

# Accord

Politics of compromise  
**The Tajikistan peace process**

**Issue Editors: Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes**

**Conciliation Resources**

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*Cover: Navruz and Days of Moscow celebration, Dushanbe, March 1998*

Source: Gennady Ratushenko

*Poster of politburo member, Summer 1992*

Source: Gennady Ratushenko

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**Site of 1989 conflict between Tajik  
and Kyrgyz for water and land,  
Isfara Leninabad**

Source: Gennady Ratushenko

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# The Tajik civil war

## Causes and dynamics

**Shirin Akiner and  
Catherine Barnes**

*This article draws on Akiner's paper "Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?" Published by The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, Spring 2001.*

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In the early 1990s, as the forces that once held together the Soviet Union began to dissolve, political competition and conflict began to escalate in Tajikistan, the far south-eastern republic of the USSR. Shortly after independence was declared in September 1991, the struggle for state power played out more or less peacefully, albeit with frequent public demonstrations in the capital, Dushanbe. Nine presidential candidates contested the first multi-party elections, which were won by a former leader of the Communist Party. Yet a popular consensus on the legitimacy of his presidency remained elusive. Tension between supporters of the government and the opposition parties intensified to the point where different factions took up weapons. Less than a year after independence, Tajikistan was engulfed in civil war.

Between 20,000 and 60,000 people were killed in the first year of fighting when the war was at its peak, with most commentators judging that about 50,000 lives were lost between May and December 1992. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 600,000 people – about one-tenth of the population – were internally displaced and at least 80,000 sought refuge outside the country, mostly in Afghanistan. The brutality of fighting in rural areas in the south shocked Tajikistanis and foreign observers. Many unarmed civilians were murdered, apparently in an effort to force them to flee their homes. A peace process, led by the UN and with considerable participation from foreign countries, resulted in a political and military settlement centred on a power-sharing formula codified in the June 1997 General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan. Since the treaty was signed there have been periodic skirmishes between government forces and renegade militia groups and continuing attempts (occasionally successful) to assassinate political opponents. Nevertheless, it appears that the danger of a return to civil war is now receding and that a new political order has been established.



As in many armed conflicts, the interests and actors that joined forces to fight the war were complex and changed over time. The main warring factions were composed of political groups allied with people capable of mobilizing armed militias, often through regional affiliations. In the early 1990s, the old political elite – many of whom were from the northern Leninabad region – joined in a new alliance with people from the Kulob region in the south. Kulobis were generally under-represented in positions of state power in the Soviet period but now had the capacity to muster armed groups to reinforce the government. The balance of power in this ‘government alliance’ shifted to the Kulobis as the war continued. By the end of the decade the Leninabadi old guard had been marginalized from government and the Kulobi faction retained power under President Emomali Rakhmonov.

Opposed to the government forces was a coalition of new opposition parties and their armed supporters. Most of these parties identified themselves by ideology, (e.g., promoting ‘democracy’ or ‘Islamic values’ or a revitalized ‘Tajik nation’) but drew their support from a particular region. The largest of these parties was the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), with its stronghold in the south-west amongst families relocated from the mountainous Qarateghin region who had been forcibly relocated to

the cotton fields of the Vakhsh valley in the Soviet period. The IRP aligned itself with the new Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), the Rastokhez popular movement composed mainly of Dushanbe-based intellectuals with a Tajik nationalist agenda, and La’li-Badakhshan, a party whose members were primarily Pamiri people advocating greater autonomy for the mountainous Badakhshan region in eastern Tajikistan. As the war progressed, some of these groups united in the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) to further their military effort and to participate in peace negotiations.

The warring parties had a strong regional base. Unlike the contenders in the wars that have tormented the Balkans and the Caucasus in the 1990s, however, they did not engage in a secessionist war to establish their own independent territories – although some in the Badakhshan region may have been motivated by the ambition for greater autonomy. Nor was the war primarily ‘driven’ by deep-rooted animosities between regional or ethnic groups. Instead the conflict in Tajikistan had the classic dynamics of a civil war in which different interest groups mobilized to contest control of the state and its resources, as well as the principles upon which the newly independent country would be based: secular or Islamic, ‘democratic’ or authoritarian. Given the limited channels for political expression allowed during the Soviet era,

Tajikistan on the cusp of independence lacked well-developed mechanisms to manage political conflict and competition. This meant that there were few internal counterbalances capable of arresting the escalation to war. Yet to understand something of the causes and dynamics of the conflict, it is important to look briefly at the country's human and physical geography and its history, as well as its position in the larger geopolitical dynamics of the region in the early and mid-1990s. (See Chronology for a narrative of the unfolding war and peace processes.)

## Land, people and history

Tajikistan is a landlocked mountainous country situated to the north of Afghanistan, to the north-west of China, to the south of the Kyrgyz Republic and to the east of Uzbekistan. At 143,100 square kilometres, it is similar in size to Tunisia or Greece. High mountains, arid plateaux, and glaciers cover more than 90 per cent of the country. With a predominantly agrarian population, Tajikistan has some of the most densely populated arable land in the world. Few passes cross the mountains and many are closed by snow for several months each year. This has always made travel between different regions difficult and even modern transport networks suffer disruption, creating a significant obstacle to communication as well as social and economic integration.

Tajikistan has four main natural zones. The largest and highest is the Badakhshan region in the east, consisting of the Pamir mountains and plateau, with an average height of 4,000m and individual peaks higher than 7,000m. Badakhshan borders China and Afghanistan but its main valleys have created traditional routes linking it to central Tajikistan in the west and Afghanistan in the south, fostering social exchange between the communities of these regions. The second natural zone is located in the centre of the country and stretches from Badakhshan to the Uzbek border in the west. It is dominated by three mountain ranges – the Turkestan, Zarafshan, and Hissar – each running along an east-west axis at altitudes ranging from 2,000m to 3,000m. In the centre-east of this zone is the Qarateghin valley, where the Gharm and Tavildara areas are located. In the centre-west is the Hissar valley where Dushanbe is located and whose communities are closely linked with the south and with Uzbekistan to the west. The third zone, in the south-west, corresponds to the Khatlon province. It is located between the Hissar range and the Amu Darya/Panj river. It borders Afghanistan in the south-east and Uzbekistan in the west. A north-south mountain chain divides this zone into the Qurghonteppa region to the west – with its Kofarnihon and Vakhsh river valleys – and the Kulob region to the east. The fourth zone is in the north of the country, in the Zarafshan and Syr Darya river valleys, forming what used to be the Leninabad province, which was renamed Sogd in summer 2000. (To avoid confusion, it will be referred to

as Leninabad throughout this publication.) The northern area lies mostly in the fertile and densely populated Ferghana valley, which extends into the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. Its main city is Khujand. This zone was historically part of the ancient 'silk road' trading routes and supported an urban culture linked with other regions and peoples, which enabled a unique fusion of Iranian and Turkic cultures.

The physical geography of Tajikistan supported the development of many culturally distinct groups, most of whom are a part of the Iranian cultural world and are predominantly Sunni Muslims. One distinction has been between the peoples of the plains in the north, who in ancient times were a part of the rich urban-based culture of Transoxiana, and the people of the mountains in the centre, east and south-west, who were comparatively isolated and developed strong localized identities. There was relatively little interaction between the peoples of these regions until the Soviet era. The communities of the north-western plains had extensive contact with the Tajik centres of Bukhara and Samarqand, as well as with their Uzbek neighbours. The Tajik peoples of the mountains have, in modern times, distinguished between Kulobi, Qarateghini, and Hissari people. In the Badakhshan region there are eight distinct peoples belonging to the Eastern Iranian language family who are collectively referred to as Pamiris and are typically part of the Shi'a Imami Ismaili branch of Islam. They have ties with other Pamiris across the borders in Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. Approximately 25 per cent of the population in Tajikistan belong to ethnic Uzbek communities, many with their own distinct local identities, who form the largest bloc of non-Iranian peoples. There are also long-established communities of Arabs, mostly in the south; of Jews, mostly in urban areas; of Kyrgyz, mostly in the north; and – since the Soviet period – of Russians and other Slavic people as well as Armenians, Germans and Tatars, many of whom left during the upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is also an extremely marginalized community of Central Asian, Tajik-speaking Roma (Gypsies), called the Luli or Jugi with roots in India.

The origins of the Tajik political nation are often traced back to the Samanid Empire (875-999 AD), which at its height stretched from the plains of southern Kazakhstan to the Hindu Kush and from the Pamirs to northern Iran. The Samanids were the last Iranian dynasty to rule Central Asia and were overthrown by the Turkic Karakhanids. After this period, local rulers established small but semi-independent principalities in the mountainous regions that had little contact with the larger states on the plains. By the early nineteenth century there were two main regional powers on the plains: the Emirate of Bukhara in the west and the Khanate of Kokand in the Ferghana valley. Both were absorbed into the Russian Empire towards the end of the century, although the Bukharan Emirate – which had authority over the central and

southern zones of Tajikistan – retained nominal autonomy until it was fully integrated into the USSR in the 1920s. It is notable that there is no history of protracted conflict between the peoples of these different regions and no pre-Soviet tradition of inter-communal animosity.

## Legacies of Russian and Soviet control

The early years of Russian dominance widened the differences between life on the plains and that in the mountains. The northern province was the most changed by Russian expansion. The new rulers promoted light industries, began to exploit mineral resources and built a rail link to the Caspian Sea, thus initiating modernization complete with expanded educational opportunities and the politicization of society. In the mountainous zones, however, little changed and people continued to live much as their ancestors had done for centuries. It was in this region that Basmachi fighters, aspiring to restore the Bukharan Emirate, contested the advancing Soviet power in Central Asia until the late 1920s. In an attempt to eliminate resistance, the Red Army massacred more than 10,000 Tajiks and Uzbeks between 1922 and 1926, according to official estimates. About a quarter of the population, mostly from the south, fled to Afghanistan. This was the first of successive waves of mass migration across the southern border in the following decades, as people sought to escape violent purges, forcible resettlement and collectivization, and religious persecution. These events had a lasting effect that contributed to the conflict dynamics which emerged during the civil war in the 1990s.

The Soviet period shaped many of the social, economic, and political features of contemporary Tajikistan. The boundaries of the country were controversially demarcated. Territories that were historically Tajik were initially placed within the new Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), whose leaders were soon accused of trying to ‘uzbekify’ Tajik society. Protest led to the formation of a Tajik SSR in 1929, with Dushanbe as its capital. It included the Leninabad province, but over half a million Tajiks and the Tajik centres of Bukhara and Samarqand remained in Uzbekistan – a source of grievance for many Tajik nationalists. Within the new Tajik SSR, national political, cultural, and educational institutions were established in an effort to consolidate the new nation. A standardized modern literary language developed, based on the Bukharan and northern group of Tajik dialects and emphasizing differences with standard Persian. The Cyrillic script was used to further integrate Tajik into the Soviet space and distance it from Iran and other parts of the Muslim world. Intensive efforts were made to develop transport links between different regions within Tajikistan and with neighbouring Soviet republics. All these developments helped to integrate the people of the different regions into modern Tajikistan, a

shared political and cultural entity that would become an independent state in 1991.

Yet social divisions remained and were deepened by policies to address labour shortages and, later, by the slow economic and social disintegration of the USSR. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing intermittently until the late 1960s, the Soviet authorities forcibly transferred people from the central and eastern zones of Tajikistan to provide labour for new industries and, especially, for intensive agricultural projects. These migrations meant that every part of Tajikistan experienced some degree of population movement during the Soviet period. This opened up inter-regional exchange and integration but generated conflict by stimulating inter-group competition and sharpening perceptions of social difference.

Until the 1970s, economic growth provided virtually full employment. Growing prosperity and greater social security characterized much of the Soviet period. In the early 1980s, a push to construct hydroelectric plants and other industries was accomplished with labour recruited from other republics and resulting in a sharp increase in unemployment and poverty amongst Tajikistanis. Young people were especially marginalized and some were drawn into criminal networks. Corruption intensified in the 1980s. It was expressed in nepotism, theft and bribery – and in the emergence of ‘mafias’ that controlled large-scale illegal economic activities, frequently appropriating state resources with the covert participation of officials. Some senior officials directly orchestrated mafia activities. Corruption on this scale undermined the legitimacy and control of government and created a set of *de facto* fiefdoms held by powerful shadowy figures who existed outside the law and were not held to account by any public authority. The civil war seems to have intensified these dynamics. Mafias were strengthened through the formation of militias and benefited from the erosion of legal controls and the exponential growth of the traffic in narcotics from Afghanistan. Furthermore, economic recession deepened with the dissolution of the USSR when access to credit and to customary markets in other republics was reduced.

## Political revival

Social discontent increased in the 1980s and took shape in the development of underground political movements and in occasionally violent inter-group conflict over the allocation of state resources. Independent, secular socio-political movements developed, fuelled by and in turn stimulating the emergence of genuine political debate. By the late 1980s some movements had taken a xenophobic and nationalistic character and slogans such as ‘Tajikistan for the Tajiks’ were used in street demonstrations. These developments contributed to an





exodus of ethnic Slavs, Germans and Jews, many of whom had professional skills and whose departure undermined the Tajik industrial, educational and health sectors. Yet ethno-nationalist appeals failed to mobilize the majority of the population. In 1990, Shodmon Yusuf founded the DPT. Together with other opposition parties, it organized a successful public demonstration in August 1991 that led to the resignation of the Tajik Communist Party leadership, which had supported the abortive coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The DPT had several thousand members in the early 1990s but was weakened by the war and remained the junior partner of the IRP in the UTO.

Apparently more durable, however, was a movement advocating a form of Islamic political ideology oriented towards restoring 'Islamic values' in the country. This movement seems to have originated in the 1970s out of an underground network for Islamic worship that shunned the state-controlled Islamic structures. Its heartland was in the Qurghonteppa region where communities resettled from Qarateghin lived. This underground movement began to develop a political agenda that took root among marginalized urban youth, as well as in some of the traditional village-based community networks. Despite their differences, by the early 1990s an alliance was formed between the leaders of the distinct Islamic factions who made up the IRP: the new 'radicals' (led by Said Abdullo Nuri), and what was at

the time Tajikistan's official religious 'establishment' (led by Khoji Akbar Turajonzoda). The majority of Tajikistanis consider themselves to be Muslims and regard Islam as an important part of their heritage. Yet it seems that most did not support the creation of an Islamic state and it appears that even local religious leaders were divided over whether the IRP offered the only way forward. Nevertheless, the contest between secularist and Islamicist visions for the state became and remains an important ideological conflict.

## Geopolitical dynamics

With Tajikistan's location at a crossroads between different political and cultural worlds, it is not surprising that a range of foreign actors have played significant roles in the dynamics of war and peace. Most notable were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian republics, particularly Uzbekistan. (See the Profiles section for more detail on their roles.) The warring Tajik factions largely depended on support from foreign sponsors, yet this support was never sufficient to give either side absolute superiority. Initially, the pro-government faction benefited from the efforts of Russia and other Central Asian countries to restore stability and retain the (non-Islamicist) *status quo* by deploying Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) 'peacekeeping' troops to guard the Tajik-Afghan border. The UTO forces benefited from the support of northern Afghan leaders and field



commanders and were able to base themselves across the border in Afghanistan. They may also have received support from militant Islamicist interests based in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Iran was also an important player, although its government played primarily a mediating role – perhaps because it acknowledged that a Shi'a Muslim revolution on the Iranian model was impossible in Sunni-dominated Tajikistan. Iran also shared with Russia a common strategic objective of minimising the potential for the USA and Turkey to increase their influence in the region and this strengthened their motivation to encourage a peace process.

The rapid rise of the radical Islamicist and ethnic Pushtun-based Taliban movement in Afghanistan in 1995-96 dramatically changed the regional geopolitical context. Fears that the Taliban might threaten Tajikistan encouraged foreign governments to pressure their Tajik allies to negotiate a settlement to the war. They subsequently provided practical support to the peace process. Similar fears provoked the Tajik factions into a pragmatic awareness that continued warfare could threaten the future independence of the country they aspired to control; a power-sharing compromise to govern a unified country was preferable by far to losing the country entirely. The UN was able to harness this convergence of interests to build a momentum for peace that culminated in the 1997 General Agreement.

### Future challenges

With the presidential and parliamentary elections of late 1999 and early 2000, the initial transitional period envisioned in the General Agreement was completed and most international monitoring bodies concluded their work. Tajikistan now faces the twin tasks of managing the problems of transition faced by all the post-Soviet countries as well as post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction.

In addition to the incalculable human costs of war, Tajikistan's already weak economy and infrastructure were devastated. Always the poorest of the former Soviet republics, social development and economic indicators have plummeted from the beginning of the 1990s. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by more than half between 1992 and 1996 and although it began to rise slowly after the General Agreement was signed, GDP per capita in 1998 was only US\$215. Tajikistan had the lowest rating of all the USSR successor states on the 1999 UN Development Programme (UNDP) human development index. Although it is difficult to state precisely the size of the underground economy, it seems that illegal trafficking in Tajikistan's main exports – aluminium, cotton, gold and above all, narcotics – is the most dynamic sector. The strengthened criminal networks increasingly hold power that draws politicians,

bureaucrats, and militia leaders into patron-client linkages that permeate society and blur the boundaries between politics and crime.

The social costs of economic collapse have combined with the devastation of war to create great hardship for most people. Displacement and the massive destruction of property left a legacy of housing shortages and property disputes. Rapid population growth, from 5.2 million in 1990 to an estimated 6.5 million in 2000, has increased demographic pressures on land and other resources. The age structure of the population is weighted toward the young, with consequences for youth unemployment – almost 60 per cent of people aged 16-29 were unemployed in 1997. Interrupted education has contributed to a de-skilling of the workforce. Females have been especially hard hit. The war stimulated increased violence against women. This has been accompanied by a contraction in girls' access to education because of the hidden costs of schooling and increased discrimination in the workplace enabled by a labour surplus – all at a time when the war left many women as the sole providers for their families. Narcotics addiction has escalated and combines with impoverishment to create a growing problem with prostitution and HIV/AIDs. Both the government and the expanding civil society network are trying to address these problems but resources are extremely limited and likely to be insufficient to address the scale of need. These social and economic stresses have a potential political cost, particularly if forces wishing to promote their cause outside constitutional politics can exploit them.

One significant outcome of the war and the peace process was to transform the political landscape of the country – particularly with regard to the balance of power between regionally-based elites. The major change has been the increase in Kulobi control over state bodies and commercial enterprises throughout the country, despite President Rakhmonov's efforts in the late 1990s to make the regional representation in the government and bureaucracy more balanced. This contrasts with the decline in influence of Leninabad, once the wealthiest province. A sense of exclusion may fuel devolutionary – and possibly even secessionist – demands by some regional leaders. Residual inter-regional tensions combine with the latent potential for Islamicist insurgency to hold out the potential for future conflict. (For example, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fighters based in the Qarateghin region may have links to militant Islamicist forces in Tajikistan.) Nevertheless, the trauma of the 1990s has generated an underlying consensus on one issue: hardly anyone wants to return to full-scale war and most people yearn for peaceful development. This consensus alone may be sufficient to preserve a degree of stability for years to come.