within such a political entity. There is no separation between *din* (the faith) and *dawla* (the state); this is why Islam involves a unique inseparability of religion and politics. The ultimate objective of Hizb-ut-Tahrir is the establishment of a true Islamic state. The party rejects contemporary efforts to establish Islamic states, claiming that Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia do not meet the necessary criteria. From its perspective, an Islamic state means liberation from both secular and corrupted regimes.

The model for Hizb ut-Tahrir is the Islamic state that existed in the seventh century under the Prophet Muhammed and his first four successors. The party aims at re-establishing a caliphate that would encompass all Muslims. The caliphate would be led by a caliph, a supreme leader who would combine religious and political power, elected by an assembly (*Majlis al-Ummah*), which would in turn be elected by the people. The caliph would appoint an amir, or military leader, who would declare *jihad* (holy war) and wage war against all nonbelievers. The Islamic state would not join international organisations such as the United Nations.

Hizb ut-Tahrir presents its political struggle as part of a battle between good and evil. According to the party,

the struggle between good (*khair*) and bad (*sharr*), and truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*batil*) is one of the universal laws of life. The Wisdom (*hikma*) of Allah dictates that the struggle and contest between the people should be a

factor in the victory of truth and good and the defeat of falsehood and evil.  
(Hizb ut-Tahrir, 1997, p. 5)

Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects violence as a method of political change, however. From its point of view, 'military struggle is not the method of re-establishing the Caliphate' (Hizb ut-Tahrir, 2000, pp. 68–69). Its political methodology is attractive to people in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley, because as noted earlier the region witnessed violent ethnic conflict in the early 1990s and as a result there is strong popular rejection of violence as a tool of political change.

Hizb ut-Tahrir views its struggle in parallel with the three stages that the Prophet Muhammad experienced en route to the establishment of the Islamic state in the seventh century. These were the following: spreading the word of Allah to the communities of the Arabian Peninsula; the flight from Mecca to Medina in order to establish the first Islamic community there; and finally, the conquest of Mecca, *jihad* and the establishment of the caliphate. Similarly, Hizb ut-Tahrir has envisaged a three-stage method of action: first, to educate people in the idea and the method of Hizb ut-Tahrir, so that they join the party (recruitment and campaigning); second, to interact with the *umma* and to encourage the *umma* to embrace Islam, so that the latter will work to establish it in the affairs of life (islamisation); third, to establish a government implementing Islam and carrying it as a message to the world (revolutionary takeover and *jihad*) (Hizb ut-Tahrir, 1999, p. 32).

Why did people in southern Kyrgyzstan turn to political Islam rather than secular ideologies such as liberalism or socialism? Democracy has been discredited in the eyes of many people in Kyrgyzstan because, while the country has adopted a form of democratic government, it has not embraced the minority rights and protections of liberal democratic practice. People turn to political Islam because political institutions are poorly consolidated and lack roots in democratic politics.

Hizb ut-Tahrir has seized the political opportunity, but its response has been circumscribed by ideology. The party asserts that western countries have systematically promoted their culture, their political ideology (part of which is liberal democracy) and their viewpoint about life in order to divert Muslim people away from Islam; thus it would be easier to control them (Zalloom, 1995, p. 18). The party opposes liberal democracy because it gives rise to a system of dictatorship by an elite group. Members of the parliament can blackmail the rulers with dismissal at any time, by using the no-confidence vote. As a result, governments focus on satisfying the needs of the majority of an elite group, rather than securing the people's welfare (OOSHTP, 2002).

## Conclusion

The rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan is a complex phenomenon. Structural-functional theory argues that its emergence is a direct response to political and economic disenfranchisement. Facing a failed political and economic system, people join Hizb ut-Tahrir for comfort. The party has seized the opportunity to promise the establishment of a fair society under an Islamic caliphate. Socio-economic circumstances are important for understanding why people join Hizb ut-Tahrir, but pointing to them as the main cause is too simplistic.

Resource mobilisation theory suggests that social movements like Hizb ut-Tahrir emerge when individuals who have grievances are able to pull together the resources they need to mobilise effectively for collective action. The group is well structured and

its membership is growing fast in Kyrgyzstan. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been able to mobilise support through mosques and social networks. The group also has financial resources.

Political opportunities theory argues that a social movement develops when opportunities are available and individuals respond rationally to maximise openings. Indeed, some people are attracted to the prospect of an Islamic government propagated by the group, due to the lack of legitimate channels for protest against Kyrgyzstan's political elite.

All social movement theories nevertheless share a secular framework of perception and tend to ignore the concept of the inseparability of religion and politics in Muslim societies. The ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir has provided a mechanism for mobilising collective action. Its ideology is a system of beliefs that aspire both to explain the world and to change it. The ills of the society are attributed to the departure from Islamic ideals, and in turn a return to Islamic sources is advocated.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, ICG, 2003 and Rashid, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Only 1.3 per cent of the adult population is illiterate (UNSK, 2001, p.76).
- <sup>3</sup> According to the Kyrgyz intelligence services, a meeting was held in Kabul in early September 2000 between the Taliban, the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir to discuss the plans of the latter to cooperate with a wide range of movements in calling the *umma* to struggle against the *kufir* (non-believers) (Knyazev, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Zubaida, 1993, Tessler, 1997 and Wyatt, 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Officially the Soviet authorities listed the casualties at 200 killed and some 300 injured, but local sources put the death toll at more than 1000 (Rashid, 2002, p. 68).
- <sup>6</sup> The major regions of the country are the north, which includes the capital Bishkek and Chui, Issyk-Kul and Talas provinces, and the south, consisting of Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken provinces.
- <sup>7</sup> The Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (CPK) was dominated for nearly 25 years by leaders from the north. The northern domination almost came to an end with the promotion of Absamet Masaliyev, a southerner, but the balance of power soon shifted again in favour of the north; Askar Akayev was elected president in October 1990, while Masaliyev was removed from the position of CPK first secretary in April 1991 (Akbarzaden, 2001, p. 455).
- <sup>8</sup> In 2002 317 citizens of Kyrgyzstan were studying in religious educational institutions in Pakistan (Ibraimov, 2002).

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