Searching for social justice: The problem of women joining religious extremist organisations in Kyrgyzstan

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“Women compared to men are more fanatical and dedicated; they are entirely in the organisation, it is their specific feature."

Interview materials, Osh city

The problem of women joining religious extremist organisations is a little-studied issue in Central Asian Studies. This research report is based on a series of field studies conducted in the three Southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan in 2012-2013. Based on interviews with convicted women members of Hizb ut-Tahrir this research analyzes the main reasons for women's participation in such organisation. Findings show that women's participation in religious extremist organisations is based on a rational choice. This choice helps to solve the problems of personal safety, improve the social role in the community, and mitigate financial problems. Findings also show that internal factors in the field of human security, human capital and economic decline are crucial in the spread of religious extremist organisations in Kyrgyzstan.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyzstan, religious extremist organisations, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat

**Introduction**

Most experts consider the development of religious extremist organisations (REOs) in Central Asia through the same prism: export of destructive ideas to the region from the outside.² Thus, REOs are seen as imported and introduced to local communities. Such an approach omits internal factors which serve as the basis for the development of these movements in Central Asia and which, in our opinion, are the most significant in shaping the organisations’ social base. The problem of identifying the motivational attitudes of those engaged in REOs and the transformation of the discursive frameworks within the Central Asian context is

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important, too. This article is based on the results of field studies carried out in 2012-2013 in Kyrgyzstan. Those field studies aimed at exploring the motivational factors of religious women convicted of involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir and to explore the public discourse related to and the perception of those convicted women.

Research methodology

Research materials are based on data from a series of field studies conducted in Jalal-Abad, Batken and Osh regions. The following methods were used to collect information:

- Focus groups (sample: ministers of mosques (temples, churches), madrasah students, atyncha women, wives of imams, teachers of theological disciplines in universities, Muslim activists, employees of local self-governments, law enforcement representatives, employees of large markets, migrant workers, the unemployed, students, farmers, businessmen, housewives).
- Interviews with women-convicts who were sentenced under Art 297 Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (henceforth CC) “Public calls for violent change of the constitutional system” and / or Art 299 CC “Inciting national, racial, religious or interregional hatred”, as well as interviews with members of Mastura Jamaat.4
- Expert interviews.

All field research materials were collected on condition of anonymity. The study surveyed 260 respondents, of whom women accounted for 70 % and men for 30 %. The data obtained during field research were analyzed on the basis of the so-called situational discourse analysis model,5 in which the process of communicative interaction is presented as a flexible procedure. This model allows defining discourses as units of a communicative phenomenon. Thus, the specifics of language functioning among respondents are studied, taking into account social factors such as opinion or attitudes of the speaker and the hearer. The purpose of this analysis is to determine the causes, the social context as well as the motivational attitudes contributing to the fact that women become members of REO.

Analysis of the main problems of the religious sphere

The number of religious women in Kyrgyzstan has grown visibly in the early 1990s and was initially associated with the beginning of a general liberalisation of post-Soviet societies. The introduction of female religious attributes in the public sphere (primarily the hijab, less frequently the niqab) is perceived by various groups in different ways. However, there is a high dynamism in the perception of such attributes. If in the early 1990s, women in hijab were seen as something new or even exotic (especially in urban areas), it has now become commonplace to wear hijab in

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3 Atyncha - religious women who preach and teach the Quran for women at home.

4 Mastura Jamaat - mixed male and female groups of Tablighi Jamaat members. Most female participant are the wives (more rarely the mothers, daughters or sisters) of davaatchy men who accepted their mission to spread Islam in society.

schools, universities and other public institutions. Religiousness of women has thus become one of the main features of their identity. Socio-economic upheavals of the early 1990s and the major systemic crisis of public and state institutions have led to a certain level of strengthening traditional institutions, in which religious identity was flexibly built. In this context, the growth of female religiousness cannot be separated from the general background – the identity transformation of "Soviet people", coming from a society with an atheistic and / or secular world view.

As one of the most vulnerable groups, women carry the greatest burden under deteriorating socio-economic conditions, in particular the crisis of the family as an institution and changes in the role of women in society. This makes them an easily recruitable group for extremist organisations. It is also noteworthy that women committed the most resonant terrorist acts on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Almost all confessions and religious groups are engaged in targeted work to recruit women into religious organisations. Active involvement of women in destructive religious organisations is not uncommon, but it is a relatively new phenomenon for Kyrgyzstan. There is an alarming increase in the number of women having a police record for participation in REO. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, women represent 7.4 % of the total number of persons having a police record for Art 297 CC “Public calls for violent change of the constitutional system” and for Art 299 CC “Inciting national, racial, religious or interregional hatred”.

Research into this problem must be placed in the general context of problems in the religious sphere. Let us consider the most important issues:

1. Overlapping of interethnic conflict potential with the religious sphere. As shown by the Osh events in 2010, ethnic identity turned out to be more effectively mobilizing people than religious identity. For example, the argument that there is no distinction between nations in Islam turned out to have a very weak effect during the conflict. The consolidating potential of religion was not realized, and there was even individual participation of religious leaders in the conflict. For example, four imams of mosques in Osh were convicted and sentenced to 2 - 4 years of imprisonment for their role in the June events. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SBMK) after the events in the South ordered the removal from office of 11 imams in Osh. The SBMK also dismissed Shakirdin Mamatov, Kazi of Osh, for "attempts to organise actions that might cause ethnic discord and disruption of public order". Along with that, after the events there were speculations about hundreds of female suicide bombers undergoing military training in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Thus, in the discourse space there appeared the image of the Uzbek community as a group vulnerable to recruitment to REO. International experts paid attention to this problem. For example, the Vice-President of the International Crisis Group, Alain Délétroz, mentioned a terrorist attack committed by a suicide bomber in Pakistan who was an Uzbek affected by the June events in Kyrgyzstan: "He left a note in which he

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7 Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Order #67. Bishkek. 16 May 2012
explained: ‘I avenge what my family experienced in 2010’”. As a consequence, the overlapping of the ethnic conflict potential with the religious sphere can trigger growth in the number of supporters of radical religious views. Especially dangerous is the fact that people may use ethnicity as the basis for suspecting citizens of being supporters of REO.

(2) Proselytism (in this context - Muslims lured to converting to other religions). As a result of vigorous activity of missionaries, predominantly Protestant Christian, there are many cases of Muslims (mostly ethnic Kyrgyz) converting to Christianity and various sects. Such facts are negatively perceived by the local population. As a rule, the communities in which there are such converts, are taking actions on their expulsion or exclusion (reprimand and termination of contact with them). Proselytism is widely practiced by Baptists, Evangelicals and Jehovah’s Witnesses. They purposefully attract women into their ranks, as it speeds up the expansion of their supporters through the involvement of other family members.

(3) Destabilization of the work of the SMBK. This problem can be seen in conflicts around the organisation of the hajj and other chaotic and inconsistent activity, witnessing an increasing power struggle inside the SMBK. The main official Islamic organisation in the country is now discredited and its authority among believers is diminished. This problem also affects the ability of the SMBK to make consistent efforts to address the problems in the field of religious education and preventive measures against REO ideas in society.

(4) Weak religious education of Islamic figures (Kazi, Imams, Imam-Khatib etc.). This problem leads to the inability of the representatives of traditional Islam to effectively counteract the followers of REO. Religious leaders lack basic religious knowledge and therefore have problems in identifying differences between traditional and extremist religious views. This leads to the further problem that they have difficulties in equipping the population with adequate levels of religious knowledge.

(5) Unresolved problems in the field of religious education remain a major obstacle to creating a well-educated generation of ministers who can prevent the spread of ideas of REO. In Kyrgyzstan, in parallel with secular education, there are religious educational institutions, the curriculum of which is built in a haphazard manner (i.e. depending on the madrassah administration and not following certain educational standards); training activities are not

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registered and the status of madrassas is not legitimate (graduates do not receive state approved certificates).

The Tablighi Jamaat factor in Kyrgyzstan

An important difference between Kyrgyzstan and other countries in the Central Asian region is the relatively liberal legislation in Kyrgyzstan’s religious sphere. As a result, it is the only country in the region where the movement of Tablighi Jamaat is not banned. Tablighi Jamaat is the largest religious movement in the country. It has no formal membership. Its ranks comprise representatives of various segments of the population, mostly 20-40-year-old men. Women participate more actively in groups of Mastura Jamaat. The majority of the respondents in the focus groups expressed their concern about the magnitude of the spread of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Respondents indicated that they meet davaat in an average of 3 times per week. The emergence of davaatists (dressed in Pakistani clothes) is seen as a retreat from modernisation, and the very superficial knowledge of Islam, according to the respondents of the focus groups, serves as an opportunity for easy manipulation of members of the movement.

Tablighi Jamaat is the largest movement in contemporary Islam. It has headquarters in 120 countries and offices even in the countries where there are almost no Muslims (e.g. Japan). In scholarly discussions and among international experts there has not yet developed a single view on the role of Tablighi Jamaat and its impact on public security. On the one hand, the movement’s apolitical interpretation of Islam is seen in a positive light. The movement has an informal rule that its members should ignore politics and that they must not take part in the conflicts between various Muslim sects. Tablighi Jamaat appeals mostly to “passive Muslims”, i.e. those who do not comply with the requirements of Islam as the fulfillment of the five duties of Muslims, although they identify themselves as Muslims. On the other hand, experts point to the potential radicalisation of the movement, since the philosophy of Tablighi Jamaat is based on the Deobandi school. This school is characterized by

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10 According to various expert estimates, the number of members ranges from 20,000 to 500,000.
11 For more details about the women groups of Tablighi Jamaat see Metcalf, Islam and Women. The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat, Stanford Electronic Humanities Review. Vol. 5, Issue 1. February 27, 1996, available at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/metcalf.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/metcalf.html); Sultanalieva, Muslimmanok prinuzhdayut k davaatu [Female Muslims are forced to practice davaat], available at [http://ruazattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstanreligion/24584888.html](http://ruazattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstanreligion/24584888.html); Zhenshiny Kyrgyzstana zhalyuyutsya na davaat» [Women in Kyrgyzstan complain about davaat], Vechernyi Bishkek № 60 (10424), 25 April 2012.
12 Davaat - the call to Islam.
intolerance to any other form of religion; it sees any kind of progress as incompatible with Islam, and it is characterised by fanatical proselytism, based on the belief that Islam should supplant all other religions.\textsuperscript{14} Members of the movement in Kyrgyzstan behave peacefully and try to distance themselves from politics. Paradoxically, due to the apolitical interpretation of Islam, the movement produces a positive effect on the prevention of religious extremism, as it encourages performing the prayers in official mosques. However, the tension in the attitude to this movement is caused by the fear that due to its rapid growth its social base will become more consolidated than that of any other political party in the country. Since davaatists mostly represented the poor, the movement may well become a platform for political demands through the organisation of a political movement or support existing secular political parties.

The popularity of this movement in Kyrgyzstan is also associated with the poor religious education of Islamic religious figures and low awareness of society in religious matters. Noteworthy is that 98 \% of respondents of interview and focus-groups do not understand the differences between traditional and extremist trends in religion and are not aware of criminal liability for participating in REO.

“It is difficult to tell: if they are hiding the fact of their propaganda, perhaps, there is some prohibition?”

Materials of focus groups in the town of Kyzyl-Kiya, Batken region

Despite the growth in the number of religious women, our survey has shown that their access to religious education is rather narrow and is characterized by the following features:

- Home education provided by mentoring otyncha and self-organized women’s groups for the study of Islam - hujra.
- Special education received in madrassahs for women; however, there are not enough such institutions for the number of those wishing to be trained.
- Davaat, the call to Islam, carried out by wives of davaatists through preaching in the groups of Mastura Jamaat.

It is noteworthy that religious education for women in the official madrassahs is weakly developed. The study showed that in one of the studied regions there are 16 madrassahs, twelve for male and four for female believers. By comparison, the ratio of male to female in the population is almost 49 to 51 \%.

“Women are quickly involved, because they have little information about Islam, so they join various groups. Illiterate women are naive, one can convince them quickly. Poverty and hopelessness make them join those groups.”

Materials of a focus group in the village of Massy, Nookon district, Jalal-Abad region

Main reasons for women joining religious extremist organisations

Experts and analysts often do not take into account the causes and motivational attitudes found among members of REOs. It is commonly accepted that the basic reasons causing citizens to join these organisations are economic ones: financial support to members of the group. The channels of recruitment in this version can be both a close circle of friends and external actors. Interviews with female convicts have shown that the initiation of women into the activities of a REOs such as Hizb ut-Tahrir occurs usually by family ties: husbands, brothers, sisters, fathers or mothers involved in the activities of the organisation attract other female members of the family into its activities. Up until the last 2 to 3 years, women convicted under Arts 297 and 299 CC were close relatives of convicted men. Today, however, the picture begins to change. The studied organisations begin to form women's cells that define an active role for women: from followers to activists. Women in the studied organisations are gradually becoming independent figures: they are beginning to attract new members, creating women's wing organisations (in particular Hizb ut-Tahrir), distributing campaign materials and preaching. There is a change of motivational attitudes toward personal self-realisation. The involved women appear to be guided by ideological motives.

“I do not know what responsibility? The fact that I was imprisoned shows how the government treats believers.”

Interview materials, Osh city, Osh region

An analysis of the results of a survey among prisoners in this research shows that women’s ideological views are not so much characterised by fanatical adherence to the doctrine professed but by a rational choice. Although almost 90 % of respondents professed that their motive to participate in the organisation was to create “a just society” (in the sense of living by the rules of Islam, in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir), in reality the goal was to overcome everyday life problems: the problem of unemployment, payment of debts, lack of opportunities for self-fulfillment, housing problems, etc. It should be noted that the relatively high human capital of women plays a big role here. The study shows that the majority of women with a police record or convicted on the basis of Art 297 and/or Art 299 CC have secondary (vocational) education. The analysis of in-depth interview data on the principle of frequency references leads us to identify the following motivational factors affecting the women who join REOs:

Ensuring personal security
The problem of personal security is one of the leading motivational factors in the recruitment of women. High levels of violence in society and weak confidence (or the entire lack thereof) in law enforcement and justice agencies make members of the family the basic guarantors of personal safety for religious women.

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15 Human capital is the combination of knowledge and skills used to meet human needs.
16 More in detail, see: “Masshtab i kharakter gendernogo i semeinogo nasilia v Kyrgyzstane. Resultaty monitoringa Assotsiatsii kritosnykh tsentrov” [Scale and character of gender and family violence in Kyrgyzstan. Results of monitoring by the Association of crisis centers], Bishkek 2009, available at...
There is generally a high level of violence against women. For example, according to the review of the Kyrgyz Republic under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action "Beijing +20" made by the Ministry of Social Development of the Kyrgyz Republic, the proportion of women becoming victims of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan is almost at 90%. Compared with 2009, the number of reported cases of physical violence in 2013 increased by more than 30%.\footnote{In Kyrgyzstan, the proportion of women who have suffered from family violence is almost 90%, according to the Ministry for Social Development, see “Akipress” http://kg.akipress.org/news:596384.}

As noted, most women are recruited from the inner circle of those involved in REOs. Thus, their inclusion in such activities is considered as an extension of the personal security space due to their new identity as representatives of a community of the initiated (and therefore protected by the community). Of course, under the conditions of the post-2010 conflict situation, the problem of providing personal security is a basic need for all segments of the population. But for the less protected groups who are not involved in traditional structures (clans or patronage networks) or who have no economic resources, this problem is the main priority in the hierarchy of needs.

**Personal self-fulfillment**

The narrow range of opportunities for self-realisation of women in religious families may become another cause for joining REO activities. Religious organisations in this case are regarded as a social elevator capable of changing the status of women and making it meaningful. In this case, there is a change of self-assessment from marginal importance to the attainment of a social role. In this context, we should note the reduced spectrum of social institutions in rural areas. As a rule, they are limited to sports clubs and mosques. Paradoxically, in mosques, the participation of women is not welcome; however, we note that this specific feature in the studied regions differs from the situation throughout the country as a whole. During interviews with the administration of mosques, two main arguments for this situation were given: 1) the lack of room for women in the mosques, while recognizing their right to equal access to namaz along with men; 2) censure against the very possibility of women visiting mosques. In the latter case respondents cited the argument that namaz at home is the most acceptable way of prayer for women.

**Financial incentives**

97% of respondents indicated that unemployment and poverty among women was the main cause of their joining a REO. Poverty entails the restriction of access to basic social services (healthcare, education). Joining the religious movements is motivated by financial interest and other forms of indirect financial incentives (help paying debts, distributing food, assistance in payment of medical services, lottery, etc.).
“All life complexity, for example, sending a child to school requires money, hospital also requires money, and there is no job... all sources are good in this situation.”

Interview material, Yrys village, Jalal-Abad region

If you join the organisation, they will help you.”

Interview materials, Osh city

Regional background and scenarios of problem development

Based on interviews with experts, the following problem scenarios emerged. In general, the experts interviewed agreed that the involvement of women in REOs will depend on the extent of the threat of religious extremism in Central Asia and the effectiveness of counter-measures taken at the level of central government, local authorities and civil society. The level of consolidation of the society into a single national body is playing a crucial role. It is also crucial on the basis of which values this consolidation will take place (ethnic, civil, religious). According to experts, taking into account the current context, the problem of women’s involvement in REOs may evolve in the following scenarios in Kyrgyzstan:

1. The problem will expand due to its overlapping with interethnic conflict potential in the South of the country. The basic environment for recruitment may be women from the families affected by the conflict or experiencing pressure from law enforcement agencies in the post-conflict period. Thus, the more ethnic tensions will be exacerbated, the more the problem will grow. In connection with the various factions within the Islamic community, conflicts at the intra-confession level will be created. At the heart of these conflicts will be the commitment of Jamaats to different madhhabs, depending on the ethnicity of the believers.

2. The level of participation of women in REOs will decline against the background of the weakening position of Hizb ut-Tahrir. This will be possible due to the further development of a pluralistic political system and the releasing of radical ideas through it; the emergence of a political party associated with Islamic values is possible. Also, the realisation of this scenario can be speeded up by the spread of Tablighi Jamaat. Due to its apolitical interpretation of Islam and its large support at the grassroots level, Tablighi Jamaat can replace Hizb ut-Tahrir and can be transformed into a legal political force.

3. The problem can become a direct threat to public safety in case of sudden changes in public policy, namely in the sphere of religion. The need to strengthen laws or the introduction of repressive measures against religious organisations and movements, currently discussed in Parliament, can cause radicalisation of apolitical sects, and as a consequence, it may cause the growth of the social basis for REOs.

Significant changes (in the direction of tightening) of legislation, governing the religious sphere in neighbouring countries, can also affect the development of this

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18 Sample of respondents in this group included: law enforcement, analysts of the government and public Research Institutes, members of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, Human rights activists and Lawyers.
scenario. For example, in 2013, additions and amendments to the Law "On religious activities and religious associations" were made in Kazakhstan. Those amendments severely restricted the right to preaching activities of religious organisations. Thus, the initially taken course of a liberal understanding of freedom of religion was revised by the Kazakhstani establishment. Now the role and control of the government in the religious sphere has been strengthened. In Tajikistan, a country that is believed to have found a way to integrate political Islam into society, there are significant changes, too. In 2013, persons under 18 years were prohibited to perform prayers in mosques. Also, education in hujras was prohibited, and religious education was taken under state control. Along with this, on the eve of the presidential election (6 November 2013), the pressure on the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan was seen throughout the country. The situation in Uzbekistan has not changed significantly, and state control over religious matters remains high and is generally performed in the same direction that was set in the early 1990s.

Regulatory changes in the countries of the region conducted in 2013 are explained to be in the interests of national security, but apart from a purely national effect, these changes will have trans-regional impact, namely they will have an impact on the state of Kyrgyzstan's national security, since the current liberal legislation in the country opens up an opportunity for concentrating the various movements, including destructive ones.

Conclusion

Women's participation in REOs is closely related to transformations in the economic, social and cultural spheres of the society. In such cases, the external element becomes not as crucial as most experts in the field consider it. Certainly, it is impossible to deny the existing transfer of know-how used by members of REOs around the world. However, as the results of the field research presented in this paper have shown, the basis of the spread of destructive ideologies is the problem of growing social inequality, low levels of human (personal) security, the decline of social institutions, poor work of social mobility institutions, etc. For the majority of respondents, the strongest motivational factor is the idea of seeking social justice.

Analyzing the example of Kyrgyzstan, we must note that the dynamics of the religious sphere of Kyrgyzstan are very high. The problem of entry of women into REOs shows that women are sometimes more rational to make a choice in favour of such organizations to solve the problems with personal security, economic survival and social self-realization. The fact that women make such choices signals a serious system failure in ensuring law and order in society, upward mobility and development.

This study provides reflections for understanding the problem, but there were still such important questions as: parents’ membership in REO and how it can affect the children? Have the motivation settings of women prisoners been transformed after the prison term? Is there a relationship between political and religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan, in particular in light of the two violent changes of government experienced in 2005 and in 2010? Is there a correlation between social mobility of the population (internal and external migration) with the prevalence of REO? And many other issues that require more research for a better understanding of the problems.
It is important to note that state security sees the members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir as a menace to the state, and the expert community has identified REOs as a threat imported from the outside. It is very convenient to attribute the entry of women into REOs to external influences because such an approach solves many problems. First of all, it avoids the fact that local institutions require reforms. In line with this, conceptual approaches to the definition of security should be re-assessed. Today in Kyrgyzstan, as in many post-socialist countries, the debate is dominated by a state security approach. Hence, the protection of the state is seen as more important than the protection of citizens (human security).

But it is most important that shifting the “geography” of the problems to the external factor makes it impossible to produce adequate approaches for solving these issues. Today the problem of entry of women into REOs is fought only with prohibitive measures instead of solving the problem of increasing violence in social relations, empowering women, supporting the initiatives of religious women by opening women's Islamic centers, as well as by finding solutions to one of the fundamental problems of women’s religious education – women’s access to the Islamic educational infrastructure which so far is mainly focused on men. The study shows that for Kyrgyzstan REOs have a great potential of recruiting women. Women's participation in REOs is a response to the domestic and social problems, but there is still a cross-border effect, because, with the tightening of extremism legislation in surrounding countries, more groups will try to build on and take advantage of the domestic rise of REOs in Kyrgyzstan. These conditions can transform the source of development of REO in the future that may complicate the work for solving given problems.

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