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COMMENTARY: Religious freedom, the best counter to religious extremism

By Nariman Gasimoglu, head of Religion & Democracy

Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan – which threatens to spread in Central Asia and elsewhere - is largely the result of government repression and lack of democracy, Azerbaijani scholar and translator of the Koran Nariman Gasimoglu, head of the Center for Religion and Democracy <http://addm.az.iatp.net/ana.html> in Baku and a former Georgetown University (USA) visiting scholar, argues in this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. Extremist Islamist groups, like the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir party, which do not yet enjoy widespread support, have been strengthened by repression while moderate Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered. The best, if not the only way to counter religious extremism, Gasimoglu maintains, is to open up society to religious freedom for all, democracy, and free discussion – even including Islamist groups. This is the only way, he argues, of depriving Islamic extremism of support by revealing the reality of what extremism in power would mean.

Since the March and April 2004 terrorist bombings in Uzbekistan, attention has once again focused on the Central Asian state most at risk from a radical Islamist opposition. Yet it is Uzbek president Islam Karimov and his repressive government that have made Islamist movements like the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir party so strong by crushing democracy and the secular opposition. When ordinary people want to back other forces to replace the current dictatorship, there are only Hizb ut-Tahrir and other groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Islam has three forms in Uzbekistan. Firstly, there is traditional, moderate Islam, followed by the vast majority of the population who feel the obligation to maintain their ancestral ways, however superficially. Secondly, there is government-sponsored Islam (just as we have in Azerbaijan), with government-loyal clerics who pray for the authorities. Thirdly, there are the radical groups, including Hizb ut-Tahrir, who do not enjoy support from the majority.

Religious extremism is a threat in Uzbekistan thanks first of all to the lack of democracy and secondly to the lack of a democratic tradition. This makes it more urgent for the government to do more – or rather, to make a start - to raise the level of democracy.

At a conference in Samarkand last September, I heard government officials justifying the crackdown on Muslims as simply defending the constitution. They sounded just like Soviet-era officials. I spoke up for religious freedom and openness as the way to counter the extremism that they seemed not to be addressing. Maybe they did not like my speech or were not able to perceive this kind of approach to solving the religious problems.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's aim to change the constitutional order and impose Muslim Sharia law is against the law. When religion gets involved in politics it is against the secular establishment of the state. The secular state has the right to protect itself. But this does not allow the government to offend the religious outlook of ordinary people by restricting their worship, access to the Koran and to other religious literature.

Were they to come to power, Hizb ut-Tahrir's leaders would impose Sharia law and the situation would be darker even than it is now – like in Afghanistan under the Taliban or in Iran. After only a short time, people would be fed up with it and would understand the truth – that the movement would not be good for Uzbekistan. (For an account of what Hizb ut-Tahrir intends to do, were it to come to power, see F18News 29 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170).

Like many in the Islamic world, Hizb ut-Tahrir does not care about the Koranic injunction: "There is no compulsion in religion". I believe all Muslims should be more tolerant of those who convert from Islam to other faiths and should not regard "apostasy" as a violation of religious requirements and a sin.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's aims and plans are not good, but instead of restricting the group and pushing it into a corner, Central Asian governments need to hold open religious discussions. They should not fear religious extremism.

Secular state establishments have the right to take measures to counter extremism, but not to hurt the feelings of ordinary believers

of any faith – as the government of Uzbekistan has done. The government's actions do not give the impression that it is clever. It has no idea how to devise a sensible religious policy – it is currently the product of old Communists and KGB secret policemen. The only way they know is to suppress people by any means.

I would instead provide space and invite all religious leaders to open discussions. I have my own views on how to adapt Islam to contemporary values and believe the essence of religion is giving people happiness. Let all religious leaders, whatever their faith or attitude to faith, come and talk on television and in the media. Freedom of expression and of religion should not be restricted by laws. Such open discussion is desperately needed.

I would even invite Hizb ut-Tahrir members to discuss their views on television and in the media. Any Muslim with a religious background, enlightened with Koranic logic, could prove that they are wrong. I do not know if the Uzbek government has experts on Koranic logic, nor do I know if they are ready for such a debate, but others are ready. The government should allow its people to conduct religious enlightenment freely and should itself also do so.

As long as the Uzbek government continues to suppress democracy and refuses to allow democratic opposition parties (indeed, it has expelled them all from the country), it is only natural that it will face opposition from religious parties. There is only the government and nothing else, so it is natural this space will be filled by religious extremists. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Karimov likes to talk in his speeches of his progressive ideas about Islam and the role of religion in the state, but this is all rhetoric. We have to judge him by his actions – repression against the population.

The worst aspect of the situation in Uzbekistan is that the government has solved none of the country's severest problems – including the problem of religious extremism. But the existence of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan gives it the perfect excuse to fight back. Both sides are happy with the situation. President Karimov and his colleagues have the excuse to fight fundamentalism and terrorism and keep all power in their own hands instead of bringing in the opposition parties and democratising society.

Ordinary Muslims always need to perfect their faith – seeking perfection is one of the requirements of Koranic logic. This is impossible for Muslims in Uzbekistan today, with Hizb ut-Tahrir on one side and the government on the other. There is no space to practise religion. The Muslim community is forced to live in a kind of darkness, with no access to religious enlightenment as neither the government nor Hizb ut-Tahrir has an interest in that. This has harmed ordinary believers.

Other religions too, especially Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, have had a hard time practicing their faith in this climate of lack of democracy. However unlikely the prospect may sound, the government has to promote a climate where every religious community can openly practise its faith without any restriction. Religious freedom will gradually solve the problem of religious extremism in society, just as an open market solves economic problems (the planned economy failed in the Soviet Union). The religious market should be very open and free, with the Muslim, Christian and other faiths allowed to operate freely.

Karimov seems to me to care more about protecting his own position as president than anything else. That is his main interest. Azerbaijan is slightly different – there is more chance of a democratic change, even though it is hard putting this into reality. Opposition parties are able to exist, despite the restrictions and the recent imprisonment of opposition leaders. Religious policy is different as well.

But there are some lessons for other countries in the region. Iran has produced terrible problems for some religious minorities – such as the Baha'is or the Christians – and Sharia law has been interpreted in a way that restricts individuals' freedom of religion. These minorities are of course not happy.

But the Arab countries in particular need to learn from Uzbekistan's unhappy experience. Religious extremism is taught by some clergy in the Arab world. Several young Azerbaijani men who had studied at Cairo's Al-Azhar university came back and went off to fight for the rebels in Chechnya – they have been put on trial in Baku. Religious education works very badly in Arab countries. Their educational systems need profound changes, especially in Saudi Arabia.

The outside world should pressure Uzbekistan and other dictatorships to grant democracy in all fields, including religious freedom. There is no religious freedom without democracy. The outside world should push the Uzbek regime into a corner, just as it tries to do with its own enemies within society. Of course the outside world will be successful, though this task will be easier in the countries of Central Asia than in Iran and the Arab world. It is a mystery why the outside world is so slow to promote democracy in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, where the opportunities are better than in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But when democracy comes religious freedom will not automatically follow – changing the prevailing culture will take hard work. Religious freedom will help democracy and democracy will help religious freedom. The more free space you give people to practise their religion, the more you can free society from the problems of religious extremism. Freedom is like a medicine, capable of healing social problems like extremism. (END)

For more background see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1170

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Uzbekistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=33>

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>

Nariman Gasimoglu , contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY