Zoirshoi Davlat: “The authorities in Tajikistan do not struggle with the radicalization of Islam, but rather increase it”

“There are representatives of the Islamic clergy who enjoy great authority among the religious section of the population in Tajikistan. The government should build cooperation with them and use their authority, rather than oppose to them. It is necessary to unite all the authoritative clerics, rather than separate them. Indeed, in the case of an escalation of tension, the probability of which is high in the Central Asian countries, such opposition could lead to disastrous consequences, because in Tajikistan, the word of one religious leader can determine the scenario of events development”, said Zoirshoi Davlat, an analyst (Dushanbe, Tajikistan), in an article written for cabar.asia.

Like other post-Soviet countries, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and a central policy of the Kremlin in the early 1990s, Tajikistan was in an ideological vacuum. The ostentatious devotion to communism had led its followers to the exit from the “favorite” Communist Party. People began the search for their own model of development - from the democratic parties and movements, national, national-liberation-wing to religious ideology of their ancestors. As a result, the Tajik authorities have not decided on the religion, and it becomes the cause of many problems and contradictions for more than twenty years of independence.

Over the years, Tajikistan has tested various models of the national idea, for example, the idea of Zoroastrianism - the Aryan roots. More monuments to kings Cyrus the Great and Somoni emerged in the republic since independence day, and people across the country often began to call their children Orien and Somoni, but this could not completely replace the classical Islamic names. The main part of the Tajiks did not want to be entirely Islamic or stick to purely secular or atheistic ideas.

Despite the bitter experience of the Civil War and the difficult period of achieving national peace agreement in 1997, the national idea still has not been formed, and this deficiency will always threaten the independence and integrity of the nation.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government has recognized Islam as the official religion and contributed to its revival, but in a subsequent state policy, it acted in the direction of reducing the influence and role of religion in the society where most of the population is Muslim.

**The fight against religious extremism**
The terms “Islamic extremism”, “Islamic radicalism” and “Islamic terrorism” are more loudly sounded following the global media and authoritative research centers after the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, as well as after the inhumane behavior of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the terrorist operations in Chechnya, Central Asia, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Although the terms “extremism” and “religious radicalism” existed earlier, too, now they have “Islamic” character, and now most of the international news media, in covering the situation in the Middle East and Muslim countries, are using these key phrases extremely often.

Religious extremism, as a rule, reflects the negative reaction of conservative religious circles in the process of secularization, that is, separation of science, culture and social life from religion, thereby marginalizing religious people and clergy. In modern conditions worldwide, religious radicalism is considered to be the activity, whose purpose is the forced change in the political system or violent usurpation of power, violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Taking into account the policy objectives, religious-political radicalism can be separated from religious radicalism. In accordance with this, the radicalism and religious extremism are different from economic, parochial and spiritual extremism.

The emergence of extremist groups and religious radicals after the civil war in Tajikistan took place in conditions when the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the only party in Central Asia that had a religious character, began to legally function in the country. This party was recognized as a constructive movement that united all Islamic movements in the country; its leaders meet regularly with representatives of the Western countries and Russia and take part in various congresses and conferences held in Muslim countries.

In recent years, the IRP has been pushed out of the political arena of the country under various pretexts. In the parliamentary elections of 2015, this party, like the other opposition parties, was ousted from the parliament under the pretext that it was unable to collect the 5% threshold of the voting. However, according to critics, the weakening of the influence of this party will strengthen radicalization among young people, because the IRP adheres to the traditional Hanafi school of Islam and at the same time, it calls for the revival of national traditions. However, the government seems to fear the growing influence of the party among the population, which comes rather from considerations of protest against the infringement of religious and other fundamental rights of citizens.
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In an effort to reduce the influence of radical Islam on the population, the authorities are using strict methods. So, the draft law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” passed in 2009 put a ban on the activity of many other faiths, and significantly limited the rights of Muslims, forbidding, for example, visits to mosques for women and children up to 18 years old, prayers in the workplace and many other restrictions. This law has been criticized by international and local human rights organizations, however, it was not revised. Moreover, the authorities have continued the policy of forced secularization of Tajik society, which, however, did not help reduce the influence of Islam in the country.

The annual growth in the list of banned extremist organizations and movements in Tajikistan reflects the fact that, in reality, the government is seriously concerned about the intensification of radical organizations whose purpose is to build an Islamic caliphate, and thus to overthrow the current government. Currently, the Tajik authorities banned the following religious organizations: “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, “Tablighi Jamaat”, “Salafi”, “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”, “Jamaat Ansorulloh” and “Al Qaeda”.

**Tajik citizens in ISIL**

Lately, the Tajik youth has been actively recruited into the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), whose actions are extremely brutal. According to official reports, the number of warring Tajiks in ISIL is over 400 people. It is possible that their number is much higher, but we do not have more accurate statistics yet. If earlier it was believed that the main focus of the growth of radicalism and attracting young people to the ranks of extremist organizations is the north of the country – the Sogd region, located in the volatile Fergana Valley, now the reports of the involvement of Tajik immigrants in the ranks of the ISIL come from almost all regions of the country. Especially a lot of participants come from southern Kulob area of Khatlon region.

We know that, despite all the recent government measures, the recruitment of Tajik citizens into ISIL continues.

This is a serious concern in the government and in society. Everyone is looking for solutions, but the number of supporters of radical groups is not reducing.
It is universally agreed that the main reason for pushing young people into the ranks of extremists is poverty. Moreover, it is not only material poverty, but also spiritual, when the lack of proper education – both secular and religious – leads young people to wrong decisions.

As part of a government campaign to prevent the radicalization of young people, many events take place in the country. In the speeches on television and in meetings with young people, government officials convince young people not to believe false promises of money and fabulous life in the ranks of ISIL.

Socio-economic issues – unemployment, poverty, corruption, lack of preparedness of young people to the political and ideological reality, the absence of traditional Islamic identity, that is, religious illiteracy – are the main sources fueling extremism in the country, according to the director of the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Tajikistan (SRC) Khudoiberdi Kholiknazar.

These factors are a fertile ground for foreign emissaries. To achieve their goals, the representatives of these groups are willing and even eager to go to jail, and already there to conduct a large-scale agitation among the prisoners, he said. “Because, on the one hand, the prisoners become resistant to the harsh conditions of life, and on the other hand, they are not looking forward to the future, which is a good soil for breeding new supporters”, says Kholiknazar (1).

It is the work of foreign emissaries that is one of the main reasons for the involvement of young people in terrorist activities, believes the director of Centre of Islamic Studies under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan Faizullo Barotzoda. According to him, “foreign emissaries give material and financial promises to specific groups of young people with unstable psychological and ideological point of view, using them in the future as the guaranteed instruments of radicalization for their own gain” (2).

**Radical steps of the State**

Recently, besides all known factors, the mistakes of the Tajik authorities, who infringe on the fundamental values of Muslim believers, have also become a contributing factor. Thus,
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in early March, President Emomali Rakhmon, speaking at the ceremonial meeting dedicated to the International Women’s Day, condemned Muslim women’s black clothing, calling it “alien to national traditions”. Immediately after that, there have been police raids in the country when the women were forced to take off the hijab, and men were forcibly shaved off their beards. (For details, see: http://cabar.asia/tajikistan/267-tadzhikistan-v-borbe-s-radikalnym-islamom-vlasti-opolchilis-na-borody)

These actions have caused great discontent among the population, and even pro-government officials have condemned these actions. The intimidated Tajik population does not express their protest openly during demonstrations and rallies, but these actions of the authorities have increased the number of supporters of radical Islamic movements. One sign of this was the departure of a high-ranking officer, Colonel, former commander of the Special Police Department Gulmurod Halimov to Syria, and he also took along ten his compatriots.

Arkady Dubnov, a Russian journalist and political analyst, in his article “Why Tajik officers flee to ISIL” published on the website of news agency “Asia Plus”, noted that this reaction in response to these actions by the Tajik authorities was expected.

“We must call things by their proper names: sooner or later, something like that was supposed to happen. The ruling regime in Tajikistan could not evade such a response to the infringement of the rights of Tajik Muslims, to the restriction of their right to pray, to wear the hijab, visit the mosque, to the persecution of Muslim clerics, and finally, to the persecution of the Islamic Revival Party, the oldest in the region, whose activities are almost banned”, said Dubnov.

In search of justice, the outraged and offended Muslims in Tajikistan paid attention to such a new attractive alternative as ISIL with its promises to finally establish the world Caliphate for its followers, right believers in the true God. The ideology of ISIL has become a safe haven for them, and a refuge belligerent and dangerous for all the other infidels, unable to believe in it, in the caliphate and in the saving”, according to Dubnov quoted by the agency “Asia Plus” (3).

It should be noted that this news has caused shock among government officials. This is
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evidenced by the government’s response to a video circulating on the Internet, where Halimov confirmed his joining in the ISIL. First, there was silence, then the government started blocking many websites and cutting off the electricity at the moment on TV news on television channels. And only a few days later, after almost all of the world’s media reported on the controversial passage of a Tajik colonel to the Islamic state, the authorities announced that they created a committee to investigate this fact, and Halimov was wanted by Interpol. All this is remarkable, in particular, the fact that the authorities are not currently in a position to foresee the consequences of their actions related to gross interference in the delicate area of religious relations with Muslim believers.

The most dangerous thing in this situation is that Halimov can become a national hero for young people, and the pressure exerted on the religious feelings of the population may result in a mass exodus of Tajik men in Syria and Iraq.

If earlier it was believed that the people attracted to participate in the war in Syria have been cheated, now the campaigning network through the Internet sites in support of ISIL and information-psychological treatment of young people can bring their result to the organizers in connection with errors made by Tajik officials.

According to a religious expert and specialist in comparative religion Saadi Yusuf, religious extremism in Tajikistan is a variety of factors, among which may be the fact that the most dangerous ideological and spiritual values will match those of ISIL.

The number of Tajiks, who joined the Taliban and “Al Qaeda” and their associated movements is not clear, but there is information that more Tajiks cross the border into Afghanistan, and the news of their presence in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan periodically appear in a variety of media.

**Additional factors**

Another point that is worth paying attention to at the mention of extremism and Islamic radicalism in Tajikistan is the youth receiving education in Islamic universities and educational institutions, which was officially brought under the control of the state. Thousands of Tajik students were returned back from the Islamic states. But some of them,
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those who went there to study privately are still there. At the same time, the official information is not available about the involvement of students of Islamic universities in radical movements or the war in Syria and Iraq. However, theologians point out the fact that new Islamic movements have entered the country, including with the help of students of Islamic schools returning from overseas.

We should not forget about migrant workers. It is believed that the majority of Tajiks who joined the Islamic State were recruited in the Russian Federation where they were getting into difficult circumstances, and they could not find understanding in the community, becoming victims of emissaries recruiting adherents in Muslim schools and mosques in Russia.

It should be noted that in Tajikistan, manifestations of religious radicalism have not been observed only in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, where the majority of the population are followers of the Shia Ismaili (200,000 people). In our view, the higher level of education of people from this region, as well as the presence of a single religious leadership strategy of Ismaili Pamirs, which is implemented through the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the spiritual leader of the Ismaili world, hinders participation of Badakhshan citizens in radical groups. However, it should be noted that in recent years, this region is also prone to instability, as there occur various kinds of rallies and protests, although they are not associated with religion, they are associated with the high unemployment rate among the population, economic marginalization and isolation of Badakhshan. Therefore, we should pay attention to the fact that all of these factors, as well as the proximity of Afghanistan, is a good base for the growth of dissent among young people, and as a result, the fertile soil for the emissaries of extremist organizations.

**Recommendations**

Thus, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of religious education, as well as the reaction of the population to severe social and economic conditions, have led to an increase in religious extremism in Tajikistan. This experience is observed in all the Muslim countries facing unrest and uprisings. At the same time, we cannot ignore the growing jihadist movement and the desire to create a united Muslim caliphate, which promotes global radical Islamic organizations. Instability in the fundamental Islamic ideology and blatant interference in the religious feelings of the population of Tajikistan by the authorities also
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contribute to increasing radicalization. All this is a very dangerous phenomenon, the consequences of which would be difficult to prevent.

Therefore, decision-makers in Tajikistan should change their attitude towards the issue of religion and to take into account the following recommendations:

1. Improving social conditions and creation of appropriate jobs for young people in the country.

This recommendation is trite and simple, but actually it is not so easy to implement for the government. Even in the years of the Soviet Union, when the population did not exceed 4-5 million people, employment was a problem for Tajikistan. However, certain methods exist, in particular, benefits and government support for small and medium-sized enterprises, and domestic producers may be a good basis for creating a variety of jobs within the country. Tajikistan should study the experience of other countries on this issue and involve experts from there.

2. Change the state policy in relation to the clergy and religious issues.

Since religion is intertwined with the life of Muslim communities in the region, quick building of a secularist society in the country, which traditionally pays more attention to religious values, is not possible. The experience of the anti-religious policy of the communist system during more than 70 years of Soviet power in the region and, finally, its complete failure should serve as a lesson for the present leaders. It is necessary to recognize and respect the spiritual leaders of the people and their real status in society.

There are representatives of the Islamic clergy who enjoy great authority among the religious section of the population in Tajikistan. The government should build cooperation with them and use their authority, rather than oppose to them. It is necessary to unite all the authoritative clerics, rather than separate them. Indeed, in the case of an escalation of tension, the probability of which is high in the Central Asian countries, such opposition could lead to disastrous consequences, because in Tajikistan, the word of one religious leader can determine the scenario of events development.
3. It is necessary to create conditions for good religious education in the country.

Discussions on how to implement religious education in schools have long been present. The officials themselves are aware of that. Perhaps, it will be a good measure. But the rest of the population also needs education. A series of programs in the national media with the participation of highly educated clerics could fill this gap. It is noticed that people watch those TV channels that can enrich them spiritually. Proper words of a confessor every day will help increase religious literacy. In addition, it is necessary to completely abandon the show programs denigrating the opposition and dissidents whose number has increased in recent years on television or in other government media.

The experience has shown that this does not lead to the desired results, but to distrust in the government. Government TV channels should pay more attention to the social problems of the population, including the problems of migrants. Ignoring the coverage of these problems has led to the fact that many Tajiks are looking mainly Persian and Russian TV channels, such as “Visolihak”, “Nur”, “RTR”, “STS”. If you do not it, millions of somoni from the state budget spent on government propaganda will be wasted.

4. Strengthen cooperation with civil society.

In this regard, the government needs the support of civil society and independent media, which are also concerned about the increasing radicalization of Tajik society. It is necessary to join forces, because civil society does not replace but complements the work of state institutions. And unless the government begins to see the civil society as its ally, it will not help anything. If all of a sudden, God forbid, the situation is destabilized, the government will not be able to defend its position, as it happened in countries such as Syria Libya, Egypt and Bahrain.

Zoirshoi Davlat, political scientist

The views of the author do not necessarily represent those of CABAR

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