



Elite Fragmentation and National Identity: The Tajik Civil War in Historical and Social Perspective.

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Abstract:

The last years of collapsing USSR saw increased unrest in terms of social and political in Tajikistan's local populace. There were violent confrontations that authorities were unable to contain like 9 April in Georgia, ethnic rift in Fergana valley, Osh riots, Black January and February riots. There were many actors involved in conflict and had many dynamics that led to the conflict in 1992. Riots erupted because of inability to tackle the transfer of power taking local populace in confidence. The other factors from non-state actors to criminal gangs contributed to anarchy and disorder in the society, probably by a tacit consent by some political elite. The civil war has huge impact on the country's reputation and casualties caused had deep impact on the politics of time in the Tajikistan society and the locals suffered on many fronts.

Key Words: Civil war, Tajiks, Political elite, fragmentation and riots, political reconciliation, forced migration.

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The origin of bloody saga:

The exodus of Armenians from Baku in early 1990's and rumors of refugees to be provided shelter in Dushanbe spread quickly and conspiracy theories emerged in already adequate housing facility in Dushanbe. The authorities failed to communicate the public at large. (Epkenhans, 2016).

The atmosphere in Dushanbe was tense (Sunday, 11 February) and public could anticipate something terrible is going to happen. The KGB operatives were on high alert and some 2000-300 persons gathered at crossing at Lenin/Putovsky street in central Dushanbe and asked for information about Armenian refugees crisis. (Derluguian, 1993).

Next morning (12 February) the number of protestors increased and demanded accountability from Mahkamov regarding Armenian refugees. With tensions heightened Mahkamov addressed the crowd but there were no speakers and protestors shouted and security personnel escorted him back to building, finally forces opened fire on protestors and killed 6 and injured seventy. (Beigi, 2018). The political demonstrations became hostage of criminal gangs and some Armenians were attacked vis a vis some houses burned down to tarnish the image of Mahkamov. The spread of anarchy in Dushanbe and authorities were caught off guard and emergency provisions were imposed in Dushanbe. (Epkenhans, 2016). Fighting and looting was norm throughout the Dushanbe especially in certain pockets of the city. The arrested people were released giving an indication of complicity of political elite and security forces. The government found opposition responsible for the disorder and violence in the city.

The cause of the civil war:

Civil war in Tajikistan emerged as the result of nature of politics in soviet era, weak national identity of Tajiks, economic collapse, delimitation of Tajikistan in 1929, and institutional disintegration. The Tajik national identity was left without its two symbols of cultural and historical centres: Samarkand and Bukhara. (Lynch, 2001).

The emergence of new opposition parties and movements like Rastokhez movements, cultural revival movement by Lali Badakhshan, and democratic party of Tajikistan, centred on Tajik nationalism. The Tajik branch of Islamic Renaissance party sought to form a Islamic Tajik nation but more of in an cultural aspect. (Malik, 1994 & Dudoignon, 1998).

The former communist leaders like Rakhmon Nabyev, Safareli kenjaev attempted to force out the pamiri interior minister led to the eruption of civil war. Lali Badakhshan joined other opposition leaders to demand resignation of Nabyev's. the Tajik leadership organised opposite protests especially with the people of kulob. The emergency powers led Nabyev to arm kulobi groups, and the conflict led to the opposition factions to seize some vital facilities in the city. Under intense political pressure Nabyev agreed for the govt. of National Reconciliation and agreed for Davlat Usmon from Islamic Republic Party as Deputy Prime Minister. The southern part of Tajikistan were the main fighting areas throughout 1992 with resettled people in the area. (Brown, 2016).

The collapse of the soviet union with its all institutions whether political or economic undermined the stability in Tajikistan. further, as Tajik was the poorest region in the union with total dependence on the centre for food, raw material and financial subsidies including security. The collapse of soviet union was shock for them and destabilized economy. These circumstances led to desperate attempt for the political power in Dushanbe. (Lynch, 2001).

The fragile Tajik institutions, few control over its own territory and with no ethnic cohesion to form a common political front were critical for the outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992.

Implications of the civil war:

Intervention of the external powers like Russian, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan played a crucial role in stopping the civil war in Tajikistan. Russian interests in near abroad especially former soviet space sought to restore order in the republic. The border troops were stationed near Afghan Tajik border. (Jonson, 1998). The Russian engagement in reconciliation session dominated by old deputies of Leninabad led to abolition of the position of the head of state(president) and were successful in electing Emomali Rakhmonov as the head of government who was basically a Kulobi. Finally, the government and opposition parties, basically political elites reached a general agreement of 1997. Whereby all disagreements were sorted out and a new political process was started in Tajikistan. (Lynch, 2001).

Implications of the Tajik Civil War on the Local Populace

The immediate, tangible impact on the local populace was felt through unprecedented internal and external displacement. Estimates suggest that out of a population of fewer than six million at the time, between 50,000 and 100,000 lives were lost, and over one-fifth of the population was displaced (Nourzhanov & Bleuer, 2013). Entire villages in the Khatlon region were systematically razed, forcing over 100,000 refugees to flee across the Pyandzh River into a highly volatile, war-torn Afghanistan, while an additional 500,000 became internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country. This massive displacement shattered local communal trust. Regionalism, or mahallabozlik, which had been subtly managed under Soviet administrative structures, hardened into deadly identifiers. Neighbors who had shared collective farms for generations found themselves on opposing sides of a brutal geopolitical divide. The flight of ethnic minorities—primarily Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and highly educated urban Tajiks—stripped the nation of its technocratic and professional class, leaving a generational void in the healthcare, education, and engineering sectors that the state has failed to backfill even decades later (Olcott, 2012).

One of the most insidious and enduring social transformations resulting from the war was the violent restructuring of gender roles. The targeted execution of working-age men, particularly in the opposition-leaning regions of Gharm and Gorno-Badakhshan, left behind an estimated 25,000 to 50,000 war widows and up to 55,000 orphans. Overnight, women who had been integrated into the Soviet workforce and benefited from relatively high literacy and secular equality were thrust into the role of sole breadwinners in a devastated economy. With the collapse of state welfare and social support networks, these women faced systemic marginalization. To survive, the local populace reverted to traditional, patriarchal agrarian

coping mechanisms. This regression facilitated the resurgence of outlawed practices such as polygamy, early child marriages, and arranged matches as survival strategies for destitute families (Roche, 2014). Deprived of educational opportunities, a generation of Tajik girls grew up in a society where their economic value was tethered almost exclusively to domestic servitude, reversing decades of social progress and creating an institutionalized underclass of disenfranchised women.

The economic devastation wrought by the civil war permanently transformed Tajikistan into a remittance-dependent state. With domestic industries pulverized and agricultural collectives destroyed, the local population faced mass starvation in the late 1990s. The default survival strategy became labor migration, primarily to the Russian Federation (Heathershaw, 2009). What began as an emergency escape valve for war-weary citizens quickly evolved into a permanent feature of the Tajik state economy.

Remittances from migrant workers have regularly accounted for 30% to 50% of Tajikistan's total GDP, making it one of the most remittance-dependent nations on Earth (Olcott, 2012). The human cost of this economic structure on the local populace is staggering. It has created a "society of left-behind families." Millions of young Tajik men spend their productive years abroad, facing extreme exploitation, xenophobia, and legal vulnerability in Russia. Back home, villages are populated entirely by elderly individuals, women, and children. Grandchildren grow up knowing their fathers only through sporadic video calls, fracturing the traditional transmission of cultural values and emotional security across generations.

While economists measure the war through GDP metrics and infrastructure loss, the psychological landscape of the Tajik populace remains deeply scarred. The conflict was characterized by localized, intimate violence—public executions, systematic sexual violence used as a weapon of war, and forced disappearances. Despite the scale of these atrocities, the 1997 peace agreement prioritized national stability over transitional justice (Heathershaw, 2009). No truth commissions were established, no comprehensive war tribunals took place, and a blanket amnesty was granted to factional leaders.

This institutional amnesia forced victims to live side-by-side with perpetrators in absolute silence. The result has been a pervasive state of social anomie, collective post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a profound lack of trust in civic institutions. Psychological counseling was virtually non-existent in the post-war reconstruction framework, meaning that individual and collective trauma has been passed down intergenerationally, manifesting in high rates of domestic abuse, depression, and social withdrawal among youth who never witnessed the war but inherit its psychic wreckage.

Politically, the civil war provided the ultimate justification for the complete eradication of civil liberties. President Emomali Rahmon, who rose to power during the height of the conflict in 1992, successfully framed his administration as the sole guarantor of peace and preventing a return to chaotic bloodshed (Dagiev, 2014). Under the guise of maintaining hard-won stability and countering religious extremism, the state systematically dismantled the political plurality promised by the 1997 peace accords.

The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which had been the primary opposition signatory to the peace treaty, was officially banned and designated a terrorist organization in 2015 (Markowitz, 2013). Independent journalism has been systematically stifled, and internet access is routinely throttled. For the local populace, the memory of the war functions as an effective tool of psychological coercion. Any public dissent, demand for economic reform, or protest against systemic corruption is immediately met with state warnings that political opposition will inevitably drag the country back into the horrors of the 1990s. The citizenry is trapped in an authoritarian bargain: they accept systemic poverty and absolute political docility in exchange for the absence of active warfare.

Conclusion:

The Tajik civil war was fought for different reasons from ideological one to the struggle of power among elites for dominance to fill the power vacuum created by the early soviet demise. The basic idea of being Tajik among different political or elite groups led to the reconciliation of settling the issues by sharing power and settlement of forced migrants otherwise that may have led to disaster for the country. The war as fueled by different perception new Tajik state and its nature and functioning. By the end of 1996 major

parties have agreed to power sharing as a viable option and the only options available to settle the issue as soon as possible. The Tajik Civil War cannot be relegated to the archive of late-twentieth-century historical anomalies; it remains a living, breathing reality for the people of Tajikistan. The implications are linear, compounding, and structural. The conflict re-engineered the demographics, forced a massive exodus of intellect, institutionalized gender oppression, severed familial networks through forced migration, buried deep psychological trauma, and locked the state into a perpetual authoritarian freeze. True reconciliation and recovery cannot occur through the mere erection of grand monuments to unity in Dushanbe. It requires an honest confrontation with the past, the implementation of mental health infrastructure, the economic repatriation of its migrant workforce, and the restoration of basic civic freedoms. Until the human cost is addressed with the same urgency as infrastructural reconstruction, the local populace will remain shackled to the legacy of a war that ended on paper, but never truly concluded in the hearts and homes of its people.

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