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Political Islam in Southern Kazakhstan: Hizb ut-Tahrir

Emmanuel Karagiannis, Postdoctoral Researcher, Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa., USA, mkaragiannis@yahoo.com

During the 1990s, the government of Kazakhstan came to believe that the country was immune to political Islam, due to its large territory, multi-ethnic and multi-religious population and the booming oil economy. This view has been challenged recently by the emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Party of Liberation — hereafter Hizb ut-Tahrir) in southern Kazakhstan.

Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, an Islamic scholar of Palestinian origin, in East Jerusalem. Hizb ut-Tahrir views itself not as a religious organization, but rather a political party whose ideology is based on Islam. Hizb ut-Tahrir is now a transnational organization with thousands of members worldwide, including Western Europe and the Middle East. The group aims at uniting all Muslim-populated territories into a single state, the Caliphate. The first emissaries of Hizb ut-Tahrir appeared in the southern Kazakhstan in 1998. Hizb ut-Tahrir now claims to have thousands of members in southern Kazakhstan.¹

Hizb ut-Tahrir's members regularly distribute leaflets in southern Kazakhstan; most of them are written in Kazakh, Uzbek or Russian, a sign that the group targets all ethnic groups.² However, its leaflets usually deal with problems faced by Muslims in other countries (for example, Uzbekistan and Palestine), rather than Kazakhstan. The group is

organized in cells of five people and usually members use nicknames for security reasons.

The Kazakhstan authorities initially ignored the group, but in the last few years have responded with repressive methods. In 2004 alone, Hizb ut-Tahrir members were seen distributing leaflets and other printed materials in more than 180 instances; as a result, Kazakhstan security services launched 111 criminal cases (*Embassy of Kazakhstan 2005a*). In March 2005, the city court of Astana granted the Kazakhstan Prosecutor General's request to declare Hizb ut-Tahrir an extremist organization and ban its activity in the country (*Embassy of Kazakhstan 2005b*).

Drawing on fieldwork conducted from September 2003 to January 2005, the article will show how social movement theories can help explain the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kazakhstan. Fieldwork included examining Hizb-ut-Tahrir's books and leaflets, and interviewing members, officials, and Muslim clerics.³ Social movement theories focus on multiple aspects of the origins of collective action, including responses to mobilization of resources, responses to political opportunities and framing processes. Finally, the article will suggest that the group has utilized its ideology to mobilize support among religious Muslims in southern Kazakhstan.

¹ Personal communication with a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Shymkent, February 2004. The author estimates the organization to have about 1,000 members at the time of this research, with more sympathizers.

² Personal communication with Igor Savin, director of the NGO "Dialogue," Shymkent, Kazakhstan, February 2004.

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Social Movement Theory Applied to the Rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kazakhstan

Three characteristics differentiate social movements from other types of collective behavior (e.g., crowds): a higher degree of internal organization; typically longer duration; and the deliberate attempt to reorganize society itself (Macdonis 2001: 615). Hizb ut-Tahrir is a social movement, with all these characteristics in evidence: the group has a hierarchical structure of command; it has existed for about half a century; and it aims at radical political change. Although Kazakhstan has some unique features, it is still possible to analyze Hizb ut-Tahrir in that country using the same concepts found useful in analyzing social movements in other parts of the world.

Resource mobilization theory claims that social movements must be able to mobilize key resources if they are to emerge (Zald and McCarthy 1987). The ability of a group to challenge the authorities eventually would be determined by the extent to which it is in control of material and organizational resources, legitimacy and identity resources, and institutional resources (Hafez 2004: 19).

According to Kazakhstan's law, all mosques have to be registered with the Ministry of Justice and submit to the jurisdiction of the state-controlled Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (SAMK). Nevertheless, it appears that over 100 of the 500 mosques in southern Kazakhstan are not part of SAMK (Rotar 2004). It seems that Hizb ut-Tahrir has utilized unregistered mosques as a resource for mobilizing support among the local population.

In addition, the group is relying on social networks and informal institutions. In southern Kazakhstan, as in most of Central Asia, Muslim men often form small groups that meet regularly for social events in *chaikhana*s (teahouses) and private houses. Hizb ut-Tahrir has used such informal networks as a resource for mobilization purposes.

Also, southern Kazakhstan constitutes an environment where Hizb ut-Tahrir could relatively easily acquire new human resources. The region has the highest population density in the country (17.1 people per square kilometer) and a population of almost 2 million, with young people under 30 forming the majority (National Statistics Agency 1999). Hizb ut-Tahrir's sources of revenue are unknown, but solid. It seems that membership fees are a major source of income for the group in

Kazakhstan. It is also likely that the Kazakh branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir initially received some financial support from abroad.

The group has identity resources since it is an exclusive organization that has established strict criteria for membership. Only individuals who accept fully Hizb ut-Tahrir's aim and strategy are recruited by the group. Membership in close-knit cells, which provide mutual support, fits well with traditional regional social patterns. In this way, Hizb ut-Tahrir aims at the creation of a collective identity that engenders a sense of solidarity on the part of group members. In addition, the group possesses legitimacy resources, because it perceives itself as a selected and elite group, in effect an *ummah* within the *ummah* (Members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain 2000: 79). Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kazakhstan may also have limited access to institutional resources; indeed, there are rumors that the group has infiltrated the local police and state agencies.⁴

Political opportunity theory focuses on the political environment outside social movements in order to explain their emergence. This theory claims that social movements appear when political opportunities open up (Tilly 1978). After winning the first free elections in December 1991, Nazarbaev became Kazakhstan's first president. However, the division of powers in Kazakhstan is highly problematic, because the judiciary is not really independent from the executive branch and the parliament has a mostly ceremonial role in the political system.⁵ In addition, election laws restrict any real opposition parties from arising or mounting a campaign. Hizb ut-Tahrir has skillfully portrayed itself as the only true opposition group that can offer a concrete political and economic plan for the country's future by denouncing opposition parties as corrupt and as puppets of the Nazarbaev regime.

Following the collapse of Communist Party of Kazakhstan's patronage networks in the early 1990s, clan affiliation has become again an important factor in the political life of Kazakhstan. Clan patronage networks have been particularly strong in the southern Kazakhstan, fuelling inter-clan competition for state appointments (Schatz 2004: 106). For instance, there is competition between the *Dulat* clan from the Elder Zhuz and the *Konrad* clan from the

⁴ Personal communication with a Kazakh security official in Almaty, Kazakhstan, May 2004.

⁵ Personal communication with an OSCE official, Almaty, Kazakhstan, November 2003.

Middle Zhuz. The clan-based nature of the Kazakhstan's politics has marginalized some southern Kazakhs, as well as the Uzbeks and other ethnic minorities living in the region. On the other hand, Hizb ut-Tahrir has promoted its image as an organization that cares for the well-being of all Muslims, irrespective of clan affiliation.

Moreover, social movements often use frames to mobilize support (Goffman 1974). A frame is a mental map that organizes perceptions of social or political life. Frames give new meaning to people's lives. In addition, frames identify targets of blame, offer visions of a desirable world and suggest strategies for political change, and provide a rationale to motivate collective action. Hizb ut-Tahrir has framed the political, social and economic problems in the country as the outcome of secularism, Western cultural influence, and the absence of a strong universal Islamic state. The group calls for a return to an idealized religion-based community and promotes a utopian view of an Islamic state in which all problems would be banished by the application of the *Sharia*.

In order to make frames resonate, social movements must find consistency with the local culture. Hizb ut-Tahrir's frames are well received in southern Kazakhstan, because the local population tends to be more religious than in the rest of the country. There are two main factors explaining southern Kazakhstan's high religiosity. Firstly, the region's ethnic demography includes mostly Kazakh and Uzbek Muslims; secondly, southern Kazakhstan was populated by a settled agricultural population earlier than other regions and as a result Islam has deep roots in the region.

The frames adopted by Hizb ut-Tahrir have been successful in affirming people's commitment to the cause of the Islamic Caliphate, because they cement a sense of solidarity and common cause that generates meaning.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's Ideology as a Mobilizing Force

Most scholars have ignored the role of ideology in mobilizing collective action and they have conceptualized social movements as rational actors (Snow 1992: 135-136). Yet, ideology often performs multiple functions, including transforming grievances into a politicized agenda and providing a sense of collective identity.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology is based on two beliefs. The first is that the *Sharia* should regulate all aspects of human life. The second is that a decent society can be achieved only within an Islamic state. The model for Hizb ut-Tahrir is the Islamic state that existed in the seventh century under the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors. The new Caliphate would be led by a caliph, who would combine religious and political power, and who would be elected by an assembly (*Majlis al-Ummah*), which would in turn be elected by the people. The caliph would appoint an *amir* who would declare *jihad* and wage war against all non-Muslims.

There is no doubt that the collapse of Soviet Union has produced an ideological vacuum in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's authorities have attempted to fill this vacuum by fostering nationalism among ethnic Kazakhs. For this purpose, Astana has embarked on the Kazakhification of the state, favoring the titular group in the political and cultural fields. However, the nation-building process has not achieved the eradication of cultural differences among Kazakhs. Due to historical factors, southern Kazakhs have been linguistically, religiously and culturally under Uzbek influence, whereas Kazakhs from northern Kazakhstan and Almaty have been heavily Russified.

The concept of nation-statehood has relatively shallow roots in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and many Kazakhs share a feeling of nostalgia for the Soviet Union. It was not only the economic security they felt under communism; they also enjoyed the prestige of being citizens of the Soviet Union, a superpower that defeated Nazi Germany and challenged United States. Hizb ut-Tahrir's idea of an all-powerful Caliphate, powerful enough to challenge the West, is attractive to those born-again Muslim Kazakhs who have lost their collective self-esteem in the post-Soviet era.

The rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kazakhstan has also an ethnic dimension. There are about 350,000 Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan, representing about 20 per cent of the local population (National Statistics Agency 1999). The Uzbek minority is under-represented in state institutions and senior government positions are usually reserved for ethnic Kazakhs. The group has become popular among ethnic Uzbeks, because it does not emphasize ethnicity and promotes Muslim solidarity. Moreover, Hizb ut-Tahrir's vision of a

single Islamic state in Central Asia is appealing to ethnic Uzbeks who feel isolated from their compatriots in Uzbekistan, and feel concerned about their future in a Kazakh-dominated state.

Furthermore, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in early 1990s has created a "spiritual vacuum" in Kazakhstan, because, as ironic as it may seem, Marxism-Leninism was for many a form of religion. Indeed, the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir has coincided with the rapid growth of religious self-consciousness among southern Kazakhstan's Muslims. Following the Soviet period, Muslims of southern Kazakhstan have been involved in a renewed quest for religious identity. The group appeals to those devout Muslims who need to believe in a coherent ideology that provides ready answers not only for practical issues, like gender relations, but also spiritual matters such as life after death.

Conclusion

The rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kazakhstan has complex origins. Resource mobilization theory argues that the availability of resources can explain the rise of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kazakhstan. Political opportunities theory claims that the group came into the political limelight because opportunities are available and the group responded rationally to maximize openings. According to framing theory, Hizb ut-Tahrir has framed its aims in ways that will generate a popular following. Yet, all social movement theories share a secular framework of perception and tend to ignore the importance of ideology as a mobilizing force in the post-Soviet Central Asia. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has produced an ideological vacuum among southern Kazakhstan's devout Muslims that, for some, has been filled by Hizb ut-Tahrir.

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