

Editorial

ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIAN MEDIA: A PREOCCUPYING SILENCE

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Discussed all over the world, the question of political Islam in Central Asia is almost absent from the media in the region. Under the pretext of ensuring “national security”, governments might be tempted to pressure even more dissent voices.

The events of the 11 of September have made the contrast even more striking. Outside the region, observers and media are regularly underlining the danger that Central Asia might become the next battle field of a new “Jihad” to be launched by local Islamic groups. Inside the region, little if no information is to be found in the media on movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Partly because of the fear of the journalists themselves, but largely because of the intimidating and repressive attitudes of governments, local media do not provide any substantial insight on such issues, so important for all the Central Asian states.

References to questions like Islam and politics, or different interpretations of Islam, appear in the regional media only in a very abstract and theoretical form, disconnected from the political and social reality of Central Asia.

NO DEBATES

At a time when Islamic movements are said to be “spreading with incredible speed”¹, this silence is particularly striking in the three countries around the Ferghana Valley, the cradle of political Islam in the region: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The fact that Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia to have legalised its Islamic opposition makes it no exception. In a country where the “Hizb-ut-Tahrir’s increasing support”² would be a reflection of the “growing disillusionment with the IRP [the Islamic Renaissance Party, integrated into government structures, *ed*] there are “no debates about Islam” in the generalist media of the country, writes Gulchekhra Mansurova (see her article in this issue).

NO BASIC INFORMATION

In Uzbekistan, the constant use of terms like “Allah” or “Islamic values” in the government radio and television channels may have as a consequence that “you start to doubt whether Uzbekistan is still a secular state” (see the article from Marfua Tokhakhjoeva, in this issue). But that does not create even the illusion of a debate. “There are no reports whatsoever about the activities of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir radical Islamic party: no accounts of the party’s members brought to trial; nor accounts of protests staged in the Ferghana province by wives and mothers of those arrested for links with informal religious organisations”, writes Marfua Tokhakhjoeva.

As a result, “the uncritical news media proves inefficient in cracking

down on outdated religious rules that throw society back and flings believers into the hands of religious extremism”.

SILENT ADMIRATION

In Kyrgyzstan, writes Igor Grebenshikov (see his article in this issue), “the authorities do not ban writing about the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, but impose their own ideas about the religious opposition on the media”. As a result, “the media persistently repeats the cliché that Hizb-ut-Tahrir’s members are terrorists and extremists who wish to destroy the existing regime and establish an Islamic state in Central Asia”.

The authorities’ ban however, however, is not sufficient to prevent journalists from expressing in private their respect or admiration for the level of organisation of the movement and the skills of its members. In the light of the common belief that “many [official] clergy are not well educated enough to conduct a real dialogue with Hizb-ut-Tahrir organisers”³, the official information policy in Kyrgyzstan appears to be motivated more by the government’s own incapacity of dealing with the issue of political Islam than by the necessity to preserve national security.

GROWING TENSION

It is extremely doubtful that imposing silence on the media will help in any way to prevent a possible escalation of the tension in Central Asia. As a result, social

and political discontent might just continue to grow in silence, making it more difficult to understand its precise roots, and more difficult to anticipate any new eruption of violence.

THE USUAL OBSTACLES

With little doubt, journalists who might attempt to open the necessary debate on the burning issue of political Islam in the region will be confronted with the usual arguments: the need to preserve national security, or to deprive “terrorists” of publicity will serve as justification for any kind of pressure or open censorship from the governments towards the media.

In some cases, governments will also meet some understanding from the journalists themselves. According to a media specialist in the region, in Tajikistan “the government insists on the necessity of a certain limitation of freedom of expression in the interest of national security and stability. Some journalists support this view”.⁴

PLURALISM AGAINST WAR

The general belief in the capacity of the media to provoke a conflict can even help provide a broader understanding of the strict control imposed by the Central Asian states on the media. In Tajikistan, the idea that the media played a crucial role in sparking the civil war in 1992 still leads journalists to impose strong self-censorship. This is despite the fact that so far, no substantial analysis or research has brought evidence for that common belief. Careful analysis of other contexts, like those of ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 90s, shows that media alone cannot provoke a conflict. Such analysis clearly reveals that, far

from being independent, those media outlets which proved the most zealous in promoting violence in both countries were under close government control. And those who did not follow the nationalist and aggressive trends dictated by political parties of governments were those who suffered the most from repression. The pluralism of views necessary to defend the logic of dialogue against the logic of war was not tolerated.

MEDIA AS INSTRUMENT

That media played a role in both those wars is doubtless. But, as writes Mark Thompson about ex-Yugoslavia, there is a “great difference between saying on one hand that media made war happen, and on the other hand that they were indispensable in building and maintaining conditions in which war was possible”⁵. In Rwanda, the *Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (“one thousand hills free radio” - RTL), which has often been considered responsible for the genocide of the Tutsis, was “independent” in name only. Its ownership was officially private, but many of its shareholders had close ties with the President himself. Some shareholders also appeared to have been members of the militias who were to play a decisive role in the killing of at least 500'000 persons, mainly civilians in spring 1994. “Beyond generally inciting genocide against the Tutsis, RTL played a more direct role in assisting the killing”⁶, and it is dubious that the hate speech of its journalists would have been sufficient in itself for provoking a massacre at such a scale, which proved to have been a “highly organised event”⁷.

MEDIA AND CEASE-FIRE

In Tajikistan, the fact that both

sides of the civil war were negotiating “cessation of using all channels of information and media with the intention of undermining the process of national reconciliation” parallel to the “cessation of hostile activities”⁸ during the inter-Tajik peace talks indicates that the media playing a role in this conflict were not independent, but quite strictly controlled by the belligerents. In that case, freedom of speech cannot have been the cause of the war, but was rather a victim of the conflict, as illustrated by the absence of alternative views to those of the parties in conflict.

GIVE SPACE TO DIVERSITY

If media is not to provoke war alone, it is right to deduce that it is probably not able to make peace alone. However it has a role to play in launching and maintaining a discussion on issues of public interest, giving space to diverse voices. Hopefully, some governments in Central Asia might finally recognise this necessity, and allow a public forum to be created before the escalating tensions in the region reach a point of no return. The generally authoritarian tendencies of governments in the region, and the fact that they might be tempted to use the “fight against terrorism” to legitimise their repressive policies leave little hope for a significant improvement of the conditions of work of the media in the short term. “Much of the authoritarian structure of Karimov’s regime has been legitimised by the existence of serious security threats from Islamist groups, and much of the president’s continuing popularity depends on his role in suppressing alleged Islamic extremists”, note some observers⁹. If that is the case, the media poses no threat to

national security but on the contrary, will become an indispensable instrument for maintaining a state of emergency atmosphere in Uzbekistan.

¹ See "Jihad, The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia", Ahmed Rashid, Yale University Press, 2002.

² See "Tajikistan: Un Uncertain

Peace", International Crisis Group, Asia Report No 30, 24 December 2001.

³ See "The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implication of the Afghanistan Campaign", International Crisis Group Briefing Paper, 30 January 2002.

⁴ See article "Tajikistan: Izmenenia v zakonodatel'stve", in "Pressa v SNG: Konflikty i pravonarushenia", Fond zashity glastnosti, Moscow 2001.

⁵ See "Forging War, the Media In Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina",

Mark Thompson, Article 19, 1999.

⁶ See "Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, Propaganda & State-Sponsored Violence in Rwanda 1990-1994", Article 19, October 1996.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ See "Report on the Media Situation in Tajikistan", CIMERA, October 2000 (www.cimera.org).

⁹ International Crisis Group, op. cit report on "The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (...)".