



Interview with Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in-exile

Interview by Parvina Khamidova

*“I do not regret that we have chosen the path of
tolerance and restraint”*

Can you comment on the scandal that happened at the International Conference in Iran?¹ Do you think the inviting party was trying to facilitate a dialogue between you and the official representatives of the clergy of Tajikistan, or did they simply underestimate the situation?

I myself do not understand all this hysteria about my participation in this conference. Why wasn't this note addressed to Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland or the United States, where I took part in similar events? More so, as I was involved in the work of the annual conference on a regular basis, I saw that the organizers did not expect things to turn out that way, and they did not fully understand what happened. Most likely, some people [in the government of Tajikistan] were looking to cause a scandal for several reasons. Firstly, given the strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it was necessary to attract the attention of the Saudis as a potential ally before the president's trip to Riyadh and try to get some money out of them. Second, the authorities wanted to hide

¹ The Tajik Foreign Ministry, angered by Kabiri's participation at a conference held in Tehran in December 2015, has sent a note to the Iranian Embassy.

Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) lives in exile since March 2015. In August, the IRP has been closed down by the authorities, and classified as a terrorist organization. All of the members of the party's Political Council have been detained, and Kabiri was accused in organizing an armed rebellion attempt.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author only and do not represent the Central Asia Program.

away from public attention some issues of the Tajik-Iranian relations, in particular, the hundreds of millions of dollars that Iranian billionaire Zanjani left in Dushanbe, which the authorities of Tajikistan do not wish to talk about. Also, they probably were trying to divert the attention of Iran, one of the guarantors of the country's Peace Agreement,² from the clear violation, by the Tajik authorities, of the latter. By the way, in my speech at the conference and in separate meetings, I criticized Iran and other guarantors of the Peace Agreement for failure to perform their obligations before the Tajik people.

It was very recently that the IRP, as the de facto second largest party in the country, convened its congresses and was professionally engaged in politics, recruiting young people and successfully competing with the official authorities. Today, the party is ruined and outlawed. What do you think, where was a mistake, of the party as a whole and yours as its leader?

If we got into a difficult situation, then at some point it was due to a mistake. In the very beginning of the campaign, when the government started to break the Peace Agreement and gradually began oppressing not only us, but the entire opposition, pushing us to the sidelines of the country's social and political life, many experts, including those who are close to the corridors of power, had been telling us that the policy of tolerance and moderation will eventually turn against us. Later, with increasing pressure on the Party, similar assumptions have been expressed even by some of our supporters, who demanded a tougher response from us. They argued that we have been acting as if we were living in a society where the government has a high political culture and acts strictly in accordance with the laws and generally accepted moral and political norms. We were criticized for ignoring the fact that the current government has come to power by force and recognizes only force, in its most brutal form.

And it was by force that opposition once prompted the authorities to sit at the negotiating table. Apparently, the authorities did not forget this and all this time were thinking of revenge. Knowing about our preference to dialogue and tolerance, and abusing it amid general apathy of society towards hard and massive protests, the government has acted deceitfully. With full control both over the legislative and executive branches, the authorities could not tolerate a few members of the opposition, both in the government and parliament. This is telling that peace and coexistence with the opponents were forced upon them, and as soon as the authorities got the opportunity to get rid of the imposed peace, they did so.

We cannot say that we were so naive that we did not see this and did not understand what the government's actions led to. But we had hoped that rationality would eventually prevail, and our opponents in power at some stage, realizing the danger of these actions, would stop. Here, apparently, we were wrong. But then there is another question: what would have happened if we had acted in the same way as the authorities? A new civil war? Devastation and new casualties? Even after what has been done to the Peace Agreement and to us, I do not regret that we have chosen the path of tolerance and restraint. I am sure tomorrow our people will recognize that we made the right choice.

When the pressure on the party began, did you make any attempt to soften the blow, to fight it by legal means?

The Party as a whole, and I as its leader have done everything we could. A list of all our actions in this direction would take a lot of time and space, as too much has been done. After the

² A document signed on June 27, 1997 that put an end to the civil war in Tajikistan.

Minutes 32-20 appeared,³ I wrote two letters to the president, first as a deputy of the parliament and a second time at the request of the IRP political council, as the leader of the party. I requested a meeting with him. I believe that the topic I wanted to discuss at the meeting was already known to the other side, as I conveyed my thoughts to other high-ranked officials. Probably, there could be no legitimate and logical answer to them and such meetings would not fit into a plan. Then, the IRP political council invited GKNB (state security committee), Interior Ministry and Prosecutor's Office, Committee for Youth, Women's Affairs and the Committee on Religious Affairs to engage in joint projects, establish trusted relations and eliminate all contradictions. Unfortunately, all our attempts have failed. During private and mostly casual meetings and conversations, some officials have expressed their regret that our constructivism does not find support and understanding at the top.

Why do you think that nothing has worked?

Because the decision was made at the highest level to close down the party at all costs. Of course, our opponents would like it to happen without too much noise, and would even have wanted us to self-liquidate to avoid the charges in violating the peace agreement and avoid having any black spots in history. When they began to take away the party and personal property, we were given a hint that there was a chance to change the situation. Some officials advised us to announce self-liquidation. In exchange, we were promised not only that we would be able to keep our properties, but also additional benefits, including job positions. All our arguments about national interests and law, and ultimately such notions as honor and dignity, were met with the cold response that this is all made up for the public, but a real government policy does not recognize these terms. Some of them, more well-read would refer to Machiavelli, who allowed all methods in politics, including blackmail, bribery, cruelty, and even murder.

What can you say in response to the serious allegations put forward by the government, and generally to the fact that the Islamic Renaissance Party has been classified as a terrorist organization?

Unfortunately, in today's world there is no common approach and a common interpretation of the concept of "terrorism," and at times the situation becomes absurd. Any opponent could be considered as a terrorist, especially if the opponent is also a Muslim and wears some Islamic clothes. Recently, at a conference, I suggested that it is necessary at the level of the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly to adopt a document defining the concept. So far, with its absence, many, including dictatorial regimes, make use of the situation to delegitimize their opponents as terrorists. In fact, terrorism implies violent actions that are aimed at spreading fear. Now the question arises, who does it in Tajikistan? Is it the IRP, which was claimed to be and is still accused of being excessively tolerant and loyal, or the officials who take hostages, even the elderly and children, and force them to testify against their relatives? In other words, we believe these charges are pointless, and it is good that the international community does not take them seriously.

Do you take any effort to help your followers and colleagues who have been imprisoned? According to international experts, there are about 200 people who have been detained, or do you have any other information?

The problem is that there are no certain numbers of detainees. We estimated there are more than 150 people. Some relatives do not report the arrests, thinking that this will complicate the situation even more. They hope that they can somehow resolve the situation informally. By un-

³ Published in the media in 2012, the minutes of the meeting of the government №32-20 of November 24, 2011, discussed the detailed stages of how to discredit the IRP. The authorities denied the existence of such a document.

confirmed data, more than 200 people were detained and some have already faced charges. Of course, we do everything possible to help them. But, as the experience of Zayd Saidov⁴ shows, as well as that of other political prisoners in Tajikistan, political and legal support does not help the fate of the people, leaving only moral and material means of support. But we still do provide all kinds of assistance.

What kind of action do you expect from international organizations on the situation surrounding the IRP? Do you intend to apply there, if you have not done so already, or what are the results if you have already applied?

As you know, in the summer we applied to the UN and other international organizations, as well as to guarantors of the Peace Agreement. There was a reaction from the EU, but the strongest response came from international human rights organizations, even though we did not apply to them. Amnesty International, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and others condemned the actions of the authorities.

Why do you think that international organizations and guarantors of the Peace Agreement have been silent?

We are also surprised by the inaction of the UN and the guarantors. We understand that everyone is busy resolving the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Yemen, but that does not mean that you can forget about old duties. In recent years, there has been a lot of criticism towards the UN and other international organizations that they only intervene after the crisis begins and cannot or do not want to prevent them. Though there are dozens of programs and centers for preventive diplomacy with multimillion-dollar budgets...

In December, you were planning to come to Washington to participate in a roundtable on the human rights situation in Tajikistan, but could not get a visa. Can you tell us more about this? When did you learn that you would not be able to get a visa? What was the official reason for the refusal?

Firstly, I was not denied a visa. Because I applied to the US consulate in a country in which I am not a permanent resident, and just a few days before the conference, I was told that the e-mail invitation for the interview from the consulate came just one day before the date of entry into the United States. At that time, I was outside of Germany, and was not able to, even though I wished to, get a visa in one day and arrive for the conference. Therefore, I had to participate online. Yet I am aware of other versions of why I did not go to the United States, or how I "was not let in the US."

On December 15, it became known that your family members were detained in Tajikistan and then released. You have linked this episode with the fact that the authorities became aware of your intention to participate in the roundtable on human rights in Washington. Do you still think so, or do you link it with the overall context of efforts to force you come back to Tajikistan?

Actually, it is connected with the conference and several other meetings that are organized by our supporters, among whom were members of our family. It's not for nothing that my father and other relatives of the detainees have asked us not to meet with foreigners, organize pickets near the embassy, or speak at various events abroad. We have not been in contact with our families for a long time, for reasons of safety, and they could not know with whom and where

⁴ Former Minister of Industry, and a member of opposition who made an attempt to create a Party of economic development and was later convicted for a period of 26 years in prison.

we meet and what we do. Moreover, these are old people who do not follow politics. They said what they have been instructed to say and did so on camera.

How do you feel after numerous episodes related to the detention, interrogation and tremendous pressure on your family back home? How do you cope with all this?

We try to remain calm and not give in to emotions, even though it is very difficult sometimes. The other day, my 95-year-old father was detained a second time and was removed from his flight to Istanbul, where he wanted to go for medical treatment and visit grandchildren. I cannot find words to convey all this. I received some messages that were sent by people who remained at home (our supporters and relatives). These letters are written in simple language, with mistakes, sometimes unintelligible. But they convey everything they thought and felt at the time. This should be read ... And saved for history ... These are not the notes from the siege of Leningrad, or the concentration camps of Auschwitz, but these are notes from the citizens of a legal and democratic state of the 21st century, the relatives of "enemies of the people." We and our party members are deeply inspired by the courage and perseverance of our friends under arrest.

What are you going to do next?

We have already held the first meeting of the IRP Political Council abroad and have set goals for the near future. We will keep our peaceful tactics, although it is becoming more difficult to control people's emotions. No wonder, why more and more young protesting people join radical and terrorist organizations. But we are doing everything to prevent the radicalization of our supporters.