CHAPTER 3

WE THE PEOPLE—HERE AND NOW

Heads of state, even secular states, attempt to support their policies with religious theses. Religious themes are used for secular ends even in states where the Muslim population is a majority. In this respect Uzbekistan is no exception—in the first years after independence, Islamic discourse filled the mass media, and was present in the speeches and public announcements of most public figures, from the head of state downwards. The government of Uzbekistan proposed as an element of national ideology the idea that traditionalism was inseparable from Islamic norms.

A consequence of consolidating the institute of mahalla was a strengthening in the role religion played in people's lives, and the growth in the number of believers resulted in an increase in the unofficial Islamic education network. Religious schools for boys and girls have become common, as well as religious groups set up to teach adult women the basics of Islam. Literature, audio- and videocassettes, and television programmes about Islam are widely disseminated. The balance between the secular and the traditional has shifted markedly in favour of the latter, and the prospects for the development of the secular part of society have faded with the economic crisis and the failure of development. In the period 1992-95, non-governmental organizations had to struggle hard to prove their right to exist. Governmental quangos were similar to official government organs—neither of them showed any understanding of independence and democratic procedure.

The government attempted to fill the ideological vacuum with made-up slogans, but these did not attract or control society. The promotion of the new slogans took place through various Soviet-
style events such as conferences and mass meetings. At the same time, contact with the other states of the former USSR was limited. Any material published in Moscow was almost inaccessible to the common reader. Islamic propaganda was much easier to get hold of, and it is this very availability of propaganda material which strengthened the possibilities for an Islamic revival in Uzbekistan. The government itself has hardened the theocratic mood of society. Islamic traditions have been a setback to the cause of modernization, and have—when raised to the status of national values—contributed to the erosion of Western influence.

In place of capitalistic development, Islamists propose Islamization as the best way of resolving all social and economic problems. The government attempts to win the ulama onto its side and make the official clergy serve the state, albeit in a less restrictive way than in Soviet times. In connection with this, the number of religious educational establishments has increased and an Islamic university has been established. The government views the support of Islam as necessary because of the religious identity of most Uzbek citizens. There are however some issues on which the state stands at odds with the dogmas of religion.

How to Gain Rights

As history shows us, the growth of the feminist movement in postcolonial societies in Asia is connected with the building of a modern secular state. The idea of creating a modern state in post-Soviet Uzbekistan and its neighbours, a state in which liberal values prevail, implies the rejection of former political systems and a transformation of all institutions and traditions. An open society would stimulate movements related to the protection of human rights. One such movement is the feminist movement.

Women are particularly interested in the feminist movement as a reaction to the strengthening of traditions which took place in Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, traditionalism became dominant once again, and the government understood that religion and tradition could be factors that would support national integration. However, the fact was not taken into account that Uzbekistan, like many other Central Asian states, is not only multi-ethnic but also multi-confessional, and that under such