

WOMEN AND RADICALISATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	i
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE NOOKAT INCIDENT	3
A. CHRONOLOGY.....	3
B. CONSEQUENCES.....	4
III. HIZB UT-TAHRIR IN KYRGYZSTAN	6
IV. WHY WOMEN JOIN	7
A. THE APPEAL OF ISLAM.....	7
B. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAUSES.....	8
1. No safety net	8
2. Lack of economic opportunities.....	9
3. Post-Soviet social milieu.....	9
C. THE APPEAL OF HIZB UT-TAHRIR	10
1. Restrictive social expectations	10
2. Political dissatisfaction	10
3. Sense of religious oppression.....	11
V. WOMEN’S RECRUITMENT AND ROLE	13
A. WHO JOINS	13
B. RECRUITMENT	14
1. Recruitment through the family	14
2. Recruitment within the community.....	14
C. TRAINING AND INITIATION.....	16
D. IN THE SHADOWS	16
E. IS MORE EXTENSIVE PARTICIPATION LIKELY?	17
VI. THE STATE’S RESPONSE	18
A. DEALING WITH RADICALISM.....	18
1. “Prophylactic education”	18
2. Law enforcement	19
B. PERILS OF OVER-BUREAUCRATISATION	20
VII. GENDER ISSUES	22
A. EXISTING INITIATIVES.....	22
B. SHORTCOMINGS	23
VIII. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY	24
A. NGOs: FOLLOWING THE MONEY	24
B. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: LOST IN TRANSLATION	24
IX. CONCLUSION	26
APPENDICES	
A. MAP OF KYRGYZSTAN	27

WOMEN AND RADICALISATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kyrgyzstan's increasingly authoritarian government is adopting a counter-productive approach to the country's growing radicalisation. Instead of tackling the root causes of a phenomenon that has seen increasing numbers, including many women, joining groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), it is resorting to heavy-handed police methods that risk pushing yet more Kyrgyz towards radicalism. The authorities view HT, which describes itself as a revolutionary party that aims to restore by peaceful means the caliphate that once ruled the Muslim world, as a major security threat. But for some men and ever more women, it offers a sense of identity and belonging, solutions to the day-to-day failings of the society they live in, and an alternative to what they widely view as the Western-style social model that prevails in Kyrgyzstan. Without a major effort to tackle endemic corruption and economic failure, radical ranks are likely to swell, while repression may push at least some HT members into violence. This report focuses primarily on the increasingly important role that women are playing in the movement.

HT is banned in Kyrgyzstan and operates clandestinely. There are no accurate membership figures. It may have up to 8,000 members, perhaps 800 to 2,000 of them women. To join, individuals participate in formalised training, take examinations, an oath of loyalty and pledge to recruit others. But while HT's membership is still small, support for it in the wider population is growing.

In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, where many have responded to 70 years of atheism by embracing religion, HT's uncompromising Islamic message has gained considerable acceptance. Women, especially those living in rural or conservative areas where traditional gender norms prevail, turn to HT to find meaning in their restricted social roles. The party's activists regard the growth in those who count as sympathisers if not actual members as a critical component of a long-term strategy – a currently quiescent element of society that would be ready to accept a caliphate once it begins to take form.

There are limits to HT's expansion. In other countries, HT has sought to function as an elite organisation, not a

mass movement based in the poorer sectors of the society, and there is no clear sign that the Kyrgyz party has as yet been able to substantially expand its appeal to the educated, middle class, either male or female. The degree to which it has spread from its original, predominantly Uzbek, base in the south into the majority ethnic Kyrgyz community in the north is unclear. And HT's restrictive view of women's roles in an avowedly revolutionary party could well limit its growth among female sympathisers who may be deeply critical of the regime but unwilling to abandon the freedoms they enjoy in a secular society.

The government hardened its position on Islamist groups following an October 2008 protest in Nookat, prosecuting and imprisoning a number of HT members, including two women. Officials justify their response to the incident by saying that HT had become too militant in its challenge to the state and had to be taught a lesson. They insist that energetic police action is coupled with political dialogue with believers. In fact, however, security methods prevail. Civilian elements of the government tasked with reaching out to the religious community take at best a distant, secondary part. They are either too inefficient and uncoordinated, or simply reluctant to do anything that impinges on the responsibilities of the powerful security establishment.

A policy based on repression will play into HT's hands and may even accelerate its recruitment. HT has a sophisticated political organisation that resembles that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and even, to a degree, successful communist undergrounds. It thrives on the perception of social injustice, economic collapse and repression. It views prison as the ultimate test of party resolve and will regard a crackdown as an opportunity to provide new martyrs and draw new recruits. Women, whether presently members themselves or not but whose husbands are arrested, may feel compelled to assume a more public role in petitioning authorities.

Despite the prominent role they played in the Nookat protest, the government has not implemented policies aimed specifically at discouraging women from joining

HT. Kyrgyzstan's progressive legislation on gender equality and its quotas for women representatives in government have little impact on the lives of those most likely to join HT. Religious women in particular feel that women in government do not represent their views, because most are proponents of secularism. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not reaching out to such women. They suffer from a lack of credibility with religious women and feel compelled to concentrate on projects they can secure funding for from donors rather than grassroots initiatives such as helping mothers by providing after-school programs for young children – something HT does for its women members.

The only effective long-term strategy is political. For this, however, Kyrgyzstan – and its neighbours in Central Asia, all of whom face similar problems – needs to take serious steps to eradicate systemic corruption and improve living conditions. Economic crisis and rigged elections strengthen HT's appeal to those who feel socially and politically dispossessed and buttress its argument that Western democracy and capitalism are morally and practically flawed. All states in the region need also to differentiate between a political struggle against HT and the desire of large segments of their societies to demonstrate renewed religious faith by adopting some traditional attributes of Islam – beards in the case of men, for example, and headscarves for women. As Central Asia becomes a major supply route for NATO's expanded war in Afghanistan, Western powers with an increased interest in the region's stability should caution against repressive policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Kyrgyzstan:

1. Conduct a comprehensive study on the socio-demographic characteristics and needs of religious women, starting with a pilot project in Osh and Jalal-Abad and the areas around the towns of Nookat, Aravan, Uzgen and Karasuu, which are considered the hotbed of Islamic radicalism in the country.
2. Develop, based on the results of this study, social and economic policies targeting religious women that include:
 - a) employment schemes (at first in sectors acceptable for religious women like education, health care and social work) and vocational training opportunities; and
 - b) rehabilitation of social services, including kindergartens and after-school programs, that would lighten women's workload at home and allow them to pursue outside employment.
3. Develop and implement a system of financial assistance at the local level for poor families, especially those headed by single mothers, and raise government assistance for maternity leave, sick leave to care for children, alimony and support for children with dead or missing fathers.
4. Organise, in cooperation with the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (DUMK), free study groups on Islam at the neighbourhood level that are led by respected, knowledgeable women from local communities.
5. Encourage DUMK, financially and by providing domestic and international expertise, to design a program of outreach to religious women that would ensure their greater participation in the local religious community.
6. Shift the focus from prohibiting hijab in public schools to implementing measures that would ensure better attendance and graduation rates from secondary schools by girls (especially in rural and southern areas) and deliver a basic secular curriculum in women's madrasas.
7. Set up an inter-agency task force on radicalisation whose remit includes developing specific policies relevant to religious women and assign the lead role to a non-security government body in order to establish better information sharing and decrease the influence of law enforcement agencies; ensure that concerns of religious women are separated from the agenda on gender equality.
8. Take steps to change the climate of secrecy and taboo around religious radicalism by encouraging greater public discussion on the causes of and ways to address radicalisation, and welcoming more in-depth research by domestic and international experts.

To Donors:

9. Expand programs for women beyond gender issues to include projects for religious women and joint initiatives for both secular and religious women on practical matters (e.g. water quality, coping with male labour migration, pre-school education).
10. Fund research and survey activities by the government, local think tanks and academics on the topics of religious women and female radicalisation.
11. Adjust aid priorities by channelling more funding to grassroots projects that address practical concerns of religious women and engage secular and religious audiences within local communities, as opposed to large-scale institutional initiatives.

12. Encourage local NGOs to reach out specifically to religious women in their advocacy and service provision initiatives.
13. Encourage the government to incorporate the policies on religious women as a distinct component of its institutional agenda.

To the U.S., Russia and Other Members of the International Community with Particular Influence:

14. Warn the government that its recent policy shift, which relies disproportionately on security measures in dealing with Islamic radicalism, threatens to stimulate rather than undermine the appeal of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and has potential to generate a popular backlash.

15. Call upon the government to conduct a new investigation and new trials in the Nookat case that observe due process and exclude evidence obtained through torture.

To Domestic Civil Society:

16. Initiate specific projects to address daily concerns of religious women and seek partnerships on such initiatives with religious NGOs.
17. Combine any advocacy on gender equality with more regular community work and, whenever possible, service provision to enhance credibility.

Bishkek/Brussels, 3 September 2009

WOMEN AND RADICALISATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

I. INTRODUCTION

As part of the general concern in Kyrgyzstan about radicalisation, the greater involvement of women in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) (the Party of Liberation) – one of the most active and visible radical Islamic groups in the country – and their more frequent open signs of religiosity deserves special interest. More women are, for example, seen in a headscarf or even in the paranja, a robe similar to the Afghan burqa that covers head and body, leaving a narrow opening for the eyes.¹ Recently, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev remarked, “Look at the youth on the streets, especially in the south. Women are covered. Only their eyes are visible. We didn’t have this before”.² The government’s new national security planning documents identify increasing Islamisation as a threat to internal stability and focus in particular on HT.³

HT operates freely in many Western states. Its website in the UK seeks to present a modern image of the party and engage Western thinkers, policymakers and academics in dialogue about Islam. However, it is illegal and has been branded an anti-state movement in Kyrgyzstan, as in the rest of Central Asia. The group is banned under the national constitution that prohibits religious organisations from setting up political parties. On 20 August 2003 the Supreme Court identified HT as a terrorist entity.⁴ The government position has become more

repressive over time. In the late 1990s authorities wanted to keep the party in check without resorting to much repression for the fear of stirring inter-ethnic tensions and boosting HT ranks.⁵ By 2008 the government felt compelled to toughen its stance, believing that Kyrgyzstan’s liberal policies would attract HT members from all over the region. Suspected party activists are now charged with multiple offences that carry lengthy prison terms.

The party says women have been involved since its inception. Man-made, as opposed to God-given, laws in most Muslim societies, a representative asserted, have brought only misery for women: injustice, oppression, poverty and illiteracy.⁶ The party’s message to them is twofold: to protest the oppression of their Muslim sisters and to assert their own distinctiveness as religious Muslims in a Westernised and secular world.⁷

Despite widespread interest in radical Islam in both academia and journalism, female radicalisation in Central Asia remains understudied and poorly understood. There is little comprehensive government data on the involvement of women in HT. Kyrgyz officials estimate female participation at 6 to 10 per cent of a total membership that may be as high as 8,000, though it is probably somewhat less. Most of these women, they have suggested,

¹ Previous Crisis Group reporting on the general issue of radicalism in the region includes: Asia Report N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003; and Asia Report N°72, *Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement*, 22 December 2003.

² Данияр Каримов, “Руководство Кыргызстана полагает, что возрастающая религиозность общества одна из внутренних угроз безопасности страны” [Daniyar Karimov, “The leadership of Kyrgyzstan considers growing religiosity of society one of the internal threats to the country’s security”], 24kg, 12 February 2009, at www.24.kg/politic/2009/02/12/106157.html.

³ Neither the National Security Concept nor the recently adopted National Security Strategy has yet been published.

⁴ “Религиозно-экстремистская партия ‘Хизб ут-Тхрир’ (краткий информационный материал)”, по материалам информационно-методического издания “Вопросы (проблемы) религии на переходном этапе” [“Religious and ex-

tremist Party Hizb ut-Tahrir (brief informational note)”, based on the informational and methodological publication “Issues (problems) in religion at the transitional stage”], prepared by the State Agency on Religious Affairs.

⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶ Written communication to Crisis Group from Sultanah Parvin, HT spokeswoman in the UK, 6 February 2009.

⁷ See: HT materials, “European Parliament Committee Concludes Culture Oppresses Muslim Women, not Islam”, 26 April 2008; “Liberalism Undermines Women’s Self-Worth”, 18 April 2008; “Cherie Blair’s Criticism of the Treatment of Muslim Women Ignores the Real Causes”, 10 November 2007, at www.hizb.org.uk; and Sultanah Parvin’s speech at “Khilafah: the Need for Political Unity”, video, YouTube, 19 August 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBEfGkGt8E&feature=related.

are wives or mothers of male members.⁸ Other estimates of HT women in Kyrgyzstan reach as high as 2,000. HT's female wing is hard to study, since in what is in any event a generally clandestine party, women are further protected by their husbands and social mores that keep their activities from the public eye.

In reaction to the collapse of the Soviet state and its communist ideology, women have turned increasingly to Islam as an easily accessible, socially approved route for self-identification. The state, however, has mishandled religious policy, and its approved clergy have been unable to meet the demand for religious instruction. In their search for practical explanations and solutions to life's challenges, some women have turned to radical Islamic groups, notably HT and its effective exponents.⁹

The dissolution of the Soviet Union obliged the newly independent state's rulers to seek an alternative to its repudiated ideology. They have not had great success. Kyrgyzstan, like all of Central Asia, had no recent experience of statehood. Efforts to define a national identity have included describing the nation as a "common home" for all its inhabitants, regardless of ethnicity; or as "the land of Manas," its mythical hero,¹⁰ and calling upon people to follow his rules. Another attempt proclaimed the country "an island of democracy".¹¹ More recently President Bakiyev announced an official ideology of one Kyrgyz nation "built on the idea of unification and dialogue among cultures and confessions, a common historical heritage through participation of citizens in determining a common future for the country".¹²

These attempts have resulted in public confusion and scepticism. In several interviews, official and civic sources, unable to keep up with the changes, referred to various past ideologies as still operational. Many officials struggle to articulate a state ideology. Others believe

people should be able to choose whatever ideology they like. A social scientist said the public has grown so tired of propaganda that it has a mental block against state campaigns.¹³ This was echoed by a senior official, who acknowledged that most Kyrgyz lack time for complex ideas when they are fighting for survival.¹⁴ The result is an ideological vacuum ready to be filled by a force willing to invest time and effort. HT seeks to become that force.

In such circumstances, the government and donors face a challenge to design appropriate policies without overreacting to a benign return to Islam and thus becoming entrapped in a struggle against the public manifestations of religiosity rather than the root causes of radicalisation. The official response to an October 2008 incident in Nookat illustrated the dangers of confusing the two. Overreaction could turn HT members into martyrs and fuel a backlash against the government. Neglect could put at risk the future of Kyrgyzstan as a secular state.

Interviews and research for this report were carried out in Kyrgyzstan from December 2008 to March 2009, mostly in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions and the capital, Bishkek. Interviews were conducted with Kyrgyz officials, analysts, journalists, religious leaders and imams, civic activists, members of the donor community, defence lawyers and ordinary citizens. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, most requested anonymity in order to provide more candid opinions.

⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 20; and Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Lanham, 2005).

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local journalist, Osh, March 2009; former Hizb ut-Tahrir female recruit.

¹⁰ Manas is the main character of the Kyrgyz national epic, the national hero who resisted foreign invaders and united Kyrgyz tribes.

¹¹ See, for example, Askar Akayev, "Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Democratic Alternative", *Democratizatsiya*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994); and Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 169-209.

¹² President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, "Курс на обновление страны" ["The Course Toward the Country's Renewal"], Раздел "Смена идеологических ориентиров и реальная культурная политика" ["Section: The Change of Ideological Orientations and a Real Policy on Culture"], 31 March 2009, at www.president.kg/ru/press/events/3627/.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, social scientist, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, parliament member, Bishkek, February 2009.

II. THE NOOKAT INCIDENT

A 2008 protest following cancellation of festivities both demonstrated the readiness of many women to take a more public part in asserting the interests of religiously motivated Kyrgyz and prompted an unexpectedly harsh government reaction. The resulting “Nookat incident” is widely regarded as a turning point in the state’s response to Islam’s revival, one that offered evidence of precisely what HT accuses it of: religious oppression.

A. CHRONOLOGY

On 1 October 2008 people in Nookat – a village south west of the regional capital, Osh¹⁵ – were preparing for Orozo Ait, as Eid al Fitr, the end of Ramadan, is known locally. It is a public holiday, with festivities held around the country. Nothing out of the ordinary was planned in Nookat, and accounts differ on what triggered problems. Some blame lottery tickets with an HT logo, allegedly distributed to boost attendance.¹⁶ Others, including many officials, say authorities had begun to feel they were losing control of the event and their patience with an increasingly powerful group of local HT members.¹⁷ Several days earlier, the organisers, including HT members, were told by the head of the local administration that the celebration would be moved to a stadium.¹⁸ It is not clear whether by 1 October the permit for the

event had been revoked and public festivities cancelled.¹⁹ Even officials acknowledged that the authorities badly mishandled the case,²⁰ leaving the impression Orozo Ait would proceed as usual.

On the morning of 1 October, the stadium was cordoned off. Confusion ensued – some villagers say they were told to go home, others that the event had been moved back to the square.²¹ Finally the district chief (*akim*) announced that the celebration had been cancelled and called upon people to disperse within half an hour or face consequences.²² A protest – with women forming the first row – ensued, demanding the celebration proceed. Police began detaining the most vocal males. Witnesses said some were soon released but appeared to have been beaten,²³ which further enraged the crowd. Police, reinforced from Osh and a nearby town, used batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd.²⁴ Officials insisted they had no choice after officers and officials were attacked.²⁵ The official version gives a much lower estimate of demonstrators²⁶ and claims that the violence was premeditated.²⁷

Seven protestors were initially maintained in custody, and on 3-4 October a checkpoint was set up on the Osh-Nookat road.²⁸ Within a week, authorities reported that 32 suspects, including two women, had been arrested,

¹⁵ Data from the Association of Cities of the Kyrgyz Republic at www.citykr.kg/nookat.php.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January 2009. Locals said lottery tickets were given mostly to families with boys. However, no interviewees admitted having received or seen a ticket.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009; senior regional official, Osh, January 2009; senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009. A report by Russia’s Memorial Human Rights Centre asserted that organisers encountered problems in 2007, when local police tried to confiscate the pot for cooking plov. See “Кыргызстан: нарушения прав человека в связи с делом о ‘Нюокатских событиях’” [“Kyrgyzstan: human rights violations in the case of the ‘Nookat events’”], 27 January 2009. The strength of the local HT cell in Nookat is not clear, but many officials called the area a hotbed of Islamic radicalism.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January 2009. This was corroborated by two reports: Memorial, *op. cit.*; and “Monitoring the compliance with human rights related to the events in Nookat on 1 October 2008”, report commissioned by the Office of the Ombudsman of the Kyrgyz Republic, March 2009. A senior state official asserted the organisers were unofficially warned by law enforcement agencies shortly before the festivities to keep any celebrations low key. Crisis Group interview, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁹ Memorial, *op. cit.*; and Crisis Group interviews, Nookat residents, January-March 2009.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009; law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009; oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009; and former government official, Bishkek, February 2009. Also see Yrys Kadykeev, “Kyrgyzstan: Islamic Protest Sparked by Official Insensitivity”, Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), 14 October 2008.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat; and defence lawyers, Osh, January 2009.

²² Memorial, *op. cit.*

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January-February 2009.

²⁴ Memorial, *op. cit.*; Mirgul Akimova, Ayday Tokonova and Regina Kalpanazar, “Controversy Over Kyrgyz Protest Sentences”, IWPR, 12 December 2008.

²⁵ Most reports say between five and eleven officials were injured and about five protestors detained at the start of unrest and allegedly beaten. Memorial and Kadykeev, IWPR, both *op. cit.* Crisis Group interview, senior official, Bishkek, March 2009.

²⁶ Initial official estimates indicated 100-150 demonstrators (Memorial, *op. cit.*); media reports pointed to over 1,000 people at the protest, Kadykeev, IWPR, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Ombudsman’s report, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Memorial, *op. cit.* A senior law enforcement official said the official investigation started around 3-4 October, Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009.

all HT members,²⁹ charged with such offences as incitement to mass unrest, to overthrow the government and to foment religious strife. The trial lasted from 21 to 27 November. A defence attorney and an independent observer said an informal order to speed up trial and sentencing came from the “highest echelons” of the government.³⁰

Unusually for Kyrgyzstan, all the accused received lengthy prison terms. The shortest, nine years, was given to a seventeen-year-old; two women, Labarkhan Saidaripova and Zaripa Abdikarimova, received fifteen and sixteen years respectively. Numerous allegations of torture quickly surfaced.³¹ Accounts of mistreatment of the women were especially shocking, given the leniency with which Kyrgyz police usually treat women.³² Local people and lawyers who followed the case closely said Abdikarimova suffered a miscarriage due to mistreatment.³³ She was allegedly severely beaten for giving a fake name of an HT member after hours of interrogation.³⁴ The national ombudsman’s report indicated that “both women were beaten with batons or fists on their heads”.³⁵ Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev told parliament he did not have “specific facts on the use of torture”.³⁶

On 19 May 2009, the Supreme Court threw out two charges and reduced most sentences by two to five years.³⁷ Women and minors received greater leniency.³⁸

But the essence of the charges and sentences was upheld. Human rights activists feel that, their legal options exhausted, the convicted can now hope only for a presidential pardon.³⁹

B. CONSEQUENCES

Though most if not all the trouble seems to have resulted from confusion about where or if the celebration was to take place and the subsequent heavy-handed government reaction rather than a planned radical action, the government clearly considers the Nookat unrest as a watershed. A State Agency on Religious Affairs document implies that the state views HT as having reached the point of political take-off, shifting from covert organisation and infiltration to demonstrations and mass disorder aimed at forcing the government to resign.⁴⁰ Nookat crystallised its perception of radical Islam, and HT in particular, as a major internal threat. Many officials later remarked with visible frustration that they had previously looked the other way, but this was no longer an option.⁴¹ They were losing ground to an increasingly assertive movement that seemed prepared to use violence.

The incident also underscored the belief of many officials that liberal religious policies had failed. Punishments that were much more lenient than in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan⁴² had, they said, turned Kyrgyzstan into a safe haven for Islamic radicals from all over the region.⁴³

²⁹ “Controversy over Kyrgyz Protest Sentences”, IWPR, op. cit.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, defence lawyer, Osh, January 2009. This was corroborated in the Memorial report, op. cit.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January-February 2009; defence lawyers, Osh, January 2009. See also the reports by the ombudsman and Memorial, both op. cit; and Venera Sultanova and Dilbar Ruzadorova, “Kyrgyzstan: Does Tough Policing Spell End of Islamic Radicalism?”, IWPR, 3 April 2009.

³² Crisis Group interviews, defence lawyers, Osh; Ombudsman’s report, op. cit.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January 2009.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, defence lawyer, Osh.

³⁵ Ombudsman’s report, op. cit. Their heads were also reportedly shaved twice.

³⁶ See Артем Петров, “Молдомуса Конгантiev: Конкретных фактов о применении пыток в правоохранительных органах Кыргызстана у меня нет” [Artem Petrov, “Moldomusa Kongantiev: I do not have specific facts on torture in the law enforcement bodies of Kyrgyzstan”], 24kg, 18 March 2009, at www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/18/109443.html.

³⁷ Written communication to Crisis Group from Dmitry Kabak, public defender, 25 May 2009. “Кыргызстан: Верховный Суд сократил сроки заключения осужденным по «ноокатским событиям»” [“Kyrgyzstan: the Supreme Court cuts prison sentences to the convicted in the Nookat events”], Ferghana.ru, 20 May 2009, at www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=11979&mode=snews.

³⁸ Labarkhan Saidaripova and Zaripa Abdikarimova are now to serve seven years in prison.

³⁹ “Дмитрий Кабак: Каждого мусульманина произносящего «Аллах акбар!», нужно посадить за экстремизм?” [“Dmitry Kabak: Should every Muslim, who says ‘Allah Akbar!’ be put in prison for extremism?”], Reporter-Bishkek, 22 May 2009.

⁴⁰ “Религиозно-экстремистская партия ‘Хизб ут-Тахрир’ (краткий информационный материал)”, по материалам информационно-методического издания “Вопросы (проблемы) религии на переходном этапе” [“Religious and extremist Party Hizb ut-Tahrir (brief informational note)”, based on the informational and methodological publication “Issues (problems) in religion at the transitional stage”], prepared by the State Agency on Religious Affairs. The government analysis is slightly confused by its insistence that HT has a four-, not three-part strategy as HT itself claims. See below.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009; senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009.

⁴² Officials referred to punishments ranging from small fines to three to five years in prison. Crisis Group interview, oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009; and Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, senior regional official, Osh, January 2009; senior DUMK official, Bishkek, February 2009.

Nookat was seen to highlight increased religiosity and radicalisation, especially among women and young people. The secular establishment saw in it proof that women in headscarves and men with long beards could indeed be a threat. The trial seems to have been used to warn would-be supporters of Islamist movements. Independent experts noted with alarm that the government appeared to be adopting the “Uzbek model” – speedy trials and long sentences, with little regard for procedural fairness or justice.⁴⁴

Nookat sparked a protracted popular debate on the government’s handling. Senior officials denied the response was disproportionate.⁴⁵ In the village, relatives and supporters maintained the innocence of those convicted, saying some were not even in town on the day.⁴⁶ They expressed anger that the real organisers of the protest escaped prosecution and resented the authorities’ refusal to review the convictions of those for whom exonerating evidence was said to be available.⁴⁷ Many people were simply scared.⁴⁸ A woman said that after the event, local

women were afraid to let sons and husbands outside lest they be arrested.⁴⁹ No interviewee could understand why it was wrong to celebrate Orozo Ait publicly. The national response has been more muted, partly because of limited coverage in the largely state-controlled electronic media and the small circulation of the few independent papers. But even those who oppose HT said all levels of government had acted too harshly.⁵⁰

The Nookat unrest put moderate Muslims in a difficult position. They criticised HT for inciting the violence but also insisted on the right to celebrate the holiday.⁵¹ HT leaders are said to be satisfied with the turn of events and to believe it will attract recruits for years. Similar views were echoed by a senior local cleric generally loyal to the authorities, who said the current policy would provoke intense animosity towards the government and the president.⁵² Many experts worry that repression will only push HT further underground and make it more attractive to previously untapped audiences.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Islam expert and journalist, Bishkek, February 2009; university faculty, Osh, February 2009. See also “Kyrgyzstan: Does Tough Policing Spell End of Islamic Radicalism?” IWPR, op. cit.; and conclusions, Memorial report, op. cit.

⁴⁵ The prosecutor general, Elmurza Satybaldiev, subsequently insisted that the punishment was commensurate with the crime. See Данияр Каримов, “Генеральный прокурор Кыргызстана разрешил оппозиции за свой счет провести за рубежом баллистическую экспертизу наградного оружия Аликбека Джекшенкулова” [Daniyar Karimov, “The Prosecutor General allowed the opposition to conduct a ballistic expertise of Alikbek Jekshenkulov’s weapon awarded to him by the state at its own expense abroad”], 24kg, 10 March 2009, at www.24.kg/politic/2009/03/10/108553.html. In a heated exchange with an opposition deputy in parliament, the head of the State Committee for National Security, Murat Sutalinov, stated that people were punished “not because they were religious or Hizb ut-Tahrir [members], but for organising mass disorder”. Наргиза Юлдашева, “Мурат Суталинов: Не надо выставлять руководство Кыргызстана врагами мусульман” [Nargiza Yuldasheva, “Murat Sutalinov: Don’t try to portray the leadership of Kyrgyzstan as the enemy of Muslims”], 24kg, 5 March 2009, at www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/05/108193.html.

⁴⁶ Based on Crisis Group interviews with some defence lawyers for the trial, four to ten of those convicted appear to be HT activists. They at first admitted membership, then recanted their testimony, sensing they would be sentenced more harshly. Others are not involved with HT. But evidence was not gathered impartially, so it is impossible to be certain who actually belongs to the party.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Nookat, January-February 2009.

⁴⁸ “Б. Бешимов требует от Генпрокуратуры расследовать правомерность действий сотрудников ГКНБ по запугиванию жителей Нооката” [“B. Beshimov demands the Prosecutor’s Office investigate the lawfulness of activities by the

staff of the State Committee for National Security on intimidating the people of Nookat”], CA News, 24 April 2009.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Nookat, March 2009.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local journalist and local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009; journalist and former government official, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁵¹ A prominent female religious activist, who describes herself as a moderate Muslim, complained that the government attitude makes no sense, giving a holiday but without organising anything. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, January 2009.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Islamic cleric, Osh, February 2009.

III. HIZB UT-TAHRIR IN KYRGYZSTAN

HT was founded in 1953 in the then Jordanian-controlled area of Jerusalem by Taquiddin an-Nabhani, an Islamic jurist and theologian. Its core ideological tenet is restoration of the caliphate. It advocates peaceful political change that will come about, it believes, when sufficient numbers understand the benefits of such a future Islamic state. Unlike many traditional Islamic parties, it rejects gradualism and reforms as ends in themselves, believing that only a fundamental transformation of society will improve the lives of Muslims. The party emerged in Central Asia after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, establishing a first foothold in Uzbekistan, where harsh repression by the Karimov regime quickly forced it underground. Around 1997 it spread to the southern part of neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. It speaks of three strategic stages of political struggle:

- education (*thasqif*): identifying and teaching potential members party programs and Islamic culture;
- interaction: party participation in the “political, intellectual non-military” struggle in society, so that the *umma* (wider Muslim community) “makes Islam the centre of her thoughts and emotions and practices Islam in her life works”. At this stage, “the party places erroneous ideas, concepts, emotions and actions in the society at the centre of its intellectual/political struggle, and exposes colonialists’ plans in Islamic lands”; and
- establishment of the state: setting up the caliphate by asking people of power for *nusrah* (assistance) and *baiah* (pledge of allegiance) to implement Islam in a revolutionary manner and spread the message of Islam to the rest of the world through *daawa* (proselytising) and jihad, the foreign policy of the caliphate.⁵³

The party’s organisation in Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere, is a five- to seven-person cell. One from each cell knows the identity of the next person in the chain of command, thus reducing the risk of penetration. The female wing of the party operates separately but with a similar structure; coordination with male members is at the regional, not local, level. Like other revolutionary groups, HT stresses that arrest and imprisonment is not the end of the struggle, but its next stage, presenting new opportunities to organise and proselytise. Evidence indicates some use by HT of semi-legal cadre, who function openly to provide information about the party, but whose con-

tacts with underground structures are, for security reasons, kept to the absolute minimum.⁵⁴

The party continues to grow, albeit not as rapidly as some fear. As noted, membership in Kyrgyzstan at present may be as much as 7,000 to 8,000, of whom some 800 to 2,000 could be women. Though the actual figures may be somewhat lower, they are in any event a significant increase over Crisis Group’s 2003 estimate of 1,000 to 2,000 total membership.⁵⁵ Kyrgyz government data swings from one extreme to the other.

In May 2008, the head of the State Agency on Religious Affairs claimed there were 15,000 HT activists, a figure thought to be greatly exaggerated.⁵⁶ A year later, the interior ministry rejected the estimate and said that HT membership was actually decreasing, thanks to joint educational activities by state and religious organisations. As of April 2009, the ministry claimed implausibly, there were only 1,630 supporters of HT ideas, of whom but 118 were active members.⁵⁷ This estimate is definitely too low; even law enforcement officials acknowledged that the state database contains only a fraction of actual members.⁵⁸ The London headquarters claims rather coyly that it is concerned not with precise membership figures but only with the impact the cadre have.⁵⁹

Estimates are complicated by the challenge of differentiating between members and sympathisers. Members have more formal training and are required to pass an exam before being admitted to the party. They take an oath of loyalty and pledge to recruit others. All know

⁵⁴ Observations of a Crisis Group analyst in a previous capacity; Crisis Group interview, expert on Islam, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁵⁶ “Kyrgyz Republic: International Religious Freedom Report 2008”, U.S. State Department, at www.state.gov. Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “Икбалжан Мирсайитов: Данные о числе сторонников ‘Хизб ут-Тахрир’ в Кыргызстане завышены в несколько раз” [“Ikbaljan Mirsayitov: the data on the number of ‘Hizb ut-Tahrir’ supporters in Kyrgyzstan are inflated several fold”], 24 kg, 11 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/11/108719.html.

⁵⁷ The larger figure appeared in “Country Reports on Terrorism 2008”, U.S. Department of State, chapter 2, at www.state.gov/sct/rls/crt/2008. “В Кыргызстане число сторонников ‘Хизб ут-Тахрир’ уменьшается, сообщает МВД, опровергая Госдеп США” [“In Kyrgyzstan the number of Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters is decreasing, says the Ministry of Interior, dismissing the U.S. State Department [estimate]”], AKI Press, 25 May 2009, at <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:14981/>.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009.

⁵⁹ Written communication to Crisis Group from Taji Mustafa, Hizb ut-Tahrir spokesperson in the UK, 26 May 2009.

⁵³ Summarised from “Open letter to the rulers of Afghanistan”, www.hizb.org.uk/hizb/resources/leaflets/open-letter-to-the-rulers-of-afghanistan.html. See also Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit., p. 5.

where they fit in the organisational structure. Sympathisers may have read HT materials, talked to activists and even attended educational activities but have not pledged allegiance to the party and do not participate in its activities. An important distinction between members and sympathisers is the former's exclusive access to the central leadership. At this point, however, the line separating members and sympathisers becomes blurred. Because members do not carry a card and sympathisers often turn into members after the necessary training, the categories are sometimes barely distinguishable in practice. The ambiguity serves HT well by allowing it to claim a larger support base and shielding some activists from possible prosecution.⁶⁰ The state for its part takes a very broad definition when prosecuting HT activists: any evidence linking a person to the HT – party literature, reports by neighbours, or an anonymous tip – are grounds for police action.

An analytical note drawn up by the State Agency on Religious Affairs says that HT in Kyrgyzstan is at the second stage of the struggle for the caliphate, that of “infiltration of its people into the organs of power, and also the spread ... of its political worldview in order to shake the foundations of the state and secular institutions”. Its immediate aim, the document says, is to create a caliphate in the Ferghana Valley, the fertile and densely populated lowlands that also include territory of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.⁶¹

The document claims that membership will need to reach 50,000 to 60,000 before “our society can explode”. While the party is still far from that size, its ability to turn sympathisers into active members poses a long-term threat. The document also notes the role of women is growing. “Hizb ut-Tahrir ideologists not only countenance the participation of women in its work, but also view them as the most effective, fanatical, active propagandisers and recruiters in the organisation”, who thanks to their place in society are “almost immune to punishment”.⁶²

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview. For comparative studies that shed light on HT organisational and operational procedures and structures, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Reviving the Caliphate in Malaysia”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 2009; Greg Fealy, “Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia: Seeking a ‘Total’ Islamic Identity”, conference on “Islam, Xenophobia and Pluralism”, The Australian National University, December 2005. A rough scholarly estimate of the proportion of members to sympathisers in Indonesia is 1:20.

⁶¹ “The Religious and extremist Party Hizb ut-Tahrir (brief informational note)”, op. cit.

⁶² Ibid.

IV. WHY WOMEN JOIN

A. THE APPEAL OF ISLAM

In an environment where state doctrine is either non-existent or lacks credibility, women, who “have too many questions and too few answers on what a woman should be and how she should look”,⁶³ embark on their own search for identity. In Kyrgyzstan, this is a short voyage. Most can essentially choose from three paths: Soviet, Western and Islamic. This limited set of choices is further narrowed by local expectations of a woman's behaviour.

The Soviet and Western images of a woman are unattractive for large parts of Kyrgyz society. The former carries too much historical baggage. People often associate the Soviet woman with the wife of a party boss,⁶⁴ an atheist for whom communist ideology was acceptable in large part due to material inducements. Since independence, the film and TV-based stereotype of Western women – scantily dressed, morally loose and willing to sacrifice family to career – has earned a bad reputation, not only in more conservative regions but almost everywhere outside cities.⁶⁵

Islam has numerous advantages. It offers what a female theologian called “a continuous reference point”,⁶⁶ providing prescriptions for the lifestyle a pious woman should lead. A devout Muslim woman fits naturally with social mores, according to which she is often expected to subordinate her preferences to those of family and community and enjoys considerable prestige.⁶⁷ A prominent journalist remarked that pious women, and especially those who teach the Quran, are treated with considerable reverence.⁶⁸ In rural areas, particularly in the south, many girls feel their chances of finding a suitable husband will improve if their community, and more importantly their potential mother-in-law, regard them as religious.⁶⁹ As a result, there has been growing interest since independence in Islam among young women who are unsatisfied by the meagre information about it

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, social scientist, Bishkek, February 2009.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Osh, February 2009.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009; theologian, Osh, February 2009; principal of female madrasa, Osh, January 2009.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Osh, February 2009.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, principal of female madrasa, Osh, January 2009. She also spoke disapprovingly about how Western culture seems obsessed about rights and freedoms of an individual but does not pay attention to responsibilities. Her views seem to be widely held in Kyrgyz society.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Osh, February 2009.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

they acquired at school.⁷⁰ State-supported religious structures have failed to respond to this new demand.

Established in 1993, the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (Russian acronym DUMK) oversees all Islamic entities.⁷¹ Supposedly independent, it closely coordinates with the government, especially when it comes to organising the haj, certifying Islamic educational establishments and approving religious literature for publication. It does not have a formal strategy for reaching out to adult women.⁷² Ordinary imams not affiliated with radical groups insist that any education should occur in female madrasas separated from men.⁷³ This excludes many women who are past the traditional age of schooling or cannot leave their neighbourhoods due to family commitments and traditions.⁷⁴ Only a few larger mosques have separate areas, so most women cannot attend Friday services to hear socially relevant messages.⁷⁵ An official religious leader suggested husbands should educate their wives upon return from prayers.⁷⁶

As a result, many women feel shut out by traditional Islam or even disoriented by the multiplicity of options. A former HT recruit said, “one imam tells [us] to wear a short skirt, the other says to wear hijab, the third tells it is ok to wear pants. How can you make sense of it all?”⁷⁷ HT has responded to women’s desire for religious education as well as to the inadequacy of traditional state-sponsored Islam. Its recruiters are mobile and come to local neighbourhoods to teach Islam. An NGO leader in Osh remarked ironically that many civic groups could learn from HT how to do grassroots work.⁷⁸ Even government officials and senior clerics admit that its

message is clear and practical.⁷⁹ HT recruiters are not only often more competent in theological issues than traditional imams⁸⁰ but also less rigid in their prescriptions. It is not all about prohibitions with them, a local journalist noted.⁸¹ Indoctrination takes place gradually, organically and almost imperceptibly, to both participants and state.

B. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAUSES

1. No safety net

The emergence of a free market system, the contraction of social services and job opportunities and the resulting social inequalities have led some Kyrgyz women to look to HT for a more just order and socially acceptable way to realise their potential.

The post-Soviet economic collapse led to the disappearance or significant cutback in social services for women. Only 26 per cent of the kindergartens functioning in 1990 remain open, enrolling between 8 and 11 per cent of all pre-school children.⁸² Almost one fourth of women say that housekeeping and care for children and the elderly keep them out of the labour market.⁸³ While there are similar situations in many countries, including in the West, most of the after-school clubs that used to host free extracurricular activities in Soviet times have either fallen into disrepair or started charging, which puts them out of reach for many. A female civic activist told a typical story of how the building of such a club in her town was quietly given to an important state bureaucracy.⁸⁴

Relying on the state welfare net is not a viable option. Government childcare support is minimal. A new mother

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, social scientist and female theologian, Osh, February 2009. The State Agency on Religious Affairs plans to introduce a new course on religious studies in secondary schools only as of 1 September 2010. See “В Кыргызстане Госагентство по делам религий предлагает ввести в школьную программу религиоведение” [“In Kyrgyzstan the State Agency on Religious Affairs suggests introducing religious studies into the school curriculum”], 24kg, 14 July 2007, at <http://24kg/community/2009/07/14/116136.html>.

⁷¹ “International Religious Freedom Report 2008”, op. cit.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, DUMK official, Bishkek, February 2009; political observer, Osh, January 2009; regional DUMK official, Osh, February 2009.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, imam, Osh, February 2009.

⁷⁴ Women spend 3.6 times more hours on domestic labour and two times more on raising children than their male partners. “The Second Periodic Progress Report on the Millennium Development Goals in the Kyrgyz Republic 2009”, UN, p. 17.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, female theologian, Osh, February 2009.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, imam, Osh, February 2009.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, former HT recruit.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior regional official and official on social issues, Osh, January 2009.

⁸⁰ Many clerics interviewed disputed this, saying HT activists’ knowledge is only impressive against the backdrop of widespread ignorance about Islam.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, local journalist, Osh, February 2009.

⁸² The data varies between the UN report, “The Second Periodic Progress Report”, op. cit., p. 11, and that offered by state authorities, Айзада Кутуева, “Уктомхан Абдуллаева: Из 715 тысяч детей до 7 лет в Кыргызстане дошкольные учреждения посещают лишь 60 тысяч” [Aizada Kutueva, “Uktomkhan Abdullaeva: Out of 715,000 children under seven, only 60,000 attend pre-school institutions in Kyrgyzstan”], 24kg, 17 March 2009, at www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/17/109351.html.

⁸³ “Kyrgyz Republic Poverty Assessment, vol. 1: Growth, Employment and Poverty”, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Europe and Central Asia Region, World Bank, 12 September 2007, p. 62.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Osh, January 2009.

is entitled to a lump sum of 1,000 Som (\$23),⁸⁵ but even that may not be available to those women who did not register their marriage civilly and obtain a birth certificate for their child.⁸⁶ Because employers are supposed to pay benefits for the first ten days of a maternity leave, many do not hire women or pressure them not to take the leave. Women are most affected, because they have a longer life expectancy than men,⁸⁷ their pensions are generally lower,⁸⁸ and they spend more time out of the labour market.

2. Lack of economic opportunities

Kyrgyz women have consistently been on the losing side in the post-Soviet economic transformation. A recent UN report noted that their share of the economically active population has been steadily declining. Unemployment among women is 1.5 times higher than among men; women also spend more time searching for a job.⁸⁹ Due to the lack of opportunities in formal sectors, many look for informal employment, such as selling goods at local markets or sewing in makeshift factories, both of which give them no legal protection. They cannot ask for maternity or sick leave. Their salaries are nearly always lower than those of men. And such jobs, where they do not pay taxes, are not included in the calculations of a state pension.

Dire economic realities are exacerbated by cultural stereotypes, which hold that a woman should be provided for by her husband.⁹⁰ International assessments on gender equality point to continuing discrimination. Women remain stuck in low-paid, mostly state-supported sectors, such as education, health care and social services, where their salaries are 2.5 times lower than salaries in traditionally “male” sectors.⁹¹ Access to leadership positions, even in those sectors, is often based not on merit, but

on personal connections,⁹² so women hold only 17 per cent of senior positions in the civil service.⁹³ Only one fourth of women run registered enterprises and apply for large loans. The majority are relegated to small businesses, where profits are smaller and vulnerability to economic downturns is greater.⁹⁴ As a result of these trends, “inactive and unemployed women remain an untapped resource”,⁹⁵ and their increasing number looks to “Islamic sisterhood” for social empowerment.⁹⁶

3. Post-Soviet social milieu

Since independence, society has undergone rapid stratification. According to the National Statistical Committee, the average monthly salary as of 30 March 2009 was 5,351 Som (\$134), with the highest in the financial sector (\$440) and the lowest in agriculture (\$63).⁹⁷ The poverty line is set at 963 Som (\$22).⁹⁸ Two thirds of the population live in rural areas, half of whom are either poor or extremely poor, compared to one third of urban dwellers. Differences in lifestyles are immense, especially between the richest and the poorest. For instance, 73 per cent of rural poor lack a washing machine, compared to 33 per cent of urban non-poor; 71 per cent of rural poor and only 18 per cent of urban non-poor do not have a refrigerator. Data on social class identification varies greatly from year to year, indicating “dramatic shifts in income within the society and the continued evolution of the economic system”.⁹⁹

People feel social differences acutely and understand that the economic volatility encourages making as much money as possible. Many interviewed for this report said women feel social injustices more painfully because

⁸⁵ “The Second Periodic Progress Report”, op. cit., p. 20. The amount has been increased from 700 Som stated in the report to 1,000 Som. Written communication to Crisis Group from a UN expert, 13 April 2009.

⁸⁶ Officials and civic activists noted that both practices are becoming more widespread due to the growth of polygamy and the preference for an Islamic marriage (performed by an imam and not registered with secular authorities). See Jyldyz Bekbaeva, “Concern at Unregistered Marriages in Kyrgyzstan”, IWPR, 11 June 2009.

⁸⁷ Life expectancy is 72 years for women, 63 for men, CA News Service, 20 April 2009.

⁸⁸ “Country Gender Assessment 2007”, UN in the Kyrgyz Republic, p. 70.

⁸⁹ “The Second Periodic Progress Report”, op. cit.

⁹⁰ “Country Gender Assessment 2007”, op. cit., p. 65.

⁹¹ “The Second Periodic Progress Report”, op. cit.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, international organisation source, January 2009.

⁹³ “The Second Periodic Progress Report”, op. cit.

⁹⁴ “Country Gender Assessment 2007”, op. cit., pp. 66, 74.

⁹⁵ “Kyrgyz Republic: Poverty Assessment, vol. 2: Labour Market Dimensions of Poverty”, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Europe and Central Asia Region, World Bank, 12 September 2007, p. 54.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, political observer, Osh, January 2009.

⁹⁷ Денис Ветров, “По последним данным номинальная зарплата в Кыргызстане составила \$134,4” [Denis Vetrov, “According to the latest data, the nominal average salary in Kyrgyzstan is \$134.4”], 24kg, 30 March 2009, at <http://24.kg/economics/2009/03/30/110413.html>.

⁹⁸ Наргиза Юлдашева, “В Кыргызстане минимальный прожиточный уровень составляет 3 тысячи 517 сом, а чертой бедности считаются доходы ниже 963 сомов в месяц” [Nargiza Yuldasheva, “In Kyrgyzstan the minimal living standard constitutes 3,517 Som, incomes below 963 Som per month are considered below the poverty line”], 24kg, 1 April 2009, at www.24.kg/parliament/2009/04/01/110643.html.

⁹⁹ “Kyrgyz Republic Poverty Assessment, vol.1”, op. cit., p. 22.

they are more exposed to them through gender discrimination and closer interaction within their own communities.¹⁰⁰ A senior government official complained people have become too self-centred and obsessed about “the cult of money”,¹⁰¹ but the response in a large part of society has been a return to traditionalism and patriarchy.¹⁰² As a result, many women, especially in rural areas, have come once again to view the family as the centre of life and adopt a position of unquestioned obedience to their husband and senior family members, in particular their mother-in-law.

C. THE APPEAL OF HIZB UT-TAHRIR

Individuals are attracted to HT because it offers concrete solutions to the problems many Kyrgyz see in their society. Certain failings, such as the absence of a strong state identity, affect all Kyrgyz. Men and women alike may find HT’s criticisms of the government compelling. But the party has been particularly adept in its response to certain issues, such as the disintegration of social services, that affect women more than men. While no independent confirmation is available, HT activists insist recruitment is proceeding successfully. Senior government figures are inclined to believe them.

1. Restrictive social expectations

In conservative areas where many women are largely confined to their neighbourhoods, involvement with HT offers a welcome opportunity for networking. Meetings to study the Quran, as they are first known at home, are likely to be approved by a husband or strict mother-in-law.¹⁰³ Many HT teachers are said to take active part in the lives of their students – helping to find a husband for the single ones and addressing family problems of those who are married.¹⁰⁴ The party tries to build a good reputation within communities by small-scale initiatives, such as establishing home kindergartens for members. A female activist and strong HT critic said it is hard to oppose the party because it helps so much on the local level.¹⁰⁵

HT provides a clear answer to many women’s perceptions of social injustice. It argues that social stratification is a product of capitalism, which is destined to fail and be replaced by a caliphate. The party denounces gender equality as “a highly stressful if not unrealistic and impractical lifestyle” and blames gender discrimination on the exploitation of female beauty by the Western media. It sketches a vision of a new order where “one of the husband’s and father’s responsibility is as the financial maintainer of the family”, and “a stay-at-home mum ... does not represent a subjugated role, but an empowered and honoured position”.¹⁰⁶

Unable to compete with more prosperous friends and neighbours, many women from humble backgrounds find HT’s emphasis on modesty and austerity appealing. It offers a good argument against over-spending to impress and meet social expectations: we are not poor but simply religious, with different values that focus on spiritual wholesomeness rather than material satisfaction.¹⁰⁷ HT families need not go into debt to bury a relative or marry off a child.¹⁰⁸

HT gives women in a patriarchal society a chance to realise their potential within “the cocoon of a very traditional and conservative family”.¹⁰⁹ Because female activists do not interact with men – the party enforces strict gender separation in its activities¹¹⁰ – there are no grounds for gossip about inappropriate conduct. Women are respected for teaching Islam. Most importantly, they find an outlet from household routine that adds diversity to their lives.

2. Political dissatisfaction

Social problems and falling living standards have led to disenchantment among many Kyrgyz women with what

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, political observer, Osh, January 2009; former law enforcement officer.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, parliament member, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, expert on women’s issues; local journalist, Osh, March 2009.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, female theologian, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, human rights activist, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, January 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Shabela Begum, “Has the glass ceiling been reinforced by concrete?”, HT, 28 September 2008, at www.hizb.org.uk.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, political observer, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Excessive personal spending on ceremonies has generated heated debate all over the region. Because of strong bonds within extended families, weddings and funerals last several days and include hundreds of relatives. Kyrgyz legislators have tried unsuccessfully to institute some restraint. See Артем Петров, “Юридическое управление Жогорку Кенеша Кыргызстана рекомендует инициатору парламентского постановления ‘О проведении семейных мероприятий’ представить документ в виде рекомендации” [Artem Petrov, “The Legal department of Jogorku Kenesh recommends the sponsor of the resolution ‘On Conducting Family Activities’ offer the document as a recommendation”], 24kg, 16 March 2009, at www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/16/109203.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, political observer, January 2009.

¹¹⁰ Written communication to Crisis Group from Sultanah Parvin, HT spokeswoman in the UK, 19 February 2009.

they view as the Western system of government. Those who turn to Islam for solutions feel that the authorities misinterpret their faith as a sign of radicalism rather than dissatisfaction with the status quo. Many resent a more lenient attitude toward Christian denominations that are not deemed a security threat.¹¹¹ HT plays skillfully on these sentiments by offering women a vision for an alternative order and blaming the state for social and political ills.

Until recently the country's political leadership saw itself moving in the direction of a Western-style democracy. Senior members of the ruling party now say, however, that an authoritarian political system based on the Russian model is more appropriate to present conditions in Kyrgyzstan. In a recent survey, 44 per cent of women said they were somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with democracy in the country. One third said no party represents their views; another third did not answer the question.¹¹²

The attitude of many women was summarised by a prominent female human rights lawyer: "If this is democracy, then I don't want democracy".¹¹³ While differences in attitudes between genders are not great, women have fewer venues for political participation. They feel more isolated from the political process and that there is "no chance to find the truth from authorities",¹¹⁴ so they look for it elsewhere. Not surprisingly, several who admitted they are drawn to HT used the word "honesty" to describe its attraction.¹¹⁵ As political space becomes more tightly controlled,¹¹⁶ and informal media censorship makes any criticism of the government rare or perfunctory, HT presents itself as speaking truth to power. Many religious women also see none of their own in power structures.¹¹⁷ About a quarter of the Kyrgyz legislature's members are women, but all are firmly secularist.¹¹⁸

HT exploits disillusion with democracy by emphasising its belief in the Western model's imminent demise and replacement by a system of governance based on Islam. Women are promised attractive opportunities in a caliphate, including that they will participate fully in political life and stand for any position but caliph and that "a domestic mother in the Islamic social framework... is afforded right to property, is encouraged ... to be politically active – indeed is granted the vote",¹¹⁹ while maintaining a privileged and distinct status. HT speaks in a language people can understand. Its video on the economic recession presents concepts such as the liquidity crisis and predatory lending in a simple, straightforward way, interweaving its message with the narrative.¹²⁰

3. Sense of religious oppression

Holding to the line that Kyrgyz were never zealously religious or wore the *paranja*,¹²¹ officials say the Islam revival is being forced upon people. This comes through in poorly worded statements and clumsy actions that deepen the sense of religious oppression among the faithful. For instance, in Osh authorities advocate a ban on mosque attendance by school children on Thursday and Friday.¹²² Going one step further, the police in Aravan district of the same region were reported to be stopping school-age boys on their way to the mosque to prevent them from attending Friday prayers.¹²³

On 19 February 2009, the education ministry announced a ban on religiously symbolic garments in state schools.¹²⁴ Although neutrally worded, the policy was widely as-

¹¹¹ See below.

¹¹² "Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, October 2008", International Republican Institute.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, national human rights activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Karasuu, early 2009.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°79, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, 14 August 2008.

¹¹⁷ A prominent national activist for the rights of religious women was called "a lonely warrior" in the mostly secular establishment. Crisis Group interview, former law enforcement officer.

¹¹⁸ This is a higher percentage than, for example, Italy (21 per cent), the UK (19 per cent), France (18 per cent) and the U.S. (17 per cent). "The Second Periodic Progress Report", op. cit.

¹¹⁹ "Women and Equality", HT, 20 October 2006, at www.hizb.org.uk.

¹²⁰ The video is distributed among HT sympathisers on CD.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, current and former state officials.

¹²² Жипар Акунова, "Мэр Оша Мелисбек Мырзакматов выступает за введение запрета на посещение школьниками мечетей в учебные дни – четверг и пятницу" [Жипар Акунова, "The Mayor of Osh, Melisbek Myrzakmatov, advocates a ban on mosque attendance in school days on Thursday and Friday"], 24kg, 27 February 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/02/27/107669.html.

¹²³ Ойбек Хамидов, "В Араванском районе Ошской области Кыргызстана милиционеры у мечетей поджидают пришедших на молитву школьников" [Oibek Khamidov, "In Aravan rayon of Kyrgyzstan's Osh oblast police officers stop schoolboys who come for a prayer at the mosque"], 24kg, 16 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/16/109237.html.

¹²⁴ The decision was considered a follow-up to Decree no. 260 of the cabinet of ministers (2 June 2008) that required school uniforms for grades one to four in secondary schools starting 1 September 2008.

sumed to target the hijab.¹²⁵ A senior ministry official explained: “Children are subjected to an intense attack, and we will protect them.... When choosing between education and hijab, the choice is with education”.¹²⁶ After an angry backlash, including the threat of legal challenge,¹²⁷ the ministry retreated, calling for activities to explain the merits of secularism.¹²⁸ Education experts say it should instead focus on problems like low graduation and high dropout rates among girls in rural areas.¹²⁹

Because the government overreacts to Islamisation (especially its visual signs), many women believe it is engaged in a fight with their faith rather than with radical or violent elements. A young woman from Osh said it often seemed to her that “authorities are not as much against Hizb ut-Tahrir as they are against Islam in general”.¹³⁰ “They think everyone wearing hijab is either a Hizb or a Wahhabi”, added another.¹³¹

At the same time, moderate and radical Muslims alike feel that while worrying about radical Islam, the government does not do enough to stop proselytising by evangelical Christian missionaries. Many believe the state sometimes promotes a “Christian” agenda by allowing the advertising of popular Western holidays like St. Valentine’s Day in the media¹³² or even actively participating in them.¹³³ A theologian complained: “It is un-

just that [Christian] missionaries can hold events freely but Muslims cannot”.¹³⁴ Some fear that separation of Kyrgyz into Muslim and Christian (non-Eastern Orthodox)¹³⁵ communities that do not interact with each other is a bigger long-term national concern than their division into moderate, radical and secular Muslims.¹³⁶

HT relishes cataloguing government missteps in the religious sphere. Reportedly its materials have recently listed all instances when the state denied permits to host charitable events related to Islamic holidays.¹³⁷ This reinforces the message that the government is fighting Islam. A member was said to have wished that the hijab controversy had lasted longer, because of its significance for women.

politicians’ popularity based on Valentine cards [they get]”, CA News, 19 February 2009.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, theologian, Osh, February 2009.

¹³⁵ 20 per cent of Kyrgyzstan’s population is Orthodox. After many decades in the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, however, most Kyrgyz view the Orthodox Church as native to Kyrgyzstan, and there is little public animosity toward its adherents. This does not apply to Christian missionaries. For example, the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report by the U.S. Department of State noted that the Protestant Church of Jesus Christ has 11,000 members, 40 per cent of whom are Kyrgyz and that “tensions continued between Muslims and former Muslims who have converted to other religious groups”. Christian churches in Kyrgyzstan have increased steadily. Compare the 2008 report, *op. cit.*, with the 2001 version, at www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Osh, February 2009. In interviews people complain about intrusive methods used by Baptists and Jehovah Witnesses who distribute their literature from door to door. Both churches lead in the number of established groups. Christian denominations are more widely spread in the north of the country where adherence to Islam has been less doctrinaire than in the south. Until last year the government took a relatively liberal attitude to Christian proselytisers. The law on the freedom of religion and religious organisations, adopted in January 2009, sought to address these concerns. It set a new minimum number of members (200 individuals) for registering a religious group, limited the stay of foreign missionaries in the country, and restricted venues for proselytising and involving minors.

¹³⁷ Жылдызбек Ибралиев, “В Кыргызстане представители местных органов самоуправления отмечают, что эмиссары религиозных организаций умело используют современные цифровые технологии” [Jyldyzbek Ibraliev, “In Kyrgyzstan representatives of local authorities note that emissaries from religious organizations skillfully use current digital technologies”], 24kg, 16 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/16/109145.html.

¹²⁵ “В Кыргызстане запретили хиджабы в школах” [“In Kyrgyzstan hijabs are banned in schools”], *Podrobnosti*, 4 March 2009, at <http://podrobnosti.ua/society/2009/03/04/586652.html>.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Ксения Толканева, “Фронтбек Кызы Жамал: Мы будем подавать в суд до тех пор, пока не добьемся отмены приказа министра образования Кыргызстана не пускать девочек в хиджабах в школы” [Ksenia Tolkaneva, “Frontbek Kyzy Jamal: we will be appealing to courts until we achieve a rescission of the order by the Minister of Education not to let girls in hijabs in schools”], 24kg, 11 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/11/108673.html.

¹²⁸ “Минобразования Кыргызстана сняло запрет на ношение платков в школах, ограничившись рекомендациями” [“Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Education rescinded the ban on wearing hijabs in schools, limiting [itself] to recommendations”], CA News, 11 March 2009.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, international education expert, April 2009.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Osh, January 2009.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, newspaper journalist, Osh, February 2009.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009; political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009; Islamic cleric, Osh, February 2009.

¹³³ See “Молодежный комитет партии «Ак Жол» намерен определить популярность политиков по валентинкам” [“The Youth Committee of Ak Zhol Party plans to determine

V. WOMEN'S RECRUITMENT AND ROLE

A. WHO JOINS

There is little information available on women who are involved in HT.¹³⁸ Law enforcement statistics are said to be highly unreliable and incomplete,¹³⁹ because reported numbers are subject to manipulation at the local level.¹⁴⁰ Crude stereotypes portray HT women as ignorant victims of forced recruitment by their husbands and male relatives. The picture below is an aggregate portrait of an HT female member derived from interviews with religious experts.

Most female HT members are between twenty and 40 and belong to the so-called “lost generation”, who came of age or grew up during the post-Soviet period.¹⁴¹ As described above, they are driven to join mostly by interest in Islam¹⁴² and possibly to escape a sense of economic and political powerlessness. Few over 50 appear to get involved, possibly because, as products of the communist system, they are less religious and unwilling to give up personal freedoms to which they had become accustomed in Soviet times. Some sources claimed that older women tend to join as a result of a personal tragedy or trauma that has provoked an intense search for meaning in life.¹⁴³ Party activists avoid putting age boundaries on involvement and insist that supporters come from all age groups – teenage girls to 70-year-old great-grandmothers.

As noted, however, supporters are not necessarily the same as active members. Consistent with the concept of an elite rather than a mass organisation, many members are thought to believe that their goal is not to expand membership to every Kyrgyz woman, but to have relatively few dedicated and energetic members who are

trusted by their communities and many latent supporters and sympathisers.¹⁴⁴

In the late 1990s, most female members were married, because they had joined through their husbands. This is slowly changing, as the party expands from the rural south to cities, especially in the north. Many single women now join *halaqahs* (Islamic study circles¹⁴⁵) and later seek a husband within the party. Young women studying to become members are said to be highly desired by male activists who want an “ideologically conscious” wife.

Because HT came to Kyrgyzstan from Uzbekistan, it was easier initially to recruit within the large Uzbek minority.¹⁴⁶ And thus, largely for geographical reasons, Uzbeks form the majority of the women’s wing of the party.¹⁴⁷ Though many activists deny emphasising ethnicity (claiming all Muslims belong to the common *umma*), the party seems conscious of the danger of being portrayed as primarily ethnic Uzbek. Several sources confirmed that energetic attempts have been made to involve more ethnic Kyrgyz, including women. One practice is for Uzbek members to take a Kyrgyz woman (preferably from the north) as a second wife.¹⁴⁸ The number of ethnic Kyrgyz is growing thanks to such efforts and robust recruitment in the north.

Officials insist that women who get involved come from “socially vulnerable” segments of the population – mostly uneducated rural or urban poor who are divorced or not supported by their husbands.¹⁴⁹ This risks misleadingly portraying female HT activists as confused or even tools of a male leadership. The prevalence of poor adherents is not surprising in a country where poverty is widespread and political and economic alienation is a driving force.

¹³⁸ For more, see a qualitative study by Elena Kim, “Women’s Involvement in Religious Fundamentalism: A Case Study of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Kyrgyzstan”, *Women’s Studies Review*, vol. 9 (2004), pp. 39-58; and “Gender Dimensions of Early Warning in the Ferghana Valley”, UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) project implemented by the NGO Diamond, March-December 2005.

¹³⁹ Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “Ikbaljan Mirsayitov: the data on the number of Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters in Kyrgyzstan”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, former law enforcement officer.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, former law enforcement officer, Osh; parliament member, Bishkek, February 2009; senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, female theologian, Osh, March 2009; religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, media expert, Osh, January 2009; local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Most HT members use *halaqah* in a much narrower meaning to describe a primary party cell. Members and non-members alike described general neighbourhood meetings as *jamaat*.

¹⁴⁶ Several officials continued to point out to the prevalence of Uzbeks within HT. Crisis Group interviews, senior official, Bishkek, March 2009; social issues official, Osh, January 2009. According to the 2007 estimate, 14.4 per cent of the population is ethnic Uzbek. See “Background Note: Kyrgyzstan”, U.S. Department of State, April 2009, at www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5755.htm.

¹⁴⁷ Written communication to Crisis Group from a local expert on radical Islam, March 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior regional official and oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009; senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009.

HT's female wing is, however, as socially diverse as any secular political party. Rank-and-file members tend to come from lower classes, but not exclusively. Southern members tend to be less educated than those in the north.¹⁵⁰ Those in higher positions are often middle class and better educated.¹⁵¹ The process of intra-party selection plays some role. To reach a senior position, women need to be vocal and prepared to speak on a variety of topics (while interweaving the caliphate message with each).¹⁵² Thus, the better-educated have a greater chance to rise through the ranks. For instance, a leader of the female wing in a small southern town is reported to have been trained as a teacher, which shows that not all HT female members are uneducated or "lost in life" as the state often says.¹⁵³

B. RECRUITMENT

In recruiting female members, HT pays close attention to local circumstances, including the key factor of mobility. In more conservative and rural areas, this means recruiting in neighbourhoods and during family events. In towns, the range of opportunities increases to include bazaars and madrasas.

1. Recruitment through the family

Recruitment takes advantage of local culture, which places great emphasis on family relations. Many people remarked half-jokingly that the HT approach reminded them of a business network marketing scheme in which members sign up their spouses and close relatives for a product and then engage them to find further participants.¹⁵⁴ Recruitment through family ties is most effective in a conservative environment where a woman's mobility is often limited to her neighbourhood. An HT husband will almost certainly recruit his wife as at least a sympathiser.¹⁵⁵

Many officials asserted that women are routinely recruited by harassment and even domestic violence.¹⁵⁶ More likely, however, a woman will join of her own volition or through more subtle cultural and familial pressures, such as desire to keep the family united and the widespread perception that a woman should actively support her husband. An activist who sympathised with HT recalled that at first his wife did not want to wear the hijab, but he insisted. Eventually, local culture in which the husband has the final word, prevailed.¹⁵⁷ Another man reportedly said his wife was at first too scared to join but gradually accepted membership as her destiny.

Recruitment by other family members takes place in a number of ways, including discussions in which a female relative suddenly poses profound philosophical questions – what is the meaning of your life, what is our purpose in this world?¹⁵⁸ On other occasions, it can take the form of encouraging female relatives to attend Quran lessons run by HT members. Potential sympathisers may also be encouraged to ignore Western holidays like the Orthodox New Year or to observe traditional ceremonies. That many women, especially in the south and the countryside, have already adopted the hijab or fasting during Ramadan makes the gradual recruitment process harder to stop by other relatives who may disapprove of HT.¹⁵⁹

2. Recruitment within the community

In other instances, HT relies on word of mouth to attract potential followers. As noted earlier, there is great interest in Islam among women. Seeking to satisfy that interest, many ask relatives, friends and even strangers about good Quran lessons.¹⁶⁰ A former HT recruit said she joined a *halaqah* after, on a visit to her sister, she mentioned her desire to learn more about Islam. Her sister introduced her to a neighbour who gave classes at home. In seeking advice from strangers, women rely on visual signs.¹⁶¹ A number of religious women who wear headscarves, for example, said passers-by often ask them about Islam and where they can obtain more informa-

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, expert on Islam, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, former HT female recruit.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Bishkek, and local journalist, Osh, February 2009. The scheme is known in Russian as *сетевой маркетинг*. People most often compared HT to Herbalife, well known in the region for distributing its weight control products through networks of family and friends.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, theologian, Osh, February 2009; former HT female recruit; female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior regional official, Osh, January 2009; law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Osh resident, January 2009.

¹⁵⁸ HT activists are said to believe such questions are especially challenging for Kyrgyz women, many of whom do not know what to do with their life after they marry and have a child.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group, interview, local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, female theologian, Osh, February 2009; religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, former HT female recruit.

tion or attend lessons.¹⁶² This is more common in urban areas, where women are more likely to work and have greater personal mobility.

Neighbourhood *jamaat* (groups) present a perfect venue for HT recruitment. They are informal gatherings, held at the house of a woman respected in her neighbourhood or community, where women discuss a variety of daily issues.¹⁶³ Islamic education is a frequent topic. Because of their community reputation as good Quran teachers, many HT women may be invited to speak about practical religious issues, such as how to perform *namaz* (an Islamic prayer) or to raise a boy in a religiously proper environment. Female HT activists may organise their own *jamaat*.

Gatherings look innocuous to the authorities – a place for women to chat about life and study the Quran. Attendance is usually approved, if not encouraged, by husbands.¹⁶⁴ *Jamaat* offer an emotional environment in which women know each other and feel comfortable. Political rhetoric can be mixed with discussion of routine problems. Because many attendees are “blind as kittens”, a moderate religious leader said, the meetings are often a fertile recruiting ground.¹⁶⁵ Even if their ideas do not find a receptive audience, HT women often challenge traditional religious views. A female theologian said many women express to her confusion that their understanding of Islam, derived from traditional and official sources, is so different from what they heard at such *jamaat*.¹⁶⁶

Traditional ceremonies are another useful opportunity for recruitment and proselytisation. At Islamic weddings, increasingly popular in the south, men and women are seated separately. It is believed many HT couples strategise “talking to people about Islam” when they attend an event together. Their plan is simple – to ask what is thought about a recent event (usually involving social or political injustice), then offer an opinion that closely reflects HT philosophy. Another favourite technique is to ask women about what the future holds for them, so as to plant a seed of doubt and anxiety that may prompt an ordinary woman to take another look at her life. Funerals are reportedly especially popular sites, presenting an opportunity to address bereavement by offering solace and a new beginning.

Bazaars are another good recruitment venue. Many HT men are said to run small and medium-size businesses, mostly retail.¹⁶⁷ Many of their wives work as salespeople and use the opportunity to recruit among other female sellers and curious customers. As at ceremonies, the goal is to get the word out and spark an interest in Islam. The hustle and bustle of a Central Asian market is excellent cover for a quick pitch or the inconspicuous handover of a leaflet or contact number. Recruitment in markets demonstrates the two-fold strength of HT strategies: flexibility and the extent of outreach. Several unsympathetic experts said that HT sows its seeds everywhere, is not fixated on one type of venue and moves on quickly once opportunities are lost.¹⁶⁸ “Hizb works closely with people on the street, while official mullahs are staying at home”, one explained.¹⁶⁹

In wider recruitment, female madrasas are the equivalent of neighbourhood *jamaat*. They are often small, do not attract attention and are poorly regulated by the state.¹⁷⁰ A senior State Agency on Religious Affairs official recently commented: “On this issue [religious education] the state does not have a targeted policy. All religious confessions in the republic implement their own initiatives, guided by the saying – do whatever you like”.¹⁷¹ Thus, many madrasas are not registered with the DUMK, have no secular curriculum and function in poor conditions.¹⁷²

Such makeshift establishments give HT members good chances for infiltration, since they operate in a semi-underground environment. Female students have often been removed from state secondary schools at puberty.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009; local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, principal of female madrasa, January 2009.

¹⁷⁰ Жылдызбек Ибралиев, “В Чуйской области Кыргызстана приостановлена деятельность 21 медресе” [Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “Activities of 21 madrasas suspended in Kyrgyzstan’s Chui region”], 24kg, 16 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/16/109117.html.

¹⁷¹ Жылдызбек Ибралиев, “Каныбек Осмоналиев: Наше попустительство в сфере религиозного образования Кыргызстана через 20 лет может привести к расколу между кыргызами” [Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “Kanybek Osmonaliev: Our negligence in the sphere of Kyrgyzstan’s religious education can lead to a split among Kyrgyz in twenty years”], 24kg, 22 January 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/01/22/103967.html.

¹⁷² Vladimir Briller, “Secular and Religious Education Development Trends in Kyrgyzstan”, expert analysis prepared for UNICEF-Kyrgyzstan, pp. 22-23.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, senior oblast official, Bishkek, November 2008. Briller noted that, for example, in Batken region

¹⁶² Crisis Group interviews, female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009; religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, female journalist, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, newspaper journalist, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, newspaper journalist, Osh, February 2009.

Because they stop reading fiction, watching TV and communicating with non-observant peers,¹⁷⁴ a researcher noted, they can be susceptible to radical ideas at the madrasa or later. In a private conversation, a senior regional official said the only future for such girls was to marry well or do menial work at a market.¹⁷⁵ In either case, they are relatively easy HT targets, because they are already versed in Islam and eager to find some meaning in a difficult life.

C. TRAINING AND INITIATION

For those women who have responded to the initial HT pitch, the next step is to attend classes on religious beliefs and rituals at the home of a female activist. At this stage, newcomers form a *halaqah* and become *daris* (students). Lessons are taught by a *mushrif* (an experienced teacher) who usually directs up to five *halaqahs*.¹⁷⁶ The *daris* process is critical to removing women from a secular worldview and preparing them to accept the ideology. In this first step, the party educates them about the basics of Islam. Initially, *daris* are said to come to classes “naked” (heads uncovered, dressed in pants); in a few weeks they put on a headscarf, which lets HT members know the process is working. This stage is also important for weeding out those not ready or willing to accept a Muslim dress code and other behavioural rules that HT advocates.¹⁷⁷

In the second stage, women begin to study and discuss four key HT books – *The System of Islam*, *The Party Unity*, *The Concept of Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *The Islamic State*. Understanding of these is a prerequisite for admission to the party. A former recruit called the training strict – students must know by heart certain provisions, as well as punishments for violating party discipline. During that time, she said, women are taught to become good “psychologists”, so they can identify what worries a particular person and how the party can appeal to her anxieties. Activists are also instructed “to prepare themselves to be ready to answer different questions, be resistant to interrogation, active and aggressive”, when dealing with law enforcement authorities.¹⁷⁸

A *halaqah* leader eventually determines if a woman is ready for membership, a stage defined vaguely as “re-

awakening to Islam”. Pressed further, members are said to specify that it means whether a woman is able to see problems and solutions through the lens of HT ideology. On average, “re-awakening” may take between six months and two years. Party activists emphasise that a lot depends on the individual and her intellectual ability to embrace the party’s worldview. HT does not try to retain those who fail to meet its standards or reject its precepts. A failed recruit said she understood it was not for her when she could not get through the first two books in almost a year.¹⁷⁹ Once a woman is deemed ready, she takes an examination on the key concepts and principles and, if accepted, an oath of loyalty. Then she is expected to form her own *halaqah* to spread knowledge about Islam and the party.

D. IN THE SHADOWS

The secondary role of women in traditional society places the HT female wing in the background. Its members have little time for party work, since they still need to perform such family duties as cooking, cleaning and looking after husbands and children. Things are said to move slower because women are preoccupied with their households.

Despite numerous party proclamations, traditional gender roles are often replicated in HT work. The husband’s permission is needed for a spouse to continue recruitment with a new group of women. Traditional roles are reinforced by strict gender separation.¹⁸⁰ In Central Asia, HT women are forbidden to associate with men not only for social purposes, but also for any interaction unsupervised by a male chaperon – a husband or older male relative. Many HT men insist they are not familiar with what the female wing is doing, except in broadest outline. Most coordination occurs only at the regional level. Many HT men feel it is socially unacceptable to ask others whether their wives are involved in the party. Fragmentary evidence, however, indicates that the structure of the female wing differs little from the men’s organisation.

HT female members currently play two major roles. When there is little government repression, they provide Islamic education, with the focus on bringing up children. In this at least, HT and government officials agree: both repeat the refrain of Islamic women as the foundation and driving force of a traditional family. Outside their family, female activists recruit among women to communicate Islam and to re-awaken them to religion.

80 per cent of girls are said to drop out of school at fifteen to prepare for marriage, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁷⁴ Briller, op. cit., p. 26

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior oblast official, Bishkek, November 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Angel Rabase, Cheryl Benard and Peter Chalk, *The Muslim World After 9/11* (Santa Monica, 2004), p. 347.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, former HT female recruit.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Written communication to Crisis Group from Sultanah Parvin, HT spokeswoman in the UK, 6 February 2009.

The female wing seems to take account of the specifics of its target audiences. In more conservative, southern areas, women recruit predominantly through neighbourhoods; in the north they may participate in discreet proselytising. Unlike Tablighi Jamaat,¹⁸¹ another well-known group in Central Asia, whose members wear traditional Pakistani garments, HT women usually appear in ordinary clothes (but modestly dressed, with headscarf) and do not proselytise aggressively in public, but are still said to be effective in spreading their message.¹⁸²

In times of confrontation, however, women HT activists may take a more forward part. So far this has been seen only occasionally, for example in Nookat.¹⁸³ Police have until recently been reluctant to use violence against them for fear of provoking public condemnation. Many sources indicated that HT takes advantage of this by placing women at the front in demonstrations, even advising them to appear pregnant.¹⁸⁴ HT male activists in Kyrgyzstan vehemently denied that they use women as a human shield. They insisted that women in Nookat intervened because they saw an enhanced police presence and sensed an imminent clash, so stepped forward to confront the authorities and demand the celebration be resumed.

¹⁸¹ The government attempted to ban the group as a terrorist organisation earlier in 2009 but withdrew its appeal to a local court. See, Мария Яновская, “Таблиги Джамаат: Скрытая угроза мирной проповеди” [Maria Yanovskaya, “Tablighi Jamaat: A hidden threat of peaceful preaching”], *Ferghana.ru*, 11 February 2009, at www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6065; Сергей Ким, “Генеральная прокуратура Кыргызстана отозвала свой иск о признании ‘Таблиги Джамаат’ террористической и экстремистской организацией” [Sergey Kim, “Kyrgyzstan’s Office of the Prosecutor General recalls its petition to recognise Tablighi Jamaat as a terrorist and extremist organisation”], 2 April 2009, at <http://24.kg/community/2009/04/02/110823.html>.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, social scientist, Bishkek, February 2009. Another example, though not involving Kyrgyzstan, was a 20 December 2008 protest before the Uzbek embassy in London against the arrest of 27 female party members in Tashkent. Video footage of the demonstration is on the HT website, at www.hizb.org.uk/hizb/who-is-ht/htb-national-events/demonstration-video-uzbek-regime-arrests-and-sexually-molests-muslim-women-activists.html.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former law enforcement officer, Osh; female religious activist, Bishkek, January 2009; human rights activist and scholar in theology, Osh, February 2009. An HT spokeswoman in London said she was not familiar with the details of the Nookat case and declined to comment on the use of women. Written communication to Crisis Group from Sultanah Parvin, 19 February 2009.

Despite these conflicting interpretations, two points are clear. First, HT encourages women’s involvement when it helps make a point. Secondly, like any political party, it takes advantage of social stereotypes and norms. Several experts remarked that use of women in protests is a widespread practice in Central Asia, not unique to HT.¹⁸⁵

E. IS MORE EXTENSIVE PARTICIPATION LIKELY?

There is a palpable sense of anxiety, especially among officials and Kyrgyz who support secularism, that Islamic radicalisation among women, spearheaded by a strengthening and visible HT female wing, will become irreversible. “With this speed of recruitment, we will return to the days of our forefathers”, a regional law enforcement official complained.¹⁸⁶ A prominent civic leader voiced anxiety that in ten years there would be no place for “people like us” here.¹⁸⁷ Such fears are premature; more women may be involved than in the past, but the future of Kyrgyzstan as a secular state is not at immediate risk. A dramatic increase in women’s membership in HT, and in particular their assumption of leadership roles, would be possible only under two scenarios.

In the first, women might be pushed out of the shadows by harsher state repression. As discussed earlier, men in most Kyrgyz families are the breadwinners. This is even more so in HT households, where party doctrine requires it. Arrest and long incarceration can be lethal for family well-being, so the wives, usually already party members, might be expected to petition the government and set up protests if faced with impending destitution. Repression would likely produce stronger esprit de corps. An expert said, “the more repressive the regime gets, the more united they [HT members] get”.¹⁸⁸ Adversity also breeds cohesion in practical ways; women forced to work because husbands are in prison must rely on other women’s help with household chores.

In the second scenario, HT might follow the path of Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁸⁹ in which

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, theologian and human rights activist, Osh, February 2009; political observer, Osh, January 2009; political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, local NGO leader, February 2009.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Osh, February 2009.

¹⁸⁹ See Omayma Abdel Latif, “In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood”, *Carnegie Paper 13* (October 2008). The analysis showed how over several decades women’s contribution to the Brotherhood, espe-

at a certain stage of their evolution, women seek a greater role to match their contribution. At present, this is a remote possibility. Although there were some rumblings of displeasure, even anger, in the female wing that HT men did not defend their women in Nookat,¹⁹⁰ the tension is said to have subsided. Because many female activists, especially in the south where membership is greatest, are very conservative, they are unlikely to express more than occasional private criticism.¹⁹¹

The first scenario is the more plausible, especially given the arrests after Nookat.¹⁹² Much depends on how the government handles growing religiosity in society and whether it designs and implements policies that meet women's needs. So far, its record is not promising.

cially in times of major government repression, has prompted female members to press for more authority consistent with their greater role.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, female journalist, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁹¹ In another example, a social scientist reported that some HT women expressed unhappiness at not being allowed to attend the mosque alongside men but quickly retracted, saying they are, of course, happy to be in the organisation. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁹² In February-March 2009, law enforcement authorities conducted Operation "Extremist", resulting in arrests of several HT members (or those listed in the state database as sympathisers) in the south. Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009; also Данияр Каримов, "Партия компакт-дисков 'Хизб ут-Тахрир' изъята в городе Джалал-Абаде (Кыргызстан)" [Daniyar Karimov, "A set of Hizb ut-Tahrir CDs is confiscated in Jalal-Abad (Kyrgyzstan)"], 24 kg, 27 March 2009, at <http://24.kg/investigation/2009/02/27/107603.html>.

VI. THE STATE'S RESPONSE

The government response to HT and female radicalisation is uncoordinated, contradictory and counter-productive. Authorities that address religious radicalism and women's issues rarely cooperate. Nor does the government have programs that deal with the root causes of specifically women's radicalisation. The general phenomenon of radicalisation is treated primarily as a law enforcement concern. The recent avalanche of legislation on the issue, so far unaccompanied by any action other than a crack-down, fuels speculation that radicalism and terrorism are being hyped to secure foreign funding or to pin any social unrest on Islamic radicals.¹⁹³

A. DEALING WITH RADICALISM

The government relies on two methods – "prophylactic education" (профилактические меры) and law enforcement. Neither seems to decrease HT recruitment. The prophylactic work is rigid, formalistic and offers no clear alternative to radical Islam. Law enforcement relies too much on compulsion and is almost hermetically separated from the educational elements of the policy.

1. "Prophylactic education"

Although put into law in 2005,¹⁹⁴ "prophylactic education" has gained popularity only recently. The term itself is a euphemism hitherto used mostly by law enforcement authorities. It means, in Soviet and post-Soviet society, a pre-emptive warning about the possible criminal consequences of undesirable behaviour. The police jargon is not surprising, because before Nookat radicalism was dealt with primarily as a law enforcement matter.¹⁹⁵

The government uses several mechanisms to reach out to local communities in an effort to explain the threat from radical Islamic groups and the risks of involvement with them. A new initiative is the so-called coordinating council, set up in late 2008-early 2009 at each level of government – region, district, town and village.¹⁹⁶ It may include representatives from a local administration, police, imams from DUMK and staffers from the

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, former law enforcement officer and human rights activist, Osh, February 2009; Western official, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁹⁴ "On Counteracting Extremist Activity" (Article 5), adopted by the parliament on 30 June 2005.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009; former government official, Bishkek, February 2009.

¹⁹⁶ Local territorial equivalents for the terms are oblast, rayon, town and ayul.

State Agency on Religious Affairs and security services. Ideally, such councils are supposed to design an integrated strategy for tackling radicalism that is then implemented by each body in coordination with the others.¹⁹⁷ The precise composition is determined by the head of a government department on social and economic affairs at each level, but activists from civil society are not presently included.¹⁹⁸

Some regions have sought to revive women's councils. Known as *zhensovet*, these semi-government organisations dealt in Soviet times with family issues, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, divorce and infidelity. Many focused on resolving disputes before they reached a court or local communist party structure. After a two-decade absence, an effort is being made to redefine their agenda and goals.¹⁹⁹ They have the potential to be an important venue for women to address their concerns, although efforts to reconvene them have been piecemeal and may be perceived as formalistic by many women. Other forums for educating about radical Islam include parent-teacher associations and ad hoc neighbourhood gatherings called by local authorities.²⁰⁰

These educational activities, in reality nothing more than warnings, have been ineffective for two reasons. First, they are reminiscent of Soviet propaganda in their formalistic, officious style. The dramatic acceleration in such activities after Nookat likely demonstrated more a desire by local authorities to report "achievements" to Bishkek than a genuine effort to engage ordinary people about their grievances. Foreign and domestic observers said the preoccupation with "ideological education" may be an implicit acknowledgment that local authorities are not able or willing to tackle the deeper problems driving radicalisation.²⁰¹

Secondly, the policies do not offer a viable alternative to HT. Many officials ascribe religious radicalism to ignorance and assume that having learned about criminal punishments, people will be deterred from joining the party.²⁰² That may be true for some, but daily despair about the future often outweighs fears of arrest.

Rather than channelling its resources to ineffective educational activities, the government should target the root causes driving women to join HT. A first step could be a study, funded by donors, of the characteristics and needs of religious women in areas where radicalism is gaining support. The results could be used to design policies that address socio-economic problems that women feel the government ignores. Programs could include job schemes, better social services such as after-school programs and financial help for households headed by single mothers. But unless the government offers its citizens practical reasons to buy into the merits of a secular state, it will be increasingly forced to rely on law enforcement.

2. Law enforcement

The law enforcement bodies charged with combating radical Islam are the ninth department of the interior ministry and the anti-terrorism unit at the State Committee for National Security. Officials frequently mentioned the ninth department in connection with its database of nationwide statistics on suspected Islamic radicals. Some experts questioned the quality of this data²⁰³ and expressed concern about the lack of clear criteria for identifying an Islamic radical. A human rights activist contended imprecise indicators, such as a beard or a headscarf, are used to determine HT members.²⁰⁴ Ordinary citizens complained that local authorities use the ambiguity to extract bribes and settle personal scores by threatening to report them as potential radicals.²⁰⁵

When prosecuting a suspected HT member, authorities press charges on multiple violations that carry lengthy prison sentences. The most frequently used criminal code articles include: organising an entity that threatens the personal and individual rights of citizens (259); organising, participating and inciting massive acts of disorder (233); engaging in separatist activities (295, Section 1); calling for violent overthrow of the constitutional order (297); inciting ethnic, racial, religious or inter-regional enmity (299); and hooliganism (234).²⁰⁶ The cabinet of ministers reportedly asked parliament to approve stiffer sentences for Article 299, Sections 1 and 2 – participation in a banned organisation or group that incites religious enmity and transportation of extremist materials for

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009; oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009.

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civic activist and social issues official, Osh, January 2009.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, international organisation source and political observer, Osh, January 2009.

²⁰² Crisis Group interview, senior regional official, Osh, January 2009.

²⁰³ Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, "Ikbajjan Mirsayitov: the data on the number of Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters", op. cit.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, national human rights activist, February 2009.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, southern Kyrgyzstan.

²⁰⁶ Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, edition no. 91, 25 June 2007; and the Memorial report, op.cit.

public distribution.²⁰⁷ The recently adopted religion law bans distribution of literature and proselytising activities by unregistered religious groups and confessions.²⁰⁸

Law enforcement efforts are rigidly compartmentalised from ideological operations.²⁰⁹ One reason is the reputation of the responsible bodies. Post-Soviet law enforcement and state security continue to instil fear. Although an interior ministry official insisted they share statistics (at least with district and regional administrations),²¹⁰ other government representatives gave a more mixed report. What emerges is a heightened sense of caution and a certain inhibition of the non-police organisations to become too involved in work directed at a banned group. Because HT is illegal and branded as anti-state,²¹¹ officials outside the law enforcement and security fields seemed uncomfortable talking about it, apparently concerned about trespassing on the turf of the security organs. Several avoided even mentioning HT by name in lengthy Crisis Group interviews.²¹²

The other reason for compartmentalisation is the nature of law enforcement activities. Because most are focused on punishment, not prevention, officials from other government bodies see little use in cooperating with the police (for instance, by using the socio-demographic information on known HT members) to refine their message to vulnerable audiences, including women. A senior regional official described a dual-track policy: law enforcement bodies do their work, while other agencies reach out to people through education.²¹³ In reality, the two tracks have little effect on each other.

The government should take steps to change the climate of secrecy surrounding radicalism and HT in particular. Greater public discussion should be encouraged and research by domestic and international experts welcomed.

²⁰⁷ “Kyrgyzstan: human rights violation in the case of the “Nookat events”, op. cit.

²⁰⁸ See the law “On Religious Freedom and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic”, Articles 5, 7, 23 (in effect as of 12 January 2009); explanations on the law and its most contentious provisions from the Kyrgyz Presidential Administration at www.president.kg/ru/press/laws/3157/.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009.

²¹¹ See “Religious and extremist Party Hizb ut-Tahrir”, prepared by the State Agency on Religious Affairs, op. cit.

²¹² Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Bishkek and Osh, January-February 2009.

²¹³ Crisis Group interview, oblast administration official, Osh, February 2009.

B. PERILS OF OVER-BUREAUCRATISATION

In their haste to respond to the perceived growth of religious radicalism, government agencies developed a panoply of strategies and policy papers. In recent months the Bakiyev administration has produced a new National Security Concept Paper and Strategy, drawn up a “concept” for cooperation between the interior ministry and religious organisations, put out an “inter-agency plan on combating radicalism” and created the state expert council on religious expertise.²¹⁴ A newly-established research institute claimed to be working with the presidential administration on a religion policy that would advance a national version of Islam.²¹⁵ Officials said the documents have been long needed to fill an institutional and legal vacuum and to modify excessively liberal policies that enabled the growth of radical groups during the Akayev era.²¹⁶

The challenge, however, is not the lack of official positions but their bearing on reality. An activist working on domestic violence against women in the south remarked: “Our laws are beautiful, but the reality, especially in remote villages, is horrifying”.²¹⁷ Authorities look the other way in many locations that are governed in effect by local religious leaders’ edicts.²¹⁸ Government initiatives, in other words, often vanish in the bureaucratic machine.

The lack of capacity, competence and credibility of the state institutions further impedes the government’s ability to transform strategy documents into policies and

²¹⁴ For example, see “Принята Концепция национальной безопасности Кыргызстана” [“The National Security Concept of Kyrgyzstan has been adopted”], CA News, 12 February 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/64321/>; “МВД Кыргызстана в 2009 году намеревается активнее взаимодействовать с религиозными организациями” [“Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Interior intends to cooperate more actively with religious organizations in 2009”], 24kg, 12 January 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/01/12/102781.html; and Игорь Горбачев, “В Кыргызстане в 2009 будет образован Государственный экспертный совет по проведению религиозоведческой экспертизы” [Igor Gorbachev, “In Kyrgyzstan the State Expert Council on religious expertise to be formed in 2009”], 24kg, 13 February 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/02/13/106381.html.

²¹⁵ “В Кыргызстане хотят разработать концепцию религиозной политики” [“In Kyrgyzstan they want to develop a concept paper on religious policy”], CA News, 9 July 2009.

²¹⁶ Written communication to Crisis Group from local expert on religious issues, March 2009; Crisis Group interviews, senior regional official and oblast administration official, Osh, January 2009; law enforcement official, Osh, February 2009. President Askar Akayev was overthrown in March 2005.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Osh, January 2009.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

programs that can be implemented. Its major partner in the field, the DUMK, is not up to the task. The DUMK leadership avoids rebutting HT theological arguments and attacks on its religious authority²¹⁹ and is unwilling to criticise the government's handling of social problems.²²⁰ This fuels the perception that its imams are theologically weak and politically supplicant.²²¹ Moderate and radical Muslims alike view DUMK as part of the state machine – “another administrative resource”.²²²

There is, nonetheless, a role for DUMK in stemming women's radicalisation. It can make a difference at the local level by offering alternative centres for Islamic education. Another initiative might be to make available free neighbourhood study groups led by respected local women. DUMK should also seek out partnerships with local and international experts to design religious outreach programs to sectors of the population that are likely targets for HT recruiters.

Existing government initiatives are under-funded or volunteer-based. For instance, some members of women's councils claim they cannot compete with the HT female wing because they lack the money to build a comparable grassroots network.²²³ Echoing this, a senior DUMK representative rejected criticism of his organisation and insisted the government needs to finance joint projects before demanding results.²²⁴ Money, however, is only part of the problem. Unlike HT, which wins people over on a limited budget through attention and consistent outreach, many state institutions are too passive and status quo-oriented.

State bodies do not have wide public representation. The absence of civil society groups within state coordinating councils eliminates an independent voice that might offer critical feedback and make available its human resources. Religious women are not involved in the

women's councils.²²⁵ There are also no women on the council of *ulems* (Islamic theologians) that operates under DUMK.²²⁶ Many of these organisations are thus neither respected nor trusted by the audiences they aim to reach. Members of women's councils have little credibility among religious women. A moderate female Muslim civic leader said, “the conversation needs to be among equals”.²²⁷ Otherwise, a female legislator feared, all initiatives initiated by women's councils risk becoming endless bazaar-like chatter.²²⁸

Finally, there is much bureaucratic buck-passing. The State Agency on Religious Affairs and many regional officials said DUMK should control madrasas and training of imams better.²²⁹ DUMK blamed the government for its past liberalism: “First it lets them [radical religious groups] in and then tells us, go and fight with them. Is this a joke?”²³⁰ Officials wanted DUMK to take primary responsibility for explaining HT's theological errors.²³¹ A senior DUMK official retorted that since HT is a political party, the state is better equipped to respond.²³²

Over-bureaucratisation has blocked creation of a consistent, realistic policy for dealing with an increasingly religious society and has led to over-reliance on punitive methods. This was shown by the recent controversy over the hijab and a similar debacle in 2007, when the government was forced to accept pictures of women in headscarves in passports.²³³ Both incidents polarised opinion and were taken by religious groups as proof they

²¹⁹ DUMK issued a *fatwa* (religious opinion on Islamic law) in 2002 against HT. HT activists are said to claim DUMK leaders lack sufficient religious knowledge and stature to be obeyed by all Muslims. Crisis Group interview, political scientist, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²⁰ See Жылдызбек Ибралиев, “Духовное Управление мусульман Кыргызстана запретило священнослужителям вмешиваться в политические процессы” [Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan bans imams from interfering in political processes”], 24kg, 7 April 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/04/07/111371.html.

²²¹ Crisis Group interviews, political observer, Osh, January 2009; political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²² Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²³ Crisis Group interviews, civic activist, social issues official, Osh, January 2009.

²²⁴ Crisis Group interview, DUMK official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interview, international official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²⁶ Crisis Group interview, expert on women's issues.

²²⁷ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

²²⁸ Crisis Group interview, parliament member, Bishkek, February 2009.

²²⁹ Жылдызбек Ибралиев, “Власти Кыргызстана отмечают недостаточно активную работу Духовного управления мусульман” [Jyldyzbek Ibraliyev, “Kyrgyz authorities note insufficiently active work of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims”], 24kg, 20 March 2009, at www.24.kg/community/2009/03/20/109823.html.

²³⁰ Crisis Group interview, DUMK official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²³¹ Crisis Group interview, oblast administration official and senior regional official, Osh, January 2009.

²³² Crisis Group interview, DUMK official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²³³ Жылдыз Мамытова, “Правительство Кыргызстана не намерено разрешать мусульманкам фотографироваться на паспорт в хиджабах” [Jyldyz Mamytova, “The Government of Kyrgyzstan does not intend to allow Muslim women to take pictures in hijab for passports”], 24kg, 6 October 2006, at www.24.kg/community/2006/10/06/7980.html; and “Kyrgyzstan: Muslim women are allowed to take pictures for passport in hijab”, AKI Press, 20 August 2007.

can use human rights rhetoric to advance their agenda case-by-case.²³⁴ Secularism proponents and government bodies realise they are losing the hearts and minds battle.²³⁵ An inter-agency task force on women's radicalisation is urgently needed, both to overcome bureaucratic buck-passing and to remove the issue from the remit of law enforcement agencies. The lead should be assigned to a non-security government body to encourage cooperation and information-sharing.

VII. GENDER ISSUES

Although Kyrgyzstan has passed substantial progressive legislation on gender issues, practical implementation is weak. Moreover, many initiatives are phrased in terms of gender equality, which may be off-putting to religious women in more conservative parts of the country who retain a traditional understanding of their role in society.

A. EXISTING INITIATIVES

Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has adopted a wide range of progressive laws – on fundamental guarantees of gender equality, on social and legal protection against domestic violence and on reproductive rights. The National Council on Women, Family and Gender Development under the president coordinates gender issues. The economic and social policy department within the presidential administration conducts day-to-day work in the field. There is a special representative of the president on gender issues in the national parliament.²³⁶

The national development strategy for 2007-2010 devoted substantial space to gender equality.²³⁷ It aims to increase women's participation in government services, eradicate disparities in educational opportunities and ensure gender issues are considered in state planning documents. However, while often correctly identifying problems, the strategy speaks only broadly about solutions and provides almost no specific prescriptions. For instance, it rightly states that extensive migration processes raise the danger of human trafficking and require assistance for women victims, but the response it vaguely suggests is only "comprehensive measures ... on preventing and decreasing gender violence in society".

The strategy admits that two national initiatives on gender equality have been under-funded, impeding full implementation. It calls for renewal of both programs, "with a new vision and a new impulse, basing their implementation on public institutions and mandating state authorities to actively support their implementation".²³⁸ Some major points, for example whether the state commits to fully pay for the initiatives this time or whether the costs will have to be met by bodies such as civil society groups, are unclear.

²³⁴ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Osh, February 2009.

²³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, journalist and political scientist, Bishkek, February 2009.

²³⁶ Newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 30 January 2007; "Policy on Achieving Gender Equality", National Development Strategy 2007-2010, Section 4.8.

²³⁷ National Development Strategy 2007-2010.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

Presidential decree no. 136 on measures to improve gender policy has provided one of the more useful mechanisms to assist female representation by instituting a 30 per cent quota for women in state and local authorities.²³⁹ As a result, women in the parliament increased from zero in 2005 to 25.6 per cent after the 2007 elections.²⁴⁰

B. SHORTCOMINGS

Implementation problems begin at the institutional level. An international official noted that many ministries and regional authorities approach the establishment of gender-related indicators and plans in a formalistic way.²⁴¹ Documents either are not produced at all or simply copy strategies developed by other agencies, without further analysis and local statistics.²⁴² The few progressive initiatives from higher government levels are doomed by lack of support and follow-up. Gender quotas are mechanical, equating the mere presence of women in state bodies with meaningful representation. Moreover many moderate Muslims complain that the women in government cannot properly represent them, since they have succeeded in the secular system and have difficulty understanding those women who see a return to Islam as a life-altering decision that improves their well-being.²⁴³ Unless there is a conscious attempt to fill the quotas with women from diverse backgrounds, the policy will not reach a growing number who have embraced Islam as a central part of their life.

Finally, official discourse is dominated by modern language of gender equality that some Kyrgyz women perceive as foreign and incompatible with their beliefs. Many moderate Muslim women, not just HT members, associate the concept with gender similarity. They interpret the Western assertion that women enjoy same rights and responsibilities with men as women being identical in all capacities and functions to men.²⁴⁴ A prominent reli-

gious leader said that she embraces the equality the Quran grants to women and men but believes the man is still the first of two equal sexes.²⁴⁵ In the end, gender initiatives may help those women who already believe in equality to advance professionally, but they will be shunned by the more religious who find their message unappealing.

²³⁹ *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, op. cit. The decree was adopted on 20 March 2006.

²⁴⁰ "The Second Periodic Progress Report", op. cit., p. 15.

²⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, international staff, Bishkek, December 2008.

²⁴² See "Планы действий Центральных органов, министерств, государственных комитетов, агентств, областных государственных администраций во исполнение п.1.1.2.1. Указа Президента Кыргызской Республики от 20 августа 2007 года № 369" ["Action Plans of Central bodies, ministries, state committees, agencies and regional state administrations to implement Section 1.1.2.1 of Decree no. 369 (issued 20 August 2007) by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic"], economic and social policy department, presidential administration, 2007.

²⁴³ Crisis Group interview, former law enforcement officer.

²⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, international official, Osh, January 2009.

²⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

VIII. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

A. NGOs: FOLLOWING THE MONEY

Civil society has difficulty addressing growing religious radicalisation among women. Donors show little interest in the subject. An experienced civil society leader said, “it’s not that we are not interested in working with religious women; it’s just nobody is willing to fund this type of work. There is no demand for it among grant-giving institutions”.²⁴⁶ There are very few religious civic groups to make a difference. Secular NGOs go where the money is, to projects on gender equality and domestic violence.²⁴⁷ Although both are critical issues, more traditional and religious audiences are often unreceptive for reasons that can stem from the non-profit sector’s internal problems.

First is the credibility issue. Civic groups are interested in solving issues for which they can secure grants, which are not necessarily the same issues that concern religious women susceptible to radicalisation. Most depend on Western money, which makes them look like advocates for someone else’s cause. A civic activist said she spends significant time at the start of training answering questions like, “do you get the money from the Jews?”²⁴⁸ Stereotypes are exacerbated by high-level government portrayals of NGOs as shady, beholden to outside forces.²⁴⁹

The second problem has to do with competitiveness and secrecy that impede coordination within the sector. Civic groups realise that they are after the same pool of money. The activist quoted above added that after registering her group, others accused her of plagiarising their organisational statute.²⁵⁰ In this atmosphere, where any informa-

tion is viewed as valuable to get grants, many NGOs are unwilling to discuss what they do or know.²⁵¹

Thirdly, many female activists are viewed as an updated version of the Soviet woman – minus the ideology and with more pragmatism about money.²⁵² They are seen as non-religious, treating Islam as merely something for ceremonial purposes (birthdays, weddings, funerals). One admitted that she cannot understand why parents would put a headscarf on their daughter.²⁵³ Another acknowledged that civic leaders and religious women speak in different languages.²⁵⁴ The two communities – NGOs and religious women – appear to exist side by side but worlds apart in thoughts, needs and perceptions of each other.

Religious women stay away from the non-profit sector’s activities, because they resent being lectured about their lifestyle by people who do not share their values. NGOs need to initiate and donors to fund projects that address practical problems shared by women from different parts of society. Water quality, pre-school education and male labour migration are among those that could be jointly addressed by NGOs and local community groups with a religious orientation. Until advocacy is coupled with service provision and regular community work, religious women will continue to doubt that NGOs can help with their daily struggles.

B. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: LOST IN TRANSLATION

International organisations have yet to establish programs that directly address the full needs of religious women. Current initiatives include two UN programs – the Gender Theme Component and the Peace and Development Analysis Process – and two projects funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on teaching human and individual rights in religious establishments and working with DUMK to introduce secular components into madrasa curriculums.

Like similar government initiatives, the UN programs do not attract religious women who are opposed to what they often perceive as the Western view on gender equal-

²⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, local NGO leader, Osh, February 2009.

²⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior state official, Bishkek, March 2009.

²⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, January 2009.

²⁴⁹ For instance, reacting to an NGO report on parliament in 2008, a deputy asked: “Who are those NGOs to criticise a parliament elected by all people?...They are simply working off someone else’s money”. “Аскарбек Шадиев: Кто такие НПО, чтобы критиковать всенародно избранный парламент Кыргызстана?” [“Askarbek Shadiyev: Who are those NGOs to criticise the popularly elected parliament of Kyrgyzstan?”], 24kg, 18 March 2009, at <http://24.kg/parliament/2009/03/18/109485.html>.

²⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, religious civic activist, Bishkek, February 2009.

²⁵¹ As an example of existing competitiveness, a civic activist refused to discuss the findings of a project with Crisis Group despite assurances that this report would be published long after the findings were made public.

²⁵² Crisis Group interviews, former official and political analyst, Bishkek, February 2009; local journalist, Osh, February 2009.

²⁵³ Crisis Group interview, national human rights activist, Bishkek, February 2009.

²⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Osh, January 2009.

ity. A source familiar with the situation noted that the two sides have an irreconcilable difference: religious communities base their judgments on the Quran; the UN is guided by international conventions to which Kyrgyzstan is a party, and it is said to lack experts in Islam and gender issues who are fluent in Russian or Kyrgyz, making it hard to work with religious communities.²⁵⁵ UN gender initiatives thus end up preaching to the choir – women who already support their agenda.

The Peace and Development Analysis Process provides a venue for officials and civic actors to voice concerns about impediments to development. Religious radicalism, especially in the southern regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad, has been mentioned as an obstacle to both peace and development.²⁵⁶ However, the long-term impact of the meetings depends on whether state bureaucracies move from voicing concern about radicalism to designing specific policies. Prospects are not promising. An international source remarked that officials are waiting to see what international organisations can offer, but “how can the West propose anything on religious issues when they [Kyrgyz] don’t have a clear understanding themselves what Islam is?”²⁵⁷ With Islam such a sensitive topic, international organisations are unwilling to show much initiative so long as the government lacks a clear policy framework.

A recent project, supported by USAID and administered by the Eurasia Foundation, works with DUMK to introduce secular components into madrasa curriculums.²⁵⁸ This would allow graduates to get a diploma recognised by the state and potential employers and is in line with the state’s efforts to standardise teaching in religious educational establishments and close those that do not meet the requirements.²⁵⁹ Success hinges on whether DUMK (and to a lesser extent the education ministry) can

enforce compliance with its directives, a past problem.²⁶⁰ Since it does not give money to madrasas, DUMK’s only leverage is the threat of de-registration.²⁶¹

Patterned after a success in secular schools, the ABA/ROLI (American Bar Association/Rule of Law Initiative) Street Law Madrasa Program, funded by USAID, has taught practical lessons on human and individual rights to over 400 students at seventeen madrasas since 2007.²⁶² With its focus on achieving long-term impact on individuals at the grassroots, it stands out among international projects that aim mostly at fostering institutional change.

Donor funding began to shift in 2003-2004 toward large institutional initiatives at ministry and parliament level.²⁶³ The assumptions were that the money would be best spent shoring up a sustainable government commitment, and institutional reforms would eventually translate into changes at the local level. This has not happened. Many initiatives have wide, formal institutional approval but have never been, and may never have been intended to be, implemented in practice. State bureaucracies are glad to cooperate on issues they deem a priority but not on sensitive subjects, such as religious radicalisation of women. Foreign aid is not invested at the grassroots level, where HT operates. Radical Islamic parties and religious groups, an international aid worker said, can combat poverty better than any donor program because they work with people in their communities day and night.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, international official, Bishkek, December 2008.

²⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, international official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ The proposal by the Eurasia Foundation envisions 24 hours weekly of Kyrgyz language and literature, Kyrgyz and world history, geography, math, physics, chemistry, biology, foreign languages and physical education. The content will be similar to what is taught in secular vocational and technical schools. Written communication to Crisis Group from Edward Winter, Eurasia Project Director in Kyrgyzstan, 21 May 2009. Crisis Group interview, Western official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, theologian, Osh, February 2009; Western official, Bishkek, February 2009.

²⁶⁰ In interviews with Crisis Group, state officials almost unanimously blamed DUMK for the inability to control the certification process for madrasas.

²⁶¹ In an informal exchange, a senior state official complained that it is hard for local authorities to shut down madrasas that violate basic educational or sanitary standards because they lack the enforcement capacity.

²⁶² “Program Introduces Law and Democracy to Kyrgyz Islamic Schools”, at www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/press/success/2007-07-37.html; and written communication to Crisis Group from the USAID office in Kyrgyzstan, 17 April 2009.

²⁶³ Crisis Group interview, international expert on women’s issues.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

IX. CONCLUSION

Despite growing fears about deepening Islamic radicalisation, the involvement of women in HT Kyrgyzstan is still mostly restricted to their own family and local community and oriented primarily to the education of their children in Islam and the quiet recruitment of other women. Women are the party's reserve force, one that has thus far rarely been fully used. The limits on their public participation are reinforced by both the gender separation of HT activities and fears of state infiltration. The women's wing, like the rest of HT, remains secretive and low-profile.

Female recruitment will proceed inconspicuously but almost certainly steadily, and HT, including its female wing, will continue spreading north, unless socio-economic and political conditions improve. There are two key obstacles to restraining the process. First, much happens off the radar in neighbourhoods, bazaars and people's houses. Secondly, radicalisation can be easily confused with visual signs (e.g., headscarves) of a much more benign return to Islam, especially in rural areas and the south. Overreaction, by attempting to remove Islamic influences from public space, as seen in the headscarf case, may only fuel radical sentiments. HT will almost certainly continue to use its female members during protests both to make a point and to deter a more aggressive police response.

Ultimately, the major byproduct of female radicalisation may be a generation of children, nieces and nephews who grow up immersed in HT discourse and committed to the idea of an Islamic state (whether a caliphate or not). This would make keeping Kyrgyzstan a secular state more challenging. In response to increased government repression, HT women may become more actively involved in party activities. There is also a possibility that members would abandon the group to join more radical organisations. Although the party spokeswoman rejected this scenario as a baseless accusation by lazy academics,²⁶⁵ it cannot be completely ruled out. HT activists are said to insist that the caliphate is coming soon to unite all Muslim states. It is not known how they would react once they realise that given the strength and historical endurance of the nation-state, a change of this magnitude is unlikely.

HT's short-term expansion may be hard to reverse, but the long-term scenario outlined above is not irreversible. The government needs to redefine its approach to religious radicalisation (including women's involve-

ment) as primarily a socio-economic and political, not law enforcement challenge. It has to develop long-term plans that address root causes by providing more job and participatory opportunities for women in the more traditional and conservative parts of society, increasing social payments and improving social services that cater to their needs. It should recognise that HT's appeal partly reflects a desire for better religious instruction and so build the capacity of quasi-state bodies to provide adequate Islamic education to all interested women. Finally, along with international organisations and civil society, it should engage religious women in joint projects on practical issues like water quality, childcare and labour immigration and avoid moralistic lectures about their "less enlightened" lifestyle.

Such initiatives are sorely needed to bridge a gulf of mistrust between secularists and religious communities. The main danger is that concerns of ordinary women will slip off the radar again due to apparently more pressing problems or be jammed into the narrow framework of gender issues. The government needs to realise that if people no longer believe in the state to provide justice and well-being, they will look elsewhere. The challenge is enormous, but the solution is in the hands of the state.

Bishkek/Brussels, 3 September 2009

²⁶⁵ Written communication to Crisis Group from Sultanah Parvin, HT spokeswoman in the UK, 19 February 2009.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF KYRGYZSTAN

