



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Tajikistan

Success in Political Transitions: Stability versus State-Society Consolidation

Topic of Research:
Sustainable Peace in Tajikistan

Policy Relevance of Research:

Efficacious targeting for intervention efforts to support peace building necessitates a consistent theoretical base supported by comparative analysis. According to the UN Tajikistan Office of Peacebuilding (UNTOP), Tajikistan is the most successful of five UN peacebuilding efforts, so the reasons for that success deserve investigation.

Approach and Methodology:

Research consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. I arranged for accreditation as a journalist with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Participants were given a list of ten purported reasons for sustained peace in Tajikistan and asked, "Why did conditions of peace improve in the five years after the peace agreement of June 27, 1997?" They were encouraged to express their disagreement with suggested explanations and to propose alternative ideas. I elicited personal experiences and evaluations from those with specific expertise. Forty-two people

participated, including seven members of the informal “Dartmouth Conference Sustained Dialogue” program, government officials, newspaper editors, academics, NGO leaders and leaders of minority groups and political parties.

Preliminary Conclusions:

The most commonly repeated description claims that “Tajiks are peaceful people.” This represents an entirely new theme in the popular consciousness, compared to two years before. This idea, promoted with considerable effort by the government, displaces responsibility for the civil war to unnamed “outside forces,” and supports psychological healing from the trauma of that conflict. Even though Tajiks still commonly express themselves in a volatile and emotional manner, self-restraint governs the expression of grievances or protest. Some informants say that people tolerate injustice because the civil war taught them to fear conflict while others note that people fear the warlords who have become regional governors. Belief in the “Tajiks are peaceful people” motif reinforces the current political passivity of the people.

The second theme emphasizes the significance of labor migrants and their remittances. Many informants claimed that one million Tajiks—out of a total population of 6.2 million—are working in Russia. This represents a very significant phenomenon, even though according to the International Organization for Migration, the most accurate number is 600,000 Tajiks working in other countries of the former Soviet Union. Tajiks interpret the poverty that drives this phenomenon, and the large numbers of workers killed or injured abroad, to say that the government of Tajikistan fails its duty to protect Tajiks. People fear that “If relations with Russia deteriorate and these people all come home, there will be a revolution.” The rising levels of grievance and declining support for the state fuel the growth of the underground Islamist movement “Hizb-ut-Tahrir.” The large numbers of young men away from their homeland deprives the opposition parties of their social base of mobilization. These two factors are forcing the Party of Islamic Revival, the informal ulema (Islamic leaders) and officially registered mullahs into closer cooperation. The absence of potential opposition supporters, while the economy benefits from workers’ remittances, reinforces the short-term, stabilizing, political consequences of labor migration.

A third and less prominent issue is the blatantly fraudulent referendum on constitutional changes held this last spring. Some informants believed that the government would become more tolerant as a result of the additional personal security the president gained from the extension of his eligibility to remain in office. A large fraction of participants described the president as gaining “authority through magnanimity.” This means they accept the present government in exchange for their relatively greater freedom of discussion and complaint, compared to other Central Asian states. A major new development is the appearance of two newspapers that carry some criticism of the government. In contrast to the expensive, modern facilities of the US subsidized “Asia-Plus,” which does not criticize the state, the Ruz-I Nov (New Day) newspaper with critical articles represents one man with only one computer and five employees working in Spartan conditions. Reaction to the most recent typhoid epidemic illustrates rising grievances against the state. Because the government refused to allow public warnings while many foreigners were present in the capital for the Asian Games, and vaccines and medicines could not be found in the pharmacies, the public blames

the government for these illnesses. Public awareness of the high level of state expenditure on many international events and on many huge, recently constructed, expensive presidential palaces, while the water remains untreated, fuel a sense of resigned disgust.

Several sources complained of new pressures from the state against independent social leaders. Leaders of public associations (NGOs) have gained significant popular support and represent the most viable candidates for parliament. The state has directed prosecutors to mount investigations and to challenge the legal status of NGOs as a means toward preventing their leaders from becoming parliamentary candidates. A new government policy of "Mahallization" will bring the leaders of traditional community social groups onto the payroll and into the greater control of the state. For example, these people could be assigned to collect signatures for parliamentary candidates approved by the president and to prevent other candidates from collecting signatures. This imitates the authoritarian methods of control in Uzbekistan.

In summary, according to statistical accounts of ten-percent economic growth, greater activity of civic associations and the decline of assassinations and crime, Tajikistan presents an image of growing stability. Opposition parties and movements recognize that people are politically passive and their social base of support has left to work abroad. This awareness of insufficient resources to present any challenge to state policies supports a prediction of stability, at least over the short-term. While people have been given the freedom to struggle to survive, no factor current constrains the long term growth of corruption and authoritarianism, which creates higher levels of grievance. The large number of international organizations working to provide the social services that the state cannot or will not supply do apply some pressure for the promotion of tolerance, openness and pluralism. In recognition of this support given to the public by international humanitarian agencies, Tajiks commonly say, "If the international community leaves tomorrow, within one year we will have another Saddam Hussein."

Future Research:

I am collaborating with a Tajik sociologist to study the effects of Soviet forced population movements on the regional distribution of the educated class.

Recommendations for US Policy:

American support for Uzbekistan, which violates human rights and acts as a regional power, discredits efforts to promote human rights. The failure to protest against the blatantly fraudulent referendum held in the spring of 2003, and even pressure against those who did protest, also weakens US credibility. Subsidizing only one politically complicit newspaper prevents diversity in the media and does not aid the promotion of pluralism and openness. Despite the short-term prediction of stability, support for the president as a "strong-man" leader, and the humanitarian aid and development efforts to alleviate popular grievances, do not suffice for long-term stability in the absence of support for human rights, the development of independent social movements and a free media. Indigenous intellectuals in Tajikistan have promoted a culture of peace. Direct aid from a single state to individuals would make them vulnerable to the "foreign agent" accusation, and in Tajikistan, even international

organizations have become corrupted and penetrated by regime agents. However, these deleterious consequences can be alleviated and human freedom defended through transparency in awarding grants from international organizations to multiple recipients.

Independent social movements have set the highest priority on demanding free and fair parliamentary elections. For the sake of stability in Central Asia it is essential that the US extend greater aid to this effort, to opposing state efforts to intimidate potential parliamentary candidates and protest against state policies that repress independent social movements and organizations. United States' policy must defend freedom equally with stability as goals for political transitions.