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Tajikistan: The Mirage of Stability

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With the beginning of the United States' "war on terrorism," the former Soviet republics of Central Asia suddenly became the focus of unprecedented US attention. Of particular importance was Tajikistan, a country that shares a long border with Afghanistan.

Tajikistan, for its part, was a willing partner; siding with the US campaign opened up new access to foreign aid, and was strategically useful as well.

Tajikistan has long been Russia's closest ally in Central Asia, but relations between Dushanbe and Moscow have cooled considerably in recent years. This may have made a potential alliance with Washington all the more desirable.

Tajikistan clearly has the potential to play a major role in the new Central Asia. It serves as a major conduit for foreign aid to Afghanistan. Additionally, Tajikistan has emerged from a seemingly intractable civil war with a peace accord of which many Tajiks are justifiably proud. On the surface, Tajikistan seems to offer a model of conflict resolution and reconciliation. However, beneath this veneer of stability lurks a host of problems that could seriously threaten the future stability of Tajikistan in particular and the region as a whole.

In the spring of 1992, following nearly two years of increasing political instability, Tajikistan erupted into civil war. The Dushanbe government of former communists had agreed to a power-sharing deal with the country's four main opposition groups; (1) however, the leaders of the northern province of Leninobod (from which most of the country's communist leadership originated) and their allies in the impoverished southern

province of Kulob had refused to recognize this government. By early fall, the upper hand on the field of battle belonged to the so-called Popular Front of Tajikistan (PFT), a loose coalition of mostly Kulobi and ethnic Uzbek militias. Late in November, the country's Supreme Council met in Khujand, the capital of Leninobod Province (Dushanbe was deemed too dangerous), and chose Emomali Rahmonov, a former state farm director and the current head of Kulob Province, (2) as chairman. Opposition forces in Dushanbe refused to accept the results of the Khujand session; in mid-December the PFT, reportedly with Uzbek and Russian assistance, stormed the capital.

Following the capture of Dushanbe by the Popular Front, opposition forces withdrew eastwards into the foothills of the Pamir Mountains and south across the Tajik-Afghan border. The next five years saw sporadic guerilla fighting along the Tajik-Afghan border (the patrolling of which was entrusted to Russia's 201st Motorized Rifle Division, or MRD) and in the mountains of central Tajikistan, particularly in the strategic region of Tavildara, which straddles the only road linking Dushanbe with the huge (but sparsely populated) Mountain Badakhshon Autonomous Province (MBAP). Many Popular Front commanders quickly fell to fighting amongst themselves — in one particularly illustrative example, the Front's two main field commanders, Sangak Safarov and Fayzali Saidov, apparently killed one another in a shootout in March 1993. Elsewhere in the republic, local warlords looted and killed with impunity, and Dushanbe itself was the scene of countless assassinations, bombings, hostage-takings and shootouts.

Years of internationally sponsored negotiations eventually led to a peace treaty signed in Moscow in 1997 between Rahmonov (since 1994, president of Tajikistan), and Said Abdullo Nuri, a longtime religious activist and the head of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Over the five years of fighting, tens of thousands had perished, while hundreds of thousands had become either internally displaced persons or refugees. The deal called for a blanket amnesty for former combatants, the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of refugees, the integration of UTO fighters and field commanders into the fledgling Tajik army, and a 30-percent share in government for members of the former opposition.

The official end of the civil war did not spell an end to Tajikistan's troubles, however. First, a number of field commanders on both sides refused to accept the accords. One example was Colonel Mahmud Khudoyberdiev, a former commander in the 201st MRD whose defection to the Popular Front did much to turn the tide of battle in the Front's favor in 1992. Khudoyberdiev mutinied against Dushanbe a number of times, and was finally driven out of Tajikistan in 1997, fleeing across the border into Uzbekistan. In 1998, he resurfaced, crossing into Khujand from Uzbekistan with armored vehicles and hundreds of fighters. After heavy fighting between Khudoyberdiev's forces and the combined forces of Dushanbe and the UTO, the colonel again withdrew to Uzbekistan; he is rumored to be there to this day.

Some opposition field commanders likewise refused to recognize the accords and continued to wage war, often resorting to assassination and abduction, particularly in the Rasht (formerly known as Qarotegin) Valley to the east of Dushanbe, a former opposition stronghold. Large-scale "mopping up" operations against these groups continued even after the Moscow accords were signed. In January 2002, Tajikistan's interior ministry announced that 80 "guerilla groups" had been "eliminated" in 2001, with 50 suspected militants killed and 200 arrested. (3)

The largest such operation was conducted in the summer of 2001 in the Lenin and Kofarnihon regions east of Dushanbe. Dubbed "Operation Lightning," this venture was directed against the former UTO commanders Rahmon Sanginov and Muaqqal Mansurov. Sanginov and Mansurov were eventually killed in the operation, which involved the use of artillery and attack helicopters, and resulted in civilian casualties. (4) On 25 February of this year, a military tribunal in Dushanbe sentenced nine members of Sanginov and Muaqqalov's bands captured during the operation to death by firing squad; 72 of the remaining accused received sentences ranging from 18 months to 25 years, while one was released on the grounds of poor health. (5)

Other former opposition field commanders seem to have sought new allies; Jum'a Namangani, an Uzbek militant and military head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,

(6) reportedly joined forces with al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001; he is said to have been killed during the US's Afghan campaign in the fall of that year. Another former Islamist commander, known as Mullo Abdullo, was almost captured during a military operation against his band in 2000, although he apparently managed to flee to Afghanistan and allegedly joined the IMU and the Taliban. He was reported to have been captured in the northern Afghan city of Taluqan in February 2002. (7) Operations against the remnants of Mullo Abdullo's group have continued until quite recently; in late November 2002, an alleged former associate of Mullo Abdullo was killed by Tajik security forces in the hills outside Kofarnihon, 13 miles east of Dushanbe. (8)

Recalcitrant opposition commanders are not the only ones to have felt the heavy hand of Dushanbe. Over the years, the Rahmonov regime has been increasingly successful in distancing itself from former PFT commanders. Immediately following the capture of Dushanbe, much of Tajikistan was controlled by warlords who were only nominally allied to the central government, and whose ultimate allegiance was to their own interests. For some years, ex-PFT warlords ruled virtual fiefdoms throughout the country (including the capital), often engaging in murder, kidnapping, drugs and arms trafficking, and other crimes with impunity. Since then, the tide has turned. During the years of the civil war itself, a number of prominent field commanders were killed fighting among themselves or in uprisings against the Dushanbe government. (9) Since the peace, others have been assassinated, such as Safarali Kenjaev, one of the main instigators of the civil war and reportedly the founder of the PFT, who was killed by unknown gunmen in 1999. Others have been quietly isolated and rotated from positions in the republic's command structures to less influential positions. A number have been arrested and imprisoned on various charges. (10) Of all the PFT's principal field commanders, only a few remain in positions of real power, and even their futures are rumored to be uncertain.

Clearly, the end of warlordism in Tajikistan is to be welcomed, as is the neutralization of all armed groups, both ex-opposition and "pro-government," engaged in criminal activities. Yet there are real risks involved as well. Dushanbe's heavy-handedness (both

in the legal system (11) and on the battlefield) against former friends and foes alike can run the risk of sparking further opposition.

A second cause for concern lies with the possible motives of the Rahmonov regime. It seems that many of Rahmonov's actions are aimed more than anything at strengthening his own power base. Rahmonov's party, the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), is the dominant party in Tajikistan's parliament, and members of Tajikistan's officially registered opposition parties (12) have accused the PDPT of using unfair means to expand its influence at all levels of regional government as well.

Of all the parties, it is perhaps the IRPT that has been most vocal in its protests; the IRPT also publishes the only real opposition newspaper in Tajikistan, Najot ("Salvation"). In October 2002, Najot published an open letter by Tajikistan's five registered opposition parties to Rahmonov, protesting that their representatives were not being invited to cultural events in Tajikistan's Khatlon province; this privilege was apparently only being extended to members of the PDPT. (13) The following month, Said Abdullo Nuri (head of the IRPT since 1999) met with Vladimir Sotirov, the head of the United Nations Office of Peace-Building in Tajikistan, and outlined some of his concerns regarding the future stability of the country. Nuri complained of the sidelining of the IRPT in the recent by-elections in Kulob; reportedly, only the PDPT and the CPT had been allowed to field candidates. (14)

Also of great concern is the reported harassment of opposition politicians by Tajik law-enforcement officials. On 10 January 2003, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, a leading figure of the DPT and a former opposition field commander, was twice detained by the police after the arrest of two of his bodyguards; it took the intervention of Rahmonov himself to win Iskandarov's release. (15)

Rahmonov may also be using the US "war on terrorism" to justify increasingly authoritarian measures, particularly against Islamist opposition. In the summer of 2002, it was revealed that among the detainees at the US "Camp X-Ray" at Guantánamo,

Cuba, were three young Tajik men from the northern city of Isfara, a city with a reputation for religious activism — and a center of IRPT support. (16) While Nuri has denied that the young men were in any way affiliated with the IRPT, (17) Rahmonov seized the opportunity, and before long a full-scale propaganda campaign against the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Tajikistan was underway. In November, Isfara's prosecutor announced that 63 clergymen (including 9 members of the IRPT) were facing charges of violating Tajikistan's laws on political parties and religious organizations. (18)

To be fair, Rahmonov does not have to go far to taint public opinion concerning the opposition. In Tajikistan today, the very word "opposition" is fraught with connotations of bloodshed and strife. Some of the opposition parties (in particular the DPT) have been wracked by internal bickering. And the IRPT may have lost much of its support by compromising with the Rahmonov regime in order to achieve peace in 1997. Yet this should not necessarily be a source of comfort to the government. As a recent International Crisis Group report points out, disillusionment with the IRPT among Tajikistan's devout Muslims may lead to increased support for much more radical groups, such as the increasingly influential Hizb ut-Tahrir party. (19)

Rahmonov has repeatedly stated his desire to create a truly democratic society based on the rule of law, and has protested against excessively flattering media coverage of his person on more than one occasion. Yet there is clearly a massive propaganda campaign underfoot in Tajikistan to present Rahmonov as the sole architect and guarantor of Tajikistan's peace. Clearly, Rahmonov's contributions to bringing a considerable degree of stability to Tajikistan must be acknowledged. Yet it is questionable to what extent his increasingly authoritarian policies can guarantee the current situation's longevity.

Recently, Rahmonov's government has suggested amending the constitution, dropping its limitation on presidential terms. (20) In a system where the president already rules by virtual decree, this would eliminate almost all checks on Rahmonov's power. The

proposal has been roundly denounced by Tajikistan's opposition, both within the country and without. (21)

Rahmonov's moves to strengthen his power come at a perilous time. Interregional tensions in Tajikistan, which may have existed to some extent prior to the civil war, have been greatly exacerbated in its aftermath. In the eastern region of Badakhshon, the civil war is remembered by many as a genocide, (22) and trust in the permanence of Tajikistan's peace is low. In Leninobod, resentment against the newfound power of the Kulobis is still strong, and has led to confrontations on more than one occasion, including an attempted assassination of Rahmonov in 1997. And Kulob itself, which supplied the bulk of the forces that put Rahmonov into power in the first place, remains mired in desperate poverty while a select few from the region enjoy tremendous wealth and power.

Throughout the country, corruption, cronyism and nepotism are rife at all levels of government, as well as in the education system. Rampant unemployment causes hundreds of thousands of Tajiks to travel to Russia every year for seasonal employment, mostly in such areas as construction. While Tajik migrant labor provides a valuable source of revenue and may serve as a useful "safety valve" to prevent unrest in the country, Russia has often threatened to crack down on migration, (23) which could have disastrous economic and social consequences for Tajikistan. Desperation has caused many to become involved in Tajikistan's rapidly growing drug trade. (24)

Rahmonov's government has adopted as its chief ideology the concept of "national unity" (vahdati milli), which seems to rest heavily on the promotion of certain cultural and historical symbols as a way of reminding (or perhaps persuading) Tajiks that they share a common national identity. Time, of course, will tell how effective this approach is, yet there are reasons to be concerned. When the Tajik civil war broke out, the worst violence occurred between Tajiks — that is, individuals who might very well have been cognizant of a shared culture, territory and language; these elements, however,

obviously were of far less importance than (real or assumed) political and ideological allegiances.

If the goal of national unity is real, it seems that the government of Tajikistan might reach it better through such measures as strengthening civil society, fostering economic growth and transparency in government, combatting corruption, and, most crucially, instituting a government that is responsive to the needs of its citizens, regardless of their regional or ethnic origin.

1 These were: the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the Tajik nationalist movement "Rastokhez," and the "La'li Badakhshon" movement, which represented the intelligentsia of Tajikistan's Mountainous Badakhshon Autonomous Province (MBAP).

2 Rahmonov's tenure as head of Kulob had not been a long one; his predecessor, Jahonkhon Rizoiev, had been murdered the preceding month by Sangak Safarov, head of the PFT and a career criminal. It is widely believed that Rahmonov's election was due largely to Safarov's insistence.

3 "Over 50 armed guerillas killed and 200 seized in Tajikistan last year," Agence France-Presse, 7 January 2002; via Lexis-Nexis.

4 Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: No Peace For Anniversary Of Peace Accord," RFE/RL Weekday Magazine, 26 June 2001.

5 "Tajikistan court sentences nine Islamists to death," Agence France-Presse, 25 February 2003; via Lexis-Nexis.

6 The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has staged armed incursions onto the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on two occasions, apparently operating from base camps in Tajikistan's Rasht Valley. Rumors of IMU camps in Rasht persist to this

day, although the Tajik government has steadfastly denied this. (See Michael Hall, "Central Asia Takes Center Stage," *Perspective*, Vol. 12, No. 2, November-December 2001.)

7 "Tajik former opposition rebel commander arrested in Afghanistan," *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 12 February 2002; via Lexis-Nexis.

8 "Tajik police kill gang member," *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 28 November 2002.

9 For example, in 1997, the former PFT commander Ibodullo Boymatov, whose forces had been instrumental in the storming of Dushanbe, and who had for a time been mayor of the important city of Tursunzoda (site of a highly lucrative aluminum-smelting plant), was killed during one of Khudoyberdiev's many uprisings; Boymatov had sided with the renegade colonel.

10 An example are the Cholov brothers of Kulob, themselves the sons of a former PFT commander, who are widely rumored to have been heavily involved in drug trafficking and murder in Kulob. At least three Cholovs have been imprisoned.

11 The government has been particularly zealous in pursuing legal action (often seeking the death penalty) in the case of former opposition commanders, a state of affairs which seems to come perilously close to violating the amnesty declared in 1997.

12 These are: the IRPT, the DPT, the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), the Socialist Party of Tajikistan (SPT), and the Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT).

13 "Murojiatnoma," *Najot*, 25 October 2002, p. 1.

14 H. Sayfullohzoda, "Namoyandai Dabiri kullii SMM dar huzuri rahbati HNIT," *Najot*, 15 November 2002, p. 1.

15 "Tajik opposition leader twice detained, released," RFE/RL Newsline, 13 January 2003.

16 "Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace," International Crisis Group (ICG) Asia Report, 30, 24 December 2001, p. 9.

17 "Tajik detainees in Guantanamo not Islamic party members — leader," BBC Monitoring International Reports, 1 August 2002.

18 Emom Ghoibov, "Isfara: khudsarii mulloho — zurovari ba zanon," Tojikiston, 14 November 2002, pp. 1, 6.

19 ICG Asia Report, 30, 24 December 2001, p. 9. Hizb ut-Tahrir, or "The Party of Freedom," is an international movement calling for the overthrow of the governments of all existing Islamic states and the establishment of a unified worldwide Islamic state, or caliphate. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been especially active in the Farghona Valley, a region shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. See "Central Asia: Islamist Mobilization and Regional Security," ICG Asia Report 14, 1 March 2001.

20 According to the current constitution, last amended in 1999, the president can only be elected for one seven-year term; Rahmonov's term would expire in 2006.

21 See Khokim Mukhabbatov, "U Tadzhiqistana khotiat otniat' budushchee," Tajikistan Times; via <www.tajikistantimes.ru>.

22 Many members of the Badakhshoni intelligentsia supported the opposition prior to the civil war. When the PFT overran Dushanbe in December 1992, it carried out a systematic purge of the city, searching homes and apartments, taking individuals off public transportation and even planes on the tarmac of Dushanbe's airports. Those whose documents, accents or physical appearances indicated that they were of Badakhshoni origin were subject to summary execution.

23 Two groups of Tajik migrant workers were deported from Russia following the massive hostage-taking by Chechen militants in October 2002.

24 Tajikistan sits astride a major route for the smuggling of Afghan heroin. A reported 33 metric tons of narcotics, including ten tons of heroin, reportedly have been confiscated in Tajikistan in the last four years. (See BBC Monitoring International Reports, 23 January 2003; via Lexis-Nexis.) This probably reflects a fraction of the amount of drugs that has been successfully smuggled through the country. Traffickers include individuals from all levels of society, from pensioners to government officials.

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