

The Islamic Renaissance Party

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IRP demonstrators, October 1991

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With the demise of the USSR, many in Tajikistan hoped that multi-party democracy would provide a choice of political development options and allow control of the state by society. In this climate of expectation, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan formed. It emerged from the June 1990 Congress of Muslims in the USSR, which created a pan-Soviet IRP, thus fulfilling the long dormant potential for Islam to be the basis of opposition to the prevailing communist ideology. Although illegal at first, the IRP in Tajikistan developed rapidly after independence and before the war in the period when religion-based parties could operate legally. It became a parliamentary party aiming to revive Islam after decades of erosion by anti-Islamic Soviet policies. Of all the Islamicist parties in Central Asia, only the IRP in Tajikistan participated in elections.

The IRP was more than a purely a religious movement; it was also a social and political phenomenon. Most new parties in Tajikistan began with ideological convictions but gradually ethno-regional interests dominated national and ideological concerns. Some leaders sought to use the new parties to redistribute state power and property to benefit themselves. The IRP was strongest in the Qarateghin region. Its ideological motivations intersected with regional concerns and it eventually became in effect a party representing Qarateghini interests.

The IRP was able to cooperate with other opposition parties. Its unlikely alliance with the 'democratic' parties was based partly on shared interests (a coalition of regional elites opposing the communist *status quo*) and partly on the tradition of egalitarianism and communal democracy in the Islamic culture of mountainous Tajikistan. Any remaining ideological contradictions were soon overshadowed by the logic of political and, later, military struggle. It fielded a joint candidate with the Democratic Party in the 1991 presidential elections but lost to the Communist Party candidate, Rakhmon Nabiev. After this defeat, the opposition movement continued the political struggle through the media, hunger strikes, and mass rallies. Prolonged demonstrations paralyzed the capital in spring 1992. As tensions escalated, a coalition Government of National Reconciliation (GNR) was formed with eight representatives from opposition groups, including the IRP.

Some in the Islamicist movement aimed to destroy the regime altogether. They helped form the military movement *Najot-i Vatan* (Salvation of the Motherland) in autumn 1991, transforming the opposition alliance into a military-political organization. Islamicists explain the resort to military force as a response to the hostility displayed by the communist regime. Some pro-communists used the slogan 'down with Islam' in their rallies, thus making them objects of a *jihad* holy war.

When President Nabiev distributed weapons to his supporters in spring 1992 and hostilities between regional groups escalated, many militants believed that armed struggle was the only option. After most opposition parties were banned by the Rakhmonov government in late 1992, most Islamicist activists went into exile. They formed a united front, the Movement for Islamic Revival in Tajikistan (MIRT), to coordinate their military and political initiatives. It was formed in Taloqan, Afghanistan, in 1993, with the IRP at its core. In 1994 it became the dominant group in the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).

Although they initially relied on a military strategy, the Islamicist groups eventually agreed to negotiate for several reasons. First, they realised that most Tajikistanis preferred secular political ideologies and resisted Islamicism. They also worried that the CIS would isolate Tajikistan because of a perceived 'Islamic threat'. Second, the IRP's goal was a Tajikistan united by Islamic principles. Yet the conflict had turned into a war between ethno-regional groups, thus risking complete fragmentation of the country – a development that negated their long-term goal. Third, the UTO could not hope to retain power over central government by exclusively military means, given the imbalance of demographic and economic resources between its strongholds and the pro-government regions. This became especially obvious in 1994, when many young people from 'rebel' regions migrated to other CIS countries in search of work, thus reducing the pool of new recruits. Finally the memory of the exile and defeat of the Basmachi fighters and communities who fled Tajikistan in the 1920s and 1930s created a powerful motivation for a negotiated settlement amongst many exiled grassroots members.

The inter-Tajik negotiations were periodically interrupted by military clashes. Both sides regularly packaged ceasefire demands with political issues. They used military operations – usually in Tavildara and Qarateghin, seven to ten days before the next round of talks – to bolster their position before demanding concessions. The IRP also used other pressure tactics, including bombing and hostage-taking. The IRP accused Russian troops in the CIS Peacekeeping Force (CIS/PKF) of ceasefire violations and interference in Tajikistan's internal affairs. It hoped that the CIS/PKF would be put under the control of UN observers, limiting their ability to resist UTO military operations. In the end, these tactics failed. As the peace process progressed, the warring parties demonstrated greater flexibility and shifted from military pressure to political strategies. Yet the course of negotiations was full of stoppages, reversals, and sudden advances – largely because of the insecurity of the participants.

The peace process gathered momentum as soon as President Rakhmonov and UTO leader Said Abdullo Nuri took charge of the negotiating teams. The December

1996 meeting between Rakhmonov and Nuri in Khos Deh, Afghanistan, was the beginning of real efforts at conciliation. Nuri made important concessions, which created conflict within the UTO leadership and deep frustration among many IRP members. Many UTO field commanders and fighters balked at the order to leave Gharm and the Qarateghin valley. Trust in their religious leaders eventually prevailed over their resistance. Subsequently, both the government and the UTO became increasingly open to compromise and generally complied with agreements. Over the next six months they agreed almost all the main military, political, and legal issues and in June 1997 the General Agreement was signed.

By 2000 the IRP had become one of the most powerful political parties in Tajikistan. Its members filled most of the government positions allocated to the UTO and it has once again become a parliamentary party committed to peaceful and legal political methods. It also operates a socio-economic development programme concentrating on women and youth. The IRP is unique in the region as an Islamicist movement participating peacefully in the political life of a secular state.

Yet some problems remain. Although it has expanded from its regional base and now has branches almost all over the country, the IRP has been unable to overcome the problem of regionalism and this has limited its influence. Also, some people question the concept of an 'Islamic party'. Khoji Akbar Turajonzoda left the IRP, arguing that Islam is incompatible with a limited political party. He promotes instead the integration of Islamic principles into the political system to encourage Tajikistan's evolution into an Islamic state.

Some IRP members, contrary to the law on political parties, have used mosques and *madrasas* for political activities. The government realizes that it is difficult to maintain a complete separation between politics and other social issues and is generally tolerant of preaching that touches on politics. It nevertheless maintains a strict ban on explicitly political activities in religious institutions. Finally, there are concerns that worsening socio-economic conditions, deepening corruption, and an 'ideological vacuum' (combining disillusionment with both 'communist' and 'democratic' ideas and the lack of powerful secular movements) may lead to a more militant and radical Islamicist movement in Tajikistan. The IRP will continue to try to channel this dissatisfaction into peaceful political struggle.

A major achievement of the Tajik peace process is that it facilitated the peaceful incorporation of Islamicist movements into the constitutional political process. It has created a system that can accommodate the political interests of different social groups professing divergent and even contradictory approaches to religion and the state.