

Chapter 9

Identity and Power—The Discursive Transformation of the Former Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan



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Abstract The former Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) underwent a political transformation from an Islamist organization, partly responsible for armed mobilizations during the Civil War in Tajikistan (1992–1997), to a moderate and arguably democratic party from the early 2000s until 2015. The party defined and redefined its identity to fit both Islamic and secular democratic narratives. This research traced the evolution of the IRPT’s identity in light of critical events such as the change in leadership in 2006, and the Arab Spring. A discourse analysis of the IRPT’s main communication channel, *Najot*, from 2008 to 2015 has been conducted, which found three themes where strong articulations about identity were made: secularism, the Civil War, and the Islamic World. First, they challenged the core legislation regulating the triangular relationship of state, society, and religion; they justified political Islam; and they criticized what they called “secular extremism.” Second, the party produced a counter-narrative of Civil War actors and actions to that of the state. Third, they expressed solidarity with legal and controversial Islamic parties elsewhere, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, or the Palestinian Hamas. This paper has found that the IRPT’s *ideological* transformation was limited due to the remaining Islamist elements in their discourse and the lack of clarity on the compatibility between Islamic and secular democratic programs.

Keywords Islam · Secularism · Democracy · IRPT · Tajikistan · Political opposition

9.1 Introduction

The former Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was the only legal Islamic party in Central Asia. Its origins, historical development, and banishment in 2015 have marked a number of conflicting ideas and events which drew the attention of regional and international policy experts and academics. Born in 1973 as a small-circle “puritan” movement of religious Tajiks, it underwent stages of identity reconstruction.

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The movement entered a stage of explicit politicization in the 1980s, opposing the Soviet regime's policies on Islamic grounds, and had a decisive part in the creation of an All-Union Islamic Party in June 1990. At these three critical junctures, the movement was neither violent nor democratic. They were officially recognized as a political party in 1991 and re-excluded in 1993, which was the beginning of the party's radicalization in rhetoric and practice. From re-inclusion in 1997 until 2015, the party embarked on its path towards constructing a democratic identity "based on an Islamic ideology" [*dar zaminai aqidai Islomī*].¹

Furthermore, the IRPT is often reported in English-language academic discourses to have been a non-violent, democratic, and even liberal party (Freedman 1996, 221; Karagiannis 2006, 13; Heathershaw 2007, 200–201; Khalid 2007, 99–152; Yilmaz 2009, 142; Atkin 2012, 263; Epkenhans 2015; Lemon 2016, 268). This chapter explores such taken-for-granted assumptions, which in my view are informed by common disapproval of the Tajik state's authoritarian ways which makes any oppositional voice seem benign. The research question of the chapter is about whether the IRPT moderation was merely *tactical*, that is, moderation in the means of implementing an Islamist agenda, or *ideological*, that is, moderation in the values and ends pursued, namely democratic governance. The argument is that the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan transformed from an Islamist party into a moderate party only as a political strategy, rather than an ideological commitment, as evident from their political discourse.

9.2 Formation and Politicization in Late Soviet Era: 1973–1990

The proto-IRP was born in the rural areas of Qarotegin and the Vakhsh Valley of Tajikistan, among people rejecting the mainstream Soviet lifestyle who sought to reestablish the normative and practical appeal of Islam within Tajik society starting from the mid-1970s. The founders of what was later called "Revival of Islamic Youth of Tajikistan" (*Nahzati Javononi Islomii Tojikiston*) articulated the following three central concerns of the movement: (1) the reintroduction of Islamic culture and teachings to people; (2) the fight against novelties and superstition gaining popularity; and (3) Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in public (Epkenhans 2015, 324–327). Domestic religious upbringing, underground religious instruction, and observance of religious rites are considered *apolitical* expressions of Islam in Tajik society by scholars like Muriel Atkin (1989: 609–12).

Indeed, almost all the members of the party, especially the older generation, recall networking in underground religious circles led by the prominent unofficial *mullahs* and teachers [*ustodon*] of the time (Orzu 2013). The discourse of contention at the beginning was between the then-young activists and established *ulamo* (scholars)

¹ *Fišorhoi afzoyanda boloi nahzatiho* (Increasing pressure over Nahzat members), *Najot*, 36 (753), 5 September, 2013, p. 9.

and mullahs and revolved around the “correct” practice of religion. More specifically, Said Abdullohi Nuri (1947–2006)—one of the Muslim activists at the time and later the founder of the current Islamic Revival Party—and some other activists spoke against rituals they called “innovations” (*bid’atho*) like costly funerals and shrine visitations, which “traditionally minded” Muslim clerks, ironically one might say, were accused of embracing and promoting among ordinary followers (Epkenhans 2016, 188–189). A seemingly apolitical issue quickly escalated into “hot” disputes which later came to be associated with the Salafiyya movement.²

The politicization of the movement was especially visible in the 1985–1990 period, when the government authorities, particularly and critically the KGB, media, and generally the public discourse began to dub such increasingly vocal activists as “extremist,” “fundamentalist,” “Wahhabi” and so on (Bennigsen 1988, 780). The concern was that they were instigating “Muslim nationalism” (Ibid). S. Nuri had “his public preaching centered on one idea: the creation on the territory of Tajikistan of an independent Islamic republic” (as quoted in Bennigsen 1988, 779).

The politicization was also associated with increased exposure of Soviet Central Asian Muslims to their “Afghan brethren” [*barodaroni afghon*] either through under-surveilled information exchange or through the direct Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, whereby some defected to the neighboring country (Orzu 2013, 63; Bennigsen and Broxup 2011, 112–114, Yemelianova and Salmorbekova 2010, 217). More importantly, in fact, the first members of the Revival Movement acknowledge that the use of literature authored by (in)famous Islamists such as Hasan al-Bannā, Sayyed Qotb, al-Ghazali, Abu’l-‘Alā Mawdudi, Muhammad Iqbal, etc., contributed to the politicization of Islam and the Muslim awakening in Central Asia (Orzu 2013, 207).

Except Rahmatulla Alloma—one of the two widest renowned Islamic teachers in the USSR and the author of the tract describing an ideal Muslim country entitled *Musulmonobod* (“Muslimland”)—it was the disciples who had shown the first signs of active involvement in politics and political activism (Khalid 2014, 146). Interestingly, Revival activists referred to one another as “ikhwan,” in imitation of the Egyptian Ikhwan’ul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood), whose political influence was particularly noted (Orzu 2013, 207). Thus, in a raid campaign of 22 June 1986 in Dushanbe and districts of the Vakhsh valley, 40 Islamic Revival activists were detained (TajInfo, n.d.). The leader of the movement and a fellow disciple—Said Nuri—was imprisoned in 1986 for opposing the Soviet system (Epkenhans 2011, 85). Moreover, some Tajik Muslim leaders and their followers were arrested for advocating hostile attitudes, even “a holy war,” against the Moscow center for their “oppressive rule” (Haghayeghi 1994, 250).

However, after decades of extreme repression, the relative increase in religious freedom associated with *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies of Gorbachev enabled the like-minded Muslims (revivalists) of the Soviet Union to finally hold a conference

² Followers of the *Salafiyya* (which was banned in Tajikistan in January 2009) want to return to an idealized early-Islamic community (umma) of the era of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the *salaf salih*) and therefore consider only Koran and hadith as relevant sources. Reports suggest that the *Salafiyya* is a network of like-minded Muslim activists without a distinct organizational structure.

in Astrakhan in June 1990 to institutionalize an all-Union Islamic Party, despite opposition by official clerics like Turajonzoda who did not favor the politicization of Islam (Akiner 2001, 8). The All-Union IRP was mainly made up of North Chechens, Ingush, Tatars, and Central Asians. The Charter of the All-Union IRP set Muslim awakening “with the purpose of implementing Qur’anic and Sunnah precepts in life” as its founding goal (Orzu 2013, 439). In sum, the Tajik Islamic Revival Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s was an exclusive club of religious individuals who mainly concerned themselves with Muslim emancipation. They did not have a clear strategy, but they did have a political Other—the “godless,” “anti-Muslim” Soviet state.

9.3 Independence and Civil War: 1990–1997

Upon return from Astrakhan, the Tajik revivalists asked for permission from the government to officially establish the IRPT in October 1990. The application was rejected on the grounds of its religious orientation. They nonetheless held an unofficial local congress in Chortut near Dushanbe, with the attendance of 500 local members, which is said to have been the determining factor in the party’s official recognition in October 1991 (Shapoatov 2004, 53–54). In those years, the party led a base of over 10,000 active, and over 20,000 passive followers, with a subsequent engagement in armed conflicts against government forces who mainly represented Kulyab and Leninabad provinces of Tajikistan (Yemelianova and Salmorbekova 2010, 220–21). In the early 1990s, the IRPT leaders would enter the struggle for power by accusing their opponents of being the “old Communist *apparatchiks* with a new democratic façade,” while declaring their own commitment to the “electoral route to power” (Haghayeghi 1994, 254). On 26 October 1991, the first official IRPT congress was held, where 650 delegates and 310 guests took part and the IRPT program and charter were adopted (Bushkov and Mikulski 1996).

As early as in 1990–1991, anti-Soviet, revisionist, and nationalist sentiments swept across Tajikistan, demanding the dissolution of the nomenklatura government.³ The coalesced opposition (UTO) comprised of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, the IRPT, Rastokhez (Renaissance), and La’li Badakhshon (Ruby of Badakhshan) first proposed for the country’s *first Islamic authority*, Hojiakbar Turajonzoda, to run for presidency, which he refused. They then nominated a Pamir-born cinematographer and human rights activist Davlat Khudonazarov in the November 1991 presidential elections, which he lost (Akbarzadeh 1996, 1110–11). The opposition forces suffered from several irreconcilable ideological elements: the minority Ismailis vis-à-vis majority Sunnis; self-styled *mullos* in favor of a *Shari’a*-based Islamic state vis-à-vis proponents of “church-state separation” with the maintenance of the “Islamic character of Tajik society” like Turajonzoda; nationalist members like DPT and

³ *Nomenklatura* refers to the Soviet ruling elites, who belonged to the Communist Party. Here—the informal political elites-successors of the Soviet government. For examples of usage, see: Fredholm 2006, 17; Foster 2015, 353–54; Epkenhans 2018, 200.

Rastokhez vis-à-vis “Islamists” like the IRPT itself (Akbarzadeh 1996, 1119–21). However, the view that the party was a “powerful fundamentalist militant group,” that attempted to Islamize the Tajik state and society prevailed anyway (Epkenhans 2010, 329).

In May 1992, members of the opposition forces—Islamists and pro-democratic activists—managed to board the first coalition government, which formed after the period of protests and lasted until two months after the ousting of President Rahmon Nabiev on September 7, 1992 (Zainiddinov 2012, 460). In December 1992, Popular Front forces defeated the coalition government, brought President Rahmon to power, and banned the IRPT in 1993 (Ibid, 460). Excluded, more radicalized Islamist military leaders declared Gharm Valley, where the majority of Islamists came from, an “Islamic Republic” (Rahnamo 2008, 123). Some commanders enforced an Islamic order in their narrow districts, prohibiting weddings, music and dance, alcohol drinking, and punishing acts of disobedience, such as not wearing *hijab* (Seifert 2005, 20–22).

After the ban on the IRPT in early 1993, the majority of opposition forces fled to neighboring Afghanistan where they established the Movement for Islamic Revival in Tajikistan (MIRT) headed by Said Abdullah Nuri and his deputies—Turajonzoda and Himmatzoda, as well as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) which included the non-religious opposition groups, also chaired by Nuri (Shapoatov 2004, 55). The intra-Tajik war was reinterpreted by Tajik Islamists, primarily by Nuri, to be a war between Muslims in *Dor-ul-Islam* (Land of Islam—Afghanistan), who sought to establish an Islamic state, and non-Muslims in *Dor-ul-Kufr* (Land of Unbelief—Tajikistan) (Kalonov 2020, 79–80). Among the atrocities committed by IRPT commanders in Tajikistan, *mavlati* Abdurahim Karim’s 1993 attack on Border Post 13, which resulted in the deaths of 25 Russian border guards, is an example (Epkenhans 2018, 213).

Since the movement was not a homogenous movement, there were atrocities committed by its affiliates in the name of Islam, alongside moderate declarations by the leadership in Afghanistan. Rahmon Sanginov, a self-styled “Hitler,” was one of the UTO warlords leading a force of around 150 fighters, with a record of over 400 serious crimes, including 270 murders perpetrated by his followers (Nourzhanov 2005, 127). He was also reported to have banned alcohol, enforced gender-segregated schooling, and introduced corporal punishment. Furthermore, the Islamists had an 8000-strong militia force outside Dushanbe, some of whom were armed by Afghanistan’s Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Ahmad Shah Masoud and who facilitated the use of the north of Afghanistan as a launchpad for incursions (Rashid 1994, 159, 167, 177; Heathershaw 2009, 30). The leaders of the IRPT at the time—Himmatzoda and Nuri—however, sought to diminish the responsibility of the party leadership for the violent atrocities committed by its affiliate field commanders by conceding that they did not have control over those militias, while the party identity was tainted ever after due to its cooperation with Afghan Islamists (Epkenhans 2018, 207–8).

9.4 Post-Conflict IRPT: 1997–2015

The third stage in the discursive evolution of the IRPT began after the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Unity Accord in Tajikistan in 1997. Under the provisions of the agreement, The United Tajik Opposition, comprised mainly of IRPT members, was allocated a third of the Parliament seats and government positions (Heathershaw 2009, 33). Its leadership, including Nuri himself, became more moderate, advocating a nonviolent Islamism that was compatible with democracy, and participating in the elections of the country as any other “worldly” political party.

The party was again officially registered in 1999, and its new charter no longer suggested that Tajikistan should move in the direction of becoming an Islamic state, instead of aiming at the “development of Islamic, national and human values in the Tajik society” and loosely mentioning that the “application of Islamic philosophy...can become the basis for the strengthening of state foundation and maintenance of peace and unity” (as quoted in Karagiannis 2006, 12). Kabiri—deputy chairman at the time—proclaimed that their ultimate goal was “to create a free, democratic, and secular state” (as quoted in Collins 2007, 88).

Already in 1999, the party lost considerable popular support. According to the independent surveys of the time, only 6% of the populace trusted S. Nuri, and a mere 0.6%—his deputy, M. Himmatzoda (Collins 2007, 85–86). In the presidential elections of 1999, the IRPT nominee received 2% of the vote due both to popular mistrust and electoral fraud. In the parliamentary elections of 2000 and 2005, it won two seats respectively, while withdrawing from running in the presidential elections of 2006 altogether (Ibid, 86).

In 2006, Said A. Nuri passed away, leaving space for internal rifts in the party between conservative, “old-generation” members and young, pro-democracy politicians like Muhiddin Kabiri (Karagiannis 2006, 14–16). According to IRPT reports, Kabiri was *elected* by the majority in the party, even though the late Nuri had already vouched for his candidacy. The new leader differed from traditional high-ranking members in his interpretation of religion and his politics. He was moderately disposed, pragmatic above all, with a secular education and good knowledge of Russian and English.

Since then, the IRPT has expanded both territorially and demographically. It opened branches all over the country and attracted youth aged below 30, and reached 25,221 members by 2007 (Rahnamo 2008, 74–75). There has been no registered violence on the part of the IRPT, especially having faced electoral fraud, since the signing of the peace accord in 1997—a conscious development referred to by Kabiri as “the path of tolerance and restraint” (Khamidova 2016). For example, the party took part in the elections of 1999, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015, boycotted the 2006 presidential elections, and supported the candidacy of a female secularist human rights lawyer, Oynihol Bobonazarova, for president in 2013 (Lenz-Raymann 2014, 94–95). In none of these did they resort to violence in response to the rigging of results in favor of the ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan.

The aftermath of the parliamentary elections of 2010 was a turning point in the IRPT's identity building. The party apparently expected to receive at least 20–25% of the vote, only to be “shocked” by being granted merely 8.2% (Kabiri 2016, 9–10). With a mass of IRPT followers gathered at its headquarters demanding public protests, it was Kabiri's call. Having received threats of military retaliation by security authorities in case of a protest, he had to call off any public demonstrations and effectively make peace with the results, in an effort to prevent a violent outcome (Roche 2019, 75–76).

Following the 2011–2012 events of the Arab Spring, the rise of radicalization in the Muslim World, and the emergence of ISIS, the Tajik government became more wary of the presence of an Islamic party in the country. Thus, they introduced stricter control over the religious sphere and embarked on a discreditation campaign against the party, linking it to terrorist cells elsewhere. In March 2012, a classified, allegedly government security document, “Protocol 32–20,” was leaked, which contained strict law enforcement measures against the IRPT. Among others, in paragraph 2, it instructed security officers (Committee of National Security, Ministry of Interior, Committee of Religious Affairs and local governments) to keep watch over the party members, particularly the leaders; determine its “propaganda methods”; and divert members and potential members away from it (TajInfo 2012). Paragraph 3 calls attention to the concerning increase in membership rates of women in the party. In paragraph 6, an order is issued to “prepare and publish materials exposing IRPT leaders' and activists' illegal activities in mass media” (Ibid).

On the eve of the 2013 presidential elections, the IRPT came up with the initiative of proposing a mutual candidate on their own and social-democrats' behalf, and Oynihol Bobonazarova was chosen to be the one. According to the Central Electoral Committee, she received 201,236 signatures out of 210,000 necessary to pass the 5% threshold, while the “little-known, pocket parties” managed to pass and ballot (BBC 2013). The IRPT and independent observers still managed to criticize the electoral proceedings, namely the disproportion between the number of *actual* voters and the minimum threshold, the scarcity of polling stations for the roughly 1.5 million Tajik population in Russia at the time (labor migrants and otherwise), the lack of time for signature collections (50 days) and other bureaucratic obstacles (Ibid).

In the March 2015 parliamentary elections, the results showed that the party failed to pass the 5% threshold to gain any seats in the Lower House of the Parliament [*Majlisi Namoyandagon*] (Epkenhans 2015, 321). Thus, the party was finally banned as a terrorist-extremist organization, with its leading members either jailed or in exile. Now, what remains of the party is some of its leading members dispersed abroad as political refugees. They have been formally aligned with other foreign-based opposition groups like “Group 24” (Guruhi 24), in what culminated in the establishment of the National Alliance of Tajikistan (PMT) in Warsaw in 2018, chaired by Muhiddin Kabiri (RFE/RL's Tajik Service 2019). As for the IRPT agenda post-2015, Kabiri's response was the following: “Whatever plans, ideas, and views we had prior to 2015 remained there. The crackdown on the party, migration and all the events of the past 5 years, despite all their tragedy, have a positive side. We can

[now] propose to our nation and country a new plan that takes into account the past experience without being chained to it (Payom.net 2020).”

9.5 The IRPT Discourse on Secularism

The IRPT members of Parliament (MPs)—Muhiddin Kabiri and Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, later replaced by Sayidumar Husayni—were active in debating the legislature on religion and religious associations. They had proposed the law “On the Freedom of Faith and Religious Associations” in February 2008 for Parliament review and in the annulment of the December 1994 law “On Religion and Religious Associations” (Epkenhans 2009, 98).⁴ However, it was rejected in favor of the government-proposed law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,” which was adopted on 26 March 2009. The party members had particular issues with the bureaucratic obstacles created by the force of law such as officially registered religious institutions having the sole permission for public preaching (paragraph 9, article 4).⁵ Article 5 stipulates that the state does not interfere “into the activities of religious associations, except as provided by the legislation,” which raised concerns in the IRPT ranks.⁶ By now, we can infer that the party’s definition of secularism involved ideological autonomy for religious institutions, including madrasas (Islamic schools). The party draft was also more liberal than its government counterpart on matters of religious minorities and public worship. It had a separate article (10) devoted to churches, monasteries, synagogues, and missionaries, granting them the freedom to establish religious associations if they had at least 50 followers.⁷ As for worship in public institutions, the IRPT proposal leaves it up to citizens [*šahrvandon*] to establish worship sites in any institution, including military units and universities. In contrast, article 20, paragraph 4 of the adopted law states that “religious *associations* have the right to make suggestions” for worship in hospitals, dispensaries, nursery houses, places of detention and imprisonment (emphasis added).⁸ In other words, the party proposal would reduce the role of the government in administering religion.

In IRPT’s definition, the core assumption of secularism—the separation of church and state—is false. The publication repeatedly discussed the inherence of politics in Islam, calling it a “religion of politics” that represents “a complete system to

⁴ *Loihai Qonuni Ğumhurii Toĝikiston «Dar Borai Ozodii E’tiqod va Ittihodiyahoi Dinī»* (Proposal of the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On the Freedom of Faith and Religious Associations), *Najot*, 7 (464), 14 February, 2008, pp. 2–3.

⁵ *Qonuni Navi Din ba Talaboti E’tiqodii Mardum Ğavobgū Nest?!* (The New Religion Law Not Suitable to People’s Spiritual Demands?!), *Najot*, 16 (525), 16 April 2009, pp. 4–5.

⁶ Emphasis added.

⁷ *Law Proposal*, *Najot*, 14 February 2008, p. 2.

⁸ Law on Freedom of Conscience, 26 March 2009.

govern social, cultural, and economic life.”⁹ As such, they saw Hanafi Islam as containing political principles closest to the Tajik culture, [durust va sozgorand], and thus publicly supported the alignment of Tajik politics with Hanafi teachings.¹⁰ In another interview with Hikmatullo Sayfullohoda, a member of the IRPT board and editor of *Najot*, the question of public promotion of Islam was raised. It was often assumed by pro-government critics that the party’s role was merely promoting Islam as a cultural legacy in the public space, so when the government declared 2009 as a commemorative year of Abu Hanifa (the founder of Hanafi law school in Sunni Islam) along with a series of events, it was meant as a counter-hegemonic move against the IRPT (Nozimova and Epkenhans 2019, 138). In response, Sayfullohoda rejected such a “reductionist” view of the party by reminding that it was primarily a political organization with an Islamic ideology [aqidai Islomī].¹¹ On a related note, the IRPT used to consider proselytization of other faiths as a “threat to national unity,” as stated in a newspaper report from 2008.¹² So, in some ways, the IRPT’s secular project was a polar opposite of “assertive secularism” (removal of religion from public space) practiced by the state, while in others, it strangely resembled the state in its *monocultural* Islamic narrative.

The party’s vision of secularism did not include *moral neutrality*. In fact, on various occasions the party members and its close affiliates were quick to employ “judgmental” language regarding female clothing, public expressions of impropriety, the media and so on. For example, in an article about public morality, the author regretfully states that “it would be better if the police were active in preventing young women’s night walks [šabgardii duxtaron]...,” complaining about alleged double standards in the government’s defense of democracy and freedom in that respect, and the shortage of the same democratic standards when prohibiting teenage religious activities.¹³ In a different article of the same year, the author reflects on the Islamic notion of “Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong” [*amri ba ma’ruf va nah’yi az munkar*] as a principle of political accountability.¹⁴ Throughout the article, one can trace a repeated juxtaposition of Sharia and (secular) law [*šar’i va qonunī*], as though the two do not pose any mutual conflict. It also invites increased

⁹ *Mardi nakūnom Namirad Hargiz* (Good Man’s Legacy Never Dies), *Najot*, 10 (467), 6 March, 2008, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Din va Siyosat* (Religion and Politics), *Najot*, 40 (549), 1 October, 2009, p. 13; *M. Kabiri: HNIT Ba Fiina Kashida Nameshavad* (IRPT Will Not Succumb In Affliction), *Najot*, 48 (610), 1 December, 2010 p. 3.

¹¹ *H. Sayfullohoda: Agar Tamomi Rohhoi Fa’oliyat Basta Shavand Ham...* (Even If All Avenues For Action Are Blocked...), *Najot*, 14 (628), 6 April, 2011, p. 9.

¹² *Paygiri Az Siyosati Payvandi Aqidatī* (Follow-up On the Policy of Ideological Bonding), 30 (487), 24 July, 2008, p. 12; *A. Collin Young: “Bo Islom qanoat kardam”* (“Satisfied through Islam”), 16 (525), p. 12.

¹³ *Islom—Rohi Najot Az Ğinoyat* (Islam—The Solution To Crime), *Najot*, 24 (741), 13 June, 2013, p. 11.

¹⁴ “*Amri ba ma’ruf va nah’yi az munkar*”—*farizai faromuššuda* (“Commanding right and forbidding wrong”—a forsaken precept), *Najot*, 45 (762), 6 November, 2013, p. 14.

public oversight over officials' conduct to ensure their conformity to Sharia and law requirements.

The IRPT members' secular project, in other words, was based on two premises. First, *religious* values inform *national* values. This premise derived from their peculiar, and in my opinion honest, view of Islam—namely that it is not solely a private affair, but one that, at least in theory, claims to regulate worldly and social affairs of a Muslim society. As such, national values should pass a “religious filtration” [*poksozii dini*] to be legitimate.¹⁵ For example, in a 2011 article disputing a government law proposal “On Parents’ Responsibility for Children’s Upbringing and Education” (2 August 2011), the author states that “in the Islamic East, there is no need for [this] law because Islamic upbringing and Muslim duty render such a law unnecessary.”¹⁶ Second, they had to decide if they supported democracy in “substance” [*muhtavo*], or in form [*šakli*] only.¹⁷ The first has an ideological base to it—secularism, humanism, individualism and other -isms, so it should ideally lead to a fairly homogenous outcome across cultures, while for the second—freedom, elections, rule of law, equality and other minimal principles of democracy would suffice. The party clearly chose the second as they advocated for an authentic “democratic” model of Tajik-Islamic civilization.¹⁸ This minimalist conception of democracy is reminiscent of a viral quote of Turkey’s Erdogan saying “Is democracy a means or an end?... We say that democracy is a means, not an end.” (Mecham 2004, 347). In sum, for the IRPT there were not and could not have been any conflicts between democracy and political Islam.

Lastly, the IRPT articulated its version of secularism in opposition to its radical Other—“radical secularism” [*ifrotgaroi duniyavi*], allegedly practiced by the Tajik government.¹⁹ The party constructed an equivalence between the government and its Soviet counterpart in its discourse. More specifically, they repeatedly criticized government policies targeting religion and religious institutions, such as impeding the public promotion of Islamic values and symbols, strict surveillance over mosque activities, as resembling the Soviet anti-religious, atheist secularism. Being the target of Islamic radicalism charges, the IRPT articulated the “reverse discourse” of secular radicalism (Lemon 2016, 218–19). Originally termed “assertive secularism” by Charles Taylor, it refers to the state’s role as the “agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain.” (Kuru 2007, 571). The increasing state-induced bureaucratic obstacles before religious organizations, tight

¹⁵ *Din, arzišhoi millī va demokratiya* (Religion, national values, and democracy), *Najot*, 1 (770), 2 January, 2014, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Mas’uliyat Yo Mahrumiyat?* (Responsibility or Deprivation?), *Najot*, 5 (619), 2 February 2011, p. 13.

¹⁷ [Religion, national values, and democracy], *Najot*, 2014; These are analogous to the ‘procedural’ and ‘liberal’ conceptions of democracy mentioned in the Conceptual Framework, i.e. the IRPT endorsed the first but rejected the second.

¹⁸ *M. Kabiri: Rušdi Demokratiya—Ĝilavgirii Tundgaroi* [Development of Democracy—Prevention of Extremism], *Najot*, 1 (615), 5 January, 2011, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Mukolama Az Rohi Amal* (Dialogue About The Course of Action), *Najot*, 6 (515), 5 February, 2009, p. 9, 12.

control of religious practices, the ban on hijab and beard in public institutions, and other policies fueled grievances addressed by the party (Thibault 2013, 180). In doing so, the party promoted the thesis that moderate Muslims are the victim of both Islamic radicals and secular radicals.²⁰ Their discontent was that instead of rooting out socio-economic and political problems leading to increased public religiosity, the government suppressed the “symptom” itself. The potential outcome, as envisaged in party statements, was a positive correlation between secular radicalism and Islamic radicalism.²¹ However, this assumption was proven false by surveys that found insignificant correlations between poverty and authoritarianism on the one hand, and radicalization on the other (Montgomery and Heathershaw 2016, 17–18, 50). Furthermore, the party inadvertently admitted that there were pro-theocracy members in its ranks, who found the statement “in Islam nobody has the right to rule people in the name of God” controversial.²² In a genuine exploration of Islamic politics, however, one can find Islamic rule under different pretexts, be that the Islamic Republic of Iran for whose politics the IRPT nurtured respect or the Ottoman Empire, leading to the conclusion that theocracy is a legitimate system in Islam, and that these *silenced* members were honest about it.

9.6 The IRPT Discourse on the Civil War

The IRPT were invested in articulating a counter-narrative to the hegemonic narrative of the government about the events and actors of the Civil War. They did so by providing their story of the “struggle for freedom,” “Islamic awakening,” “opposition,” and “violence.” In the process, they drew chains of equivalence among otherwise diverse “subject positions”—Islamists and their democratic (DPT) and nationalist (Rastokhez) allies, and even the very government at some point, and they reduced their political “Other” (Popular Front) down to “armed criminals” and “communists” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 21).

To start with, the IRPT defined their identity through the goal they claimed to have pursued: political independence and freedom [*istiqloliyattalabī va ozodixohī*].²³ From the two “maydans” of protester congregations, *Ozodī* (Freedom) and *Šahidon* (Martyrs), the first belonged to the proponents of the communist successor-government made of Kulobis and Soghdīs, while the second was 70% made up of supporters of the IRPT and Qaziyyat.²⁴ The latter was organized on March 26,

²⁰ M. Kabiri: *Tolibon Ba Osiyoi Miyona Demokratiya “Meorand”* (Taliban Will „Bring “Democracy to Central Asia), *Najot*, 36 (649), 7 September: 2011, pp. 8–9.

²¹ *Hamai Kadrhoi Millī Kadrhoi Nahzatand* (All National Experts Are IRPT’s Experts), *Najot*, 36 (701), 5 September, 2012, p. 10.

²² *Širkat Dar Intixobot Ba Manfiati Hizb Ast* (Participation In Elections Is To The Benefit Of The Party), *Najot*, 49 (714), 6 December, 2012, p. 12.

²³ *Mardi nakūnom Namirad Hargiz* (Good Man’s Legacy Never Dies), *Najot*, 6 March, 10 (467), 2008, p. 2.

²⁴ *HNIT Dar Masiri Ta’rix* (IRPT On The Path Of History), *Najot*, 30 (487), 24 July, 2008, p. 6.

1992, in Dushanbe, and allegedly attracted more than 1 million people, including an insignificant portion of Uzbek minorities, in the span of 46 days, before getting dispersed at gunfire (Epenhans 2018, 211).²⁵ So when describing the “invasion” of Safarali Kenjaev—one of the Popular Front’s field commanders—into the capital and his “victory” speech, the author of the narrative refers to the enraged and ready-for-action supporters of the opposition as “liberation forces” who were composed of “free-thinking youth of Dushanbe, with Islamic and national dignity.”²⁶ Quite tellingly, the protesters of Šahidon were chanting Muhammad Iqbal’s revolutionary poetry intended to “awaken” the Muslim Ummah from “slumber sleep.”²⁷ However, they still identified with the “nation” as far as their *raison d’être* was concerned. For example, in a one-page article titled “Islamic Revival and National Dreams,” the editor describes the movement along the lines of “reformist” [*islohotī*], and uses a configuration of the phrases “national” or “national-religious” interests and values as being the driving force behind the party ideology 16 times.²⁸

Najot is full of “responses” to accusations of hardline Islamism. One of these is a common “strawman” attack against the IRPT, namely that “Islamists would seize power and murder their opponents, force hijab and home arrest on women, ban education and other nonsense...”²⁹ The party newspaper repeatedly emphasized efforts of the leadership of the Islamic opposition, especially Nuri, Himmatzoda, Davlat Usmon, and Mahmadalii Hayit, to “suppress” militant and *jihadi* field commanders.³⁰ For instance, after the signing of the decisive Khostdeh ceasefire agreement in Afghanistan in the winter of 1996, many field commanders of the Islamic opposition felt disenfranchised. Concerned about the potential futility of their jihad and lost blood, “God’s wrath against retreat,” and the fate of mujahids in the upcoming regime, these field commanders confronted the IRPT leaders.³¹ The leadership response allegedly drew both on “scriptural evidence” (Qur’an and Hadeeth) for abstinence from violent jihad, and legal basis against politically motivated persecution.

Another jihadist group that did not welcome the ceasefire news was that of the Sadirov brothers (Rizvon and Bahrom). Their group was known for numerous terrorist acts during the Civil War, involving the kidnapping of French aid workers, taking UN and foreign media personnel hostage, and other armed attacks across Dushanbe and the south of the country (CNN 1996; Reuters 1997). The IRPT were

²⁵ Panfilov, Oleg. *Tojikiston: Inqilobi Noma’lum* (Tajikistan: Undefined Revolution), *Najot*, 49 (819), 4 December, 2014, p. 4.

²⁶ *HNIT Dar Masiri Ta’rix* (IRPT On The Path Of History), *Najot*, 45 (502), 6 November, 2008, p. 6.

²⁷ *Az Yak Gurūhi Pinhonkor To Hizbi Parlumonī* (From A Clandestine Group To A Parliamentary Party), *Najot*, 18 (735), 2 May, 2013, p. 13.

²⁸ *Nahzati Islomī va Ormonhoi Millī* (Islamic Revival and National Dreams), *Najot*, 31 (593), 5 August, 2010, p. 6.

²⁹ *HNIT Dar Masiri Ta’rix* (IRPT On The Path Of History), *Najot*, 40 (497), 2 October, 2008, p. 6, emphasis added.

³⁰ *Ustod Nurī Siyosatmadori Durandešu Voqe’bin Bud* (Doctor Nuri Was A Shrewd and Realistic Politician), *Najot*, 35 (597), 2 September, 2010, p. 8.

³¹ *Sulh Hadyai Xudo Bud* (Peace Was A Gift From God), *Najot*, 44 (657), 2 November, 2011, p. 12.

careful to avoid any discursive association with his group, and so were vocal in denouncing his group's acts, such as devoting an article of the "Peace Was a Gift from God" series to "bloody atrocities of Rizvon" and the fact that he was rightly destroyed.³² In fact, a battle was planned and executed between the Islamic Revival troops (who constituted approximately 10,000 "mujahids" in total) and government forces on the one hand, and Sadirov's band on the other, on 25 February 1997 in Romit Valley.³³ This is an ironic illustration of articulated *equivalence* between the government and the opposition, and the *difference* between Islamic opposition and an armed "jihadist" group at play. Interestingly, the party comfortably used the subject positions of *mujahid* and *šahid*, but in reference to "noble defenders of Islam by political means," so rebels like the Sadirovs would not qualify.

9.7 The IRPT and the Islamic World

The IRPT's post-Islamist discourse was indeed inspired by their counterparts in Turkey (Justice and Development Party), Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party), Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood), and Tunisia (Renaissance Movement). Throughout the newspaper issues, one can notice the language of admiration for these "Muslim democratic" parties. At the same time, accounts of Islamist violence on the part of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and *Hamas* are deliberately silenced.

First, the party emphasized the democratic *means* by which Islamic groups competed for, and came to, power. One of these was *Hamas*—an analytically contradictory case—since it had a long record of political violence against Israel and *Fatah*, its political rival, while it managed to win the 2006 legislative elections fairly; it campaigned for *Sharia law* while its leaders were mostly secular professionals, and other contradictions (Gunning 2007, 1). The IRPT discourse placed *Hamas* in the category of "grievances-driven" anti-colonialist organizations, as they "fought for the independence and freedom" of the Palestinians, thereby using apologetic language.³⁴ The West is accused of wrongly classifying this "resistance political group" as terrorist, while the political Other of *Hamas*—the "Zionist regime" is abundantly mentioned for its atrocities against the Palestinians.³⁵ In honor of the 21st anniversary of *Hamas*, the newspaper describes it as a "popular and national... jihadist movement" [*ğunbiši mardumī va millī*], which performed "some remarkable military operations" [*amaliyoti nizomii bargastaye*], such as the two Intifadas.³⁶

³² *Xunxorihoi Rizvon va Rohzani Askaroni Labi Ğar* (Rizvon's Bloody Atrocities And The Ambush of Labi Ğar Soldiers), *Najot*, 1 (666), 4 January 2012, p. 10.

³³ *Muzokiroti Sulh Dar Maskav* (Peace Negotiations In Moscow), *Najot*, 14 (679), 4 April, 2012, p. 11.

³⁴ *Bahori Xunini Falastin* (Palestine's Bloody Spring), *Najot*, 10 (467), 6 March, 2008, p. 10.

³⁵ *Falastiniyoni Charo Ba Sulh Narasidand?* (Why Did Palestinians Not Achieve Peace?), *Najot*, 49 (506), 4 December, 2008, p. 10.

³⁶ "*Hamos*" 21-Sola Šud (Hamas Turned 21), *Najot*, 1 (510), 1 January, 2009, p. 10.

Sections devoted to the Palestinian plight contain anti-Semitic discourse and words of praise for the Islamist Hamas and its leaders, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin—the spiritual leader of the movement, and Khaled Meshaal—its international representative (Encyclopaedia Britannica). For example, in an introduction to Sheikh’s achievements, the editor says “he stood up against the Jew(s)...”³⁷ Not only did the IRPT wholeheartedly support Hamas with unambiguous rhetoric, but it also provided “humanitarian aid” to it. In an interview with “Ozodi” (RFE/RL), Muhiddin Kabiri confirmed a leading question about 32,000 USD “collected by Nahzat brothers and sisters” in a humanitarian initiative for Hamas in the 2007 Gaza strip war.³⁸

Another Islamist current for which the IRPT had special admiration was the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan’ul Muslimin). A leading member of this group in the 1950s and 1960s, Sayyid Qutb, who was the radical Islamist ideologue behind the theological justification for violent (offensive) jihad, receives unequivocal respect in *Najot* articles. The IRPT articles describe him in fairly positive terms, as a model of a courageous and devout Muslim, who resisted tyranny.³⁹ The newspaper also spoke of Umar al-Tilmisani, Muslim Brotherhood’s 3rd General Guide (1972–1986), known for his relatively moderate stance on electoral politics. Unlike his predecessors, Al-Tilmisani believed in a non-violent implementation of Sharia law, through political means. As such, he initiated the first political alliance of the group on the eve of 1984 parliamentary elections, between the Muslim Brothers and the nationalist liberal Wafd Party, winning 8 seats for Ikhwan candidates.⁴⁰ He is described in the IRPT publication as having “healthy and constructive thoughts...invested in spreading the truth and guiding people towards unity.”⁴¹ The party paid homage to yet a third Muslim Brotherhood scholar, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, for his contribution to *da’wah* (proselytization) and politicization of Islam.

However, such *Najot* articles and public statements, that set these otherwise controversial figures in an unequivocally positive light, either seem unaware of the barely concealable implications of their radical ideas and/or the active encouragement of religious violence, or are deliberately *silencing* these inconvenient realities. For instance, Sheikh Qaradawi supported *Hamas* financially through charity organizations in the latter’s military endeavors against the Palestinian Authority (Bartal 2015, 586). He was an outspoken critic of all leaders of the Islamic world who did not take a public stance against the Israeli state and was openly calling for a joint and “uncompromising *jihad*” against Israel (Ibid, 595–96). Another is the leader of the Malaysian Islamic Party Abdul Hadi Nawang who spoke, upon his visit to the IRPT’s

³⁷ *Mağrāhi Muboriz* (Injured Fighter), *Najot*, 31 (593), 5 August, 2010, p. 7., emphasis added.

³⁸ *Intixoboti oyanda oson naxohad bud* (The upcoming elections will not be easy), *Najot*, 36 (806), 4 September, 2014, p. 12.

³⁹ *Sayyid Qutb—islohotxoh va muborizi rohi Xudo* (Sayyid Qutb—reformer and fighter on the path of God), *Najot*, 24 (586), 17 June, 2010, pp. 7, 13.

⁴⁰ *Al Jazeera English*, “The Brotherhood and Mubarak | Al Jazeera World.” May 23, 2012. YouTube video, 47:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwBEzxXs0cI>, min. 8:15–10:39, Accessed 18 Nov, 2020.

⁴¹ *Umari Tilmisonī—Do’ī va Murabbī* (Umar Tilmisani—Missionary and Mentor), *Najot*, 31 (635), 3 August, 2011, p. 10.

9th Congress in 2011, about his party proudly implementing Islamic law and justice in regions they won, banning “alcoholic, obscene places” as well as “gambling sites,” allegedly to non-Muslims’ content.⁴² Seen from this angle, the fact that the IRPT upheld such figures may have been a worrisome prospect for the secular segment of the Tajik public who took their time to read through the newspaper and for the government which was notoriously irritable at any sign of support for political Islam.

9.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, it was aimed to empirically illustrate to what extent and in which context the IRPT transformed to a moderate party. This transformation was part of a *political strategy*, informed by the incentives and disincentives of democratic politics. However, one ought to be skeptical about the IRPT’s *ideological* transformation, that is, the acceptance of democratic norms and standards as an end. The party members’ acceptance of the democratic procedure and the selective use of democratic rhetoric were to signal to observers inside and outside the country that they would conform to their expectations, be they from the “Islamic World” or from the so-called West, or from the Tajik government. That is where the problem lies. In an attempt to suit all audiences, the IRPT failed to present a coherent ideological program. Instead, it was an incomplete mix of (liberal) democratic and Islamist elements. The IRPT’s democratic identity depended on reiterating the *importance* of concepts like human rights and equality but failed on providing a theoretical substance to them. To be fair, political parties are not typically demanded to give a detailed account of how they conceptualize universal democratic values—as these should be universal and *uniform*—except if the political party was founded on an undemocratic past and has been associated with violence. In that case, the public should have the right to “interrogate” the party’s purported commitment to democracy and secularism. The interrogation shows that only the leadership from the mid-2000s until 2015 partly nurtured an ideological endorsement of democratic and secular standards, though even they did not elaborate on controversial issues like (non)religious minorities, secular education, and polygamy.

The party did not hesitate to acknowledge their “past mistakes,” namely aggression in the Civil War. However, instead of qualifying it as violent Islamism, they attribute it to a “situation out of control” scenario, wherein most atrocities from rebels opposing the government, including fundamentalist militias like Rizvan Sadirov’s, were “falsely” attributed to the “moderate” IRPT leadership. Second, most democratic discourses can interchangeably be called “post-Islamist,” as they signaled a commitment to democracy as an acceptable and even preferred system for Islam,

⁴² Abdul Hadi Awang: *Demokratiyai Malaysia Az Demokratiyai Tojikiston Farq Dorad* (Malaysian Democracy Is Different from Tajikistan’s), *Najot*, 40 (653), 6 October, 2011, pp. 5–6.

while some Islamist discourses could also be called “illiberal.” This strategy also ensured *consistency* in the IRPT’s transformation path, as they did not uphold democracy in its own terms, but as a system compatible with the Islamic narrative. Third, they assumed that their Islamic identity should not have been an “anomaly” but an anticipated rule, as their oft-quoted “97–98% Muslim population” statistic was supposed to eliminate all questions as to the popular desirability of an Islamic party, even though that has not been proven so far. Fourth, their discourse on violence, particularly perpetrated in the name of Islam, sometimes reminds of the “No True Scotsman Fallacy” in that they assumed the authority to decide, in an unfalsifiable manner, what it took to be a proper Muslim so that an individual claiming to be a Muslim would not suffice, hence the “No True *Muslim* Fallacy” (Manninen 2019, 374–77). At last, a reservation has to be made about the level of the bar for determining secular, moderate religious organizations. Calling ISIS a terrorist group is too low of a bar to be content. For what it’s worth, even al-Qaeda denounced ISIS (Dearden 2017). So, positive and even neutral language in remarks about Islamist groups like Hamas and leaders like Qutb and Qaradawi should not be overlooked and remain unquestioned.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that the IRPT would in fact Islamize the Tajik social structure, especially given the preponderance of the few pragmatic voices in the leadership—like Muhiddin Kabiri and Mahmadali Hayit. But the IRPT was supposedly *more* than these figures. Their avoidance from these topics in favor of “mundane” problems like elections and political freedom meant that they were either not ideologically prime to provide a definitive answer on those issues, or they simply harbored intentions of “bottom-up Islamization,” rephrased into “Islamic society.” In either case, this should suffice to question the limits of the IRPT’s ideological moderation.

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