

## **Islamic Party Fights its Corner**

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Once-powerful force is suing local bureaucrats who are trying to stop it fielding candidates in the forthcoming general election.

The Islamic Rebirth Party says the authorities in Tajikistan are deliberately obstructing it from fighting the parliamentary election scheduled for February 27.

The party – once a guerrilla force fighting the current government – is now one of only three in parliament and is hoping a new-look image will win it supporters outside its traditional constituency. But few observers believe it will displace the People’s Democratic Party of President Imomali Rahmonov.

On January 25 the party’s deputy leader Muhiddin Kabiri finally overcame obstacles to registration as a candidate in the Faizabad district, east of Dushanbe. His application had been turned down by local election officers, after he failed to submit a long list of documents they wanted to see – but which are not required under the election law.

The decision was reversed only after the national electoral body, the Central Election Commission, CIC, stepped in.

Kabiri is an influential figure who has tried to make the IRP into a modern party capable of attracting voters who might be put off by its name – it is the only parliamentary Islamic party in Central Asia.

Problems remain in other parts of the country. Senior IRP figures say their candidates are running into trouble elsewhere. On January 10, the regional IRP office in Soghd, northern Tajikistan, filled a lawsuit against the constituency electoral commission in Bobojon Gafurov district for failing to allocate a place to the party.

Involving opposition parties in election commissions is seen as a crucial to avoiding the kind of ballot-rigging that has been alleged in previous Tajik elections.

Local government in Tajikistan is responsible for setting up election commissions, but the CIC has said they should include at least one person from each political party.

“Of the 16 constituency electoral commissions in Soghd region, eight included one IRP member each, and [the rest] did not for a variety of reasons,” said Ubaidullo Faizullaev, the head of the IRP in northern Tajikistan.

In the south of Tajikistan, a traditional stronghold of President Rahmonov and his People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan [LINK: [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2\\_340\\_5\\_eng.txt](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_340_5_eng.txt)], PDPT, the IRP is faring worse than elsewhere. Many people are scared even to admit they are members of the Islamic party, as there are reports that police and intelligence services have built comprehensive files on them.

In the southern district of Vose, IRP has taken the local authorities to court. Once again, officials presented the party branch with a long list of demands which are not backed up by any legal provision. District

government chief Alamurod Tagaymurodov turned up, with police and court officials, at an IRP meeting to stop candidates being elected there.

As the IRP's branch head in Vose, Abdufattoh Abdurozikov, told IWPR, "The district administration is making out that our organisation doesn't exist and they've refused to accept documents from us.... They have set up a district electoral commission without an IRP representative, in contravention of the law."

Similar stories are coming out of the nearby Muminabad district, and the main regional town Kulyab.

## FORMER GUERRILLA GROUP TURNS TO POLITICS

Opposition parties are all reporting difficulties in getting candidates approved for the ballot lists all over Tajikistan, but the IRP seems to be facing exceptional hostility in the south.

This dates back to the start of the civil war in 1992 when fighting was particularly bitter in southern regions, and tens of thousands of civilians associated with the IRP were driven from their homes to a life as refugees in Afghanistan. The IRP was the main force in the United Tajik Opposition, UTO, a guerrilla force which spent the next five years battling the government.

However, with the 1997 peace deal that ended the conflict, the IRP was legalised, disarmed its guerrillas and was granted a mandatory quota of government posts. But in the parliamentary election of 2000, it won only two seats. That made it the smallest of three parties which made it into the legislature - the Communists came second to the PDPT.

Its failure to capitalise on its position at the end of the war was partly due to its Islamic profile, and also to its identification with specific parts of the country, particularly in the eastern mountains, as the civil war was fought along regional as well as ideological lines.

In the post-war period, relations between the IRP and the Rahmonov administration have not generally been overtly confrontational. But its position as a major opposition party has been eroded by what looks like a gradual but determined effort to marginalise all political opponents. Deputy IRP leader Shamsuddin Shamsuddinov was jailed in January 2004, on charges the party said were trumped up to deter other members.

## MODERNISERS WIN OVER MORE VOTERS

As well as bureaucratic obstacles, the IRP has been working to overcome suspicions of its Islamic tag and show that it is a modern political force with a broad economic and social agenda. The change has been led by reformers like Kabiri, in the face of more conservative attitudes of an old guard led by the party's leader, Islamic scholar and ex-guerrilla chief Sayed Abdullo Nuri.

Political scientist Tursun Kabirov says deputy leader Kabiri has done a lot to draw in new supporters, particularly from urban voters, and to win sympathy in the West, where groups with an explicitly Islamic agenda are not always popular.

The party's founding statement avoids any suggestion that Tajikistan should move towards becoming a theocratic state. Its election manifesto says Islam is "one of the original foundations of the national identity of the peoples of Tajikistan" - the plural being a nod to the country's non-Tajik groups, principally the

Uzbeks. And in remarks clearly aimed at the local Russian community and others, it talks of “peaceful coexistence between people of different confessions, based on mutual tolerance”.

According to Viktor Dubitsky, Tajikistan analyst with the Moscow Centre for Geopolitical Expertise, the IRP represents “a new form of political Islam”, with the capacity to mobilise the protest vote among an overwhelmingly Muslim population disaffected with the country’s impoverished state.

Creative campaigning, including setting up the only political party website in Tajikistan ([www.irptj.com](http://www.irptj.com)), has won over some voters who would previously never have considered the IRP an option.

One such convert is Akram Rustamov, who works at a research institute in Dushanbe, who says he’ll be voting IRP although he is not a member. “Civilisation has got into a dead end by madly pursuing material wealth, ignoring spirituality and morality,” he said. He accused other political parties of “offering us capitalism, in the worst, most distorted form”.

Not everyone is convinced. Some Tajiks are disillusioned with the political process generally, and are particularly disappointed that the IRP has – in their eyes – made so many compromises with the powers that be.

Kiyamiddin, now 40, was a guerrilla with the UTO for several years, but after the civil war ended he was forced by poverty to continue his nomadic existence, now as a migrant worker travelling to Russia.

“I don’t believe in politicians any more,” he told IWPR. “They used us, and once they got into power they dumped us. None of them thinks about me or my kids. They remember us only in time of war or elections.”

#### PARTY SEEKS A MODEST INCREASE IN SEATS

But it’s the new supporters like Rustamov who are part of the reason why IRP leaders are predicting success in the general election, though no one is suggesting that they could oust the ruling PDPT. They are counting on upping their present two seats to five or six in the 63-member lower house, a result which would allow them to form a parliamentary group.

At the moment the party has 15 official candidates competing for the 22 parliamentary seats earmarked for political parties, and 23 more running as independents (the remaining 41 seats in the lower house are set aside for non-party candidates).

“We are already the main competition to the ruling party,” Kabiri told IWPR, “The forthcoming election will be a contest between these two parties. The main thing is that there aren’t serious [procedural] violations.”

The IRP is a member of an opposition bloc – the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections [LINK: [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2\\_342\\_3\\_eng.txt](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_342_3_eng.txt)] – set up last year to counter election fraud. It has also trained 9,000 election supporters to act as observers by running them through mock elections.

Dubitsky does not share Kabiri’s confidence that the IRP is in a position to take on the PDPT head to head, “After the [peace] treaty was signed in 1997, the IRP did not get many new supporters. On the contrary, the party lost its radical members who’d taken part in the civil war.

“The IRP won’t win any more seats than it had in the last parliament. The only thing that might happen is that it gets a small increase in seats due to reverses suffered by other parties.”

Madisso Sadulluev, assistant professor at Kulyab university, believes it is an illusion to believe the election will be fair, “I’m sure that this time, too, there won’t be an election per se, just voting for the PDPT.”

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