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Speaker: Professor Kathleen Collins, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota

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“The Emergence and Mobilization of Islamism in the Former Soviet Union:
Tajikistan in Comparative Perspective”

Part of the Constitutional Developments in Central Asia Series

Professor Collins begins her discussion of the political Islamist movement in Tajikistan by noting that the rise of Islamism in the country took people by surprise. Many Western scholars expected that 70 years of Soviet rule would have destroyed institutional Islam and established entrenched support for secularism. Furthermore, Muslims in the USSR were cut off from the global Islamist movement. Despite these conditions, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) became the country’s principal opposition movement up until its ban last year.

Collins describes political Islam in general, rooting her explanation in two ideas. First, she outlines the relationship between the state and social organizations, concluding that state repression increases Islamic political consciousness, which can then lead to mass Islamic political mobilization as political space opens. Second, she points to the importance of religious identity itself and the “political theology” – the application of religion to politics – it gives rise to, arguing that strongly held religious beliefs motivate religious activists and political action in a country like Tajikistan where such actions come at high personal risk. She identifies three variables that affect mass mobilization of Islamic parties: the legitimacy that comes from figures of sacred authority, the strength of Islamic social networks, and the success in applying broad Islamic ideas to local political conditions.

Collins then addresses political Islam in Tajikistan specifically, beginning with the repressions of the Soviet era. After the 1917 revolution, practicing Muslims were excluded from the Communist Party as the state dismantled religious institutions. The “thaw” under Khrushchev liberalized politics but also came with a crackdown on Sufi Islam, the main type of Islamic practice in Tajikistan. However, this period also saw the creation of new connections with the Middle East, a proliferation of Islamic study circles, and the rise of a new generation of activist mullahs. The Islamic Revolution in Iran provided a real-world example of political Islam, while the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan raised Islamic consciousness and galvanized Islamist entrepreneurs opposed to Soviet rule.

Under Gorbachev, political space opened further. As democratic political ideals swept Eastern Europe, political Islam came to prominence in Central Asia. The IRPT was founded in 1990 to contest national and republic-level elections. Its ideology was a fusion of Islamism and Tajik nationalism. It endorsed a multi-party, parliamentary system, although some in the Party supported the establishment of an Islamic state. Party leaders publicly stated that they would work towards an Islamic state only “if the people want it” over the longer term, rather than as an immediate goal.

After the Tajik Civil War, the IRPT began taking part in elections starting in 1999. This period saw the de jure legalization of the IRPT and the removal of legal restrictions on religion, but in reality government harassment, arrests, mosque closures, and other repression continued. The IRPT adapted to the local situation by moderating some of its early Salafist ideas, abandoning discussion of an

Islamic state, and seeking to merge political Islam with parliamentary democracy. It thus became a broad Muslim democratic opposition party. However, the opening of political space and greater international openness fostered the growth of other Islamist groups in Tajikistan, including both radical and militant organizations, from Hizb ut-Tahrir to Jamaat Ansarullah.

Under the leadership of Muhiddin Kabiri, in charge since 2006, the IRPT took a Western oriented course that was at times out of step with its base. For example, a majority of the party's base supported Islamic education, Islamic marriage/polygyny, freedom to wear the hijab or Islamic beard, national Islam, a role for Islam in the state's law. Kabiri, supported some of those ideas, claiming that the IRPT has an "Islamic ideology;" however, he characterized his views as "Euro-Islam," and came out in support of a free, democratic, and secular state. This period saw the IRPT's network grow through the addition of repressed Muslims, women, and excluded regions, though it lost hard liners. Partly as a result, Islamic radical and militant movements grew in response to the IRPT's moderate course.

In 2015 the state began a total crackdown on political Islam, completely changing the circumstances for the IRPT. The party was banned, and its leadership repressed or forced into exile. While this move has dealt a clear setback to the IRPT, Collins argues that it is unclear what the future holds for political Islam in Tajikistan. Just as the repression of the Soviet period had unintended consequences that strengthened political Islam in the long run, banning the IRPT may not be so straightforward. Collins concludes that this episode of repression could threaten the democratic nature of political Islam in Tajikistan. Repressing the moderate IRPT and eliminating a democratic outlet for political Islam could serve to strengthen the growing radical and militant movements in Tajikistan.