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REP Roundtable Summary

Tajikistan's Domestic and Regional Priorities and Challenges

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Tajikistan's Domestic Politics

Parviz Mullojonov:

After the peace treaty of 1997, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) announced it was disbanding its forces. Tajikistan entered a new period of its history. The immediate post-conflict phase saw the violent elimination of bandits and opposition figures who chose to remain outside the political process. Subsequently, there were moves to stabilize the country and increase central control.

In general, the external geopolitical situation was favourable for Tajikistan's development, especially after 2001. The US invasion of Afghanistan ousted the Taliban, secured Tajikistan's southern borders and helped the government increase its control over the country. The economic boom in Russia also had a very positive effect, creating employment for thousands of migrant workers. Over this period there was a significant decrease in social tension; both internal and external conditions were largely favourable to Tajikistan's development. Whilst one couldn't speak of economic prosperity, there was certainly marked economic development.

Recent developments, however, have shifted the context and made the situation more complex. Whilst the initial centralisation of power had some positive aspects in terms of increased stability, it is clear that increasing authoritarianism is undermining political institutions and governance. All levers of power and all the main economic drivers are in the hands of the president and a small group of people around him. In addition, we are witnessing the erosion of civil society. Even during the civil war, there used to be a lively and influential public sphere in Tajikistan. Civil society acted as a break on presidential power and ensured a certain level of accountability. The non-government sector is now in deep decay. Secular parties are disappearing. The Democratic Party has split into three factions, and will be barely capable of participating in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in February 2010. The only secular party of any standing is the Communist Party. The real opposition is provided by the Islamic Renaissance Party, with which the government has extremely difficult relations.

The worsening economic situation is also a driver of change. The global economic crisis has made the geopolitical situation far less favourable. The number of migrants finding work in Russia and other post-Soviet states has fallen, and with it the level of remittances. 16 per cent of Tajik migrants did not return to Russia last spring. There is thus a large and increasing pool of young, unemployed men whom the government has to deal with. This is

difficult, but not overwhelming challenge. However, if there were to be a second wave of the crisis and the employment situation were to get even worse then this would create serious challenges for the government. The only sector of the economy which could conceivably absorb returned migrant workers is small and medium-sized business. However, the economic strategy of the government does little to support this sector. Instead, it concentrates on high-profile, high budget long-term projects such as hydroelectric plants which bring little immediate benefit.

The unbalanced character of the political system is leading to levels of corruption which pose a threat to the state and hold back development. The entire decision-making process of government is non-transparent. This has led to a series of unpopular decisions which have increased social tension in the country. Many decisions are made in the interests of particular groups. Of particular concern is the on-going corruption in the agricultural sector. 72 per cent of the population is employed in this sector.

Tajikistan is nevertheless far from becoming a failed state. We cannot speak of a revolutionary situation where the elite cannot maintain control. Whilst social tension is rising, there are a number of stabilising factors. It is unlikely that former migrant workers will organise themselves politically as they are returning gradually rather than en masse. The regime still has room for manoeuvre and has shown some capacity to instigate limited reforms. In the micro-business sector, for example, inspections and regulation have been reduced, and a 'one-window' system for registration has been set up. Previously it took up to 180 days to register a company, which was a big obstacle to private enterprise.

The International Context

Rashid Abdullo:

In order for Tajikistan to survive as an independent nation, it must build a strong state, and a strong national identity. At present, the education system is based on foreign pedagogical models. We have Russian and Uzbek schools which use Russian and Uzbek textbooks. Students are not being educated to be citizens of Tajikistan. The government has to provide the necessary political and social framework to strengthen the Tajik language, and instil a sense of civic pride. Tajikistan should return to the Arabic script to restore links with its rich cultural tradition. Some view the adoption of Arabic

script as a retrograde step, but we cannot build a strong Tajik identity without reviving the links with our ancient culture.

The government has done a lot to strengthen Tajik statehood in the international arena. The choice of a multi-vectored foreign policy has been successful. There are three major powers which play a role in Tajikistan's development. Tajikistan has had 140 years of close relations with Russia, 70 of those as part of a single state. The two countries understand each other well. Tajikistan also benefits from significant remittances from migrant workers in Russia. China is investing heavily in Tajikistan, especially in strategic infrastructure projects in sectors such as energy, communications, transport and mining. These are high cost projects which no Tajik entrepreneur could undertake. Chinese investment is thus essential in this field. Only China and Iran are in a position to provide this capital.

A third power in the region is the US. The US is the guarantor of Tajikistan's political independence. There is no direct US investment in Tajikistan, however US involvement in Afghanistan provides political stability. The US is interested in maintaining stability in Central Asia. After the events in Andijan in 2005 US-Uzbek relations were greatly damaged. The US concluded that it was best not to experiment with democracy-building in Tajikistan. There is no direct investment in the country. Tajikistan has no gas or oil; its main appeal for the US lies in its strategic position. However, the US has supported the IMF, World Bank, the EBRD with their investments in Tajikistan.

Iran is also very involved. Like the Russians, they are providing money for large-scale projects such as hydroelectric power stations. In September 2004 then President Mohammad Khatami visited Tajikistan and pledged a quarter of a billion dollars for capital investments in hydro power. Even Russia had not shown this level of interest. After Khatami made this proposal, the Russians followed up in October 2004 with an offer of \$2 billion. The Tajik government accepted both proposals. Such economic competition can only benefit Tajikistan, although increasing links with Iran worry the US.

There is great potential for European involvement in the Tajik economy, but at present this is not being exploited. The EU is not perceived in Tajikistan as an independent foreign policy actor. Why waste time speaking with Europeans if they are entirely reliant on the US? Europe is seen as too weak to become an independent pole. There are currently two models for western involvement in the region. The first is a normative approach which seeks to tie economic engagement to domestic political developments. The second model encourages emphasizes the capabilities of Western markets and technology

and promotes engagement and integration above all as a tool of modernization. From our point of view the second model is preferable. In the 1990s, when the UK had no embassy in Tajikistan, British business was very active in the country. Now there is an embassy, but investment seems to have fallen away.

Tajikistan and Islam

Muhiddin Kabiri:

1997-2007 was a period of considerable optimism in Tajikistan, not only amongst the government, but also for people and political parties. Even before the current economic crisis our party was pessimistic. The ten years up to 2007 were a time of euphoria that peace and stability had been restored to the country. But a new generation is appearing which has greater expectations. The government can offer these people only limited perspectives. They have no programme for the country's future development.

During and after the war there was a good dialogue between secular and Islamic groups. After a peace agreement had been signed and stability established, the ruling elite did not consider it necessary to maintain this dialogue. Of course, indirect dialogue between government structures and political parties exists. The government has started to implement some of the programmes proposed by the Islamic Revival Party. It was announced that 2009 would be the year of Imam Azam Abu Hanifa, for example. However, the government aims to co-opt some of the party's ideas and implement them alone. Marginalizing Islamic parties will lead to the younger generation becoming more radicalized. My generation is the generation of the civil war. We will tolerate almost any imposition and hardship to avoid a repeat of the conflict. But the new generation has higher expectations. They are the generation of the Internet – they can see how people live in other countries and are starting to ask why this cannot apply in Tajikistan. It will be very difficult for the government to provide coherent answers.

Some people blame the Islamic Revival Party for cooperating with the ruling elite and supporting President Emomali Rahmon despite his authoritarian approach. However, the party is in a very difficult situation. If we were openly to oppose Rahmon it would be very easy for the elite to label us Islamic radicals and suppress our activities. If we were to organise public demonstrations we would be beaten by the police as Islamic radicals – and it is easy for the government to convince the EU and the US that Islamic parties

in Tajikistan are akin to Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan or the Middle East. There were calls for the party to take a more oppositionist line when the hijab was banned and restrictions were imposed on women going to mosque. The party criticized the legislation but it decided not to protest publicly. However, if I want to become a leader of the younger generation then I will have to be more radical in future. This places difficult choices in front of me.

The Tajik government is strong. We need strong central power to maintain control over the country. We need a strong state too. It is dangerous when one has a strong elite but weak state institutions. In the last two years the state has been unable to enact any substantive reforms. It has shown itself unable to deal with problems over water or energy supplies, for example.

In terms of the outlook for the parliamentary elections in February 2010, if the elections are free then it is possible some opposition parties will gain seats in the parliament. The Islamic Revival Party gained 10 per cent of the vote last time and holds two seats. The Communist Party has four seats. Some say that Rahmon will turn to religion in order to increase his legitimacy, along the Jordanian or Qatari model, where the president or emir has pseudo-religious endorsement. This would not be a new development for Tajikistan or Central Asia. Although officially a *Rechtstaat*, the country is in essence more inclined to being ruled as an emirate or khanate.

Questions and Discussion

Is there pressure for the Islamic Revival Party to adopt a more radical stance? What percentage of the younger generation has been radicalised?

It is of course difficult to estimate precise levels of support or opposition to the government. The older generation will tolerate almost anything to avoid further conflict. The younger generation does not carry the scars of the civil war. They have forgotten the atrocities but remember their grievances. They want to live as others do. They have seen how people live in Moscow, never mind Europe or the US. The economic crisis means they cannot vote with their feet, so they will become active in other ways.

The politically-minded younger generation want power and money. They don't accept the paternalistic economic model which dominates the country. The people in control of the economy are in their 50s and 60s. Everyone over 45 should be withdrawn from managing the economy. Their mentality does not meet the requirements of the time. We want the government to be a partner

and facilitator, but not a manager of the economy. The government should provide credits to business, but not insist on ownership.

Could you give some details regarding the government security operation in the Eastern Rasht valley? Was it a search for Mullo Abdullo, who returned from Afghanistan with a group of around 100 militants in May, or was it an anti-narcotics operation?

It is difficult to get confirmation on what happened. It is possible it was a campaign to oust militants rather than an anti-narcotic operation. This was a unique situation, very unlike the events of the 1990s.

It should be noted that it is impossible for someone to cross the Tajik border with militants unaided. Who brought him from Afghanistan? It was not Tajiks or Afghans. Abdullo is a talented person who is unable to find his place in Tajik society. Those who can't adapt to the dynamics of the time are crushed.

Could you outline the core principles of the Islamic Revival Party?

The Islamic Revival Party has never sought to establish an Islamic state. We want Tajikistan to be an Islamic society. The government and state institutions should be run by technocrats, not religious leaders. We want a rule of law state. This should include Islamic elements, in spheres such as education and family life. Women should be free to wear the hijab at school or university. In other respects, our political programme is like that of other democratic parties.

You say that if you protest against the government you may be labelled a radical by Western powers. But the West also views public demonstration as a democratic right. If you don't intend to actively oppose the government, how do you hope to achieve change?

There are other means of opposition – through interviews, statements, advice to government. Society is growing more Islamic. Sometimes more can be achieved by working with the leadership, or through quiet negotiation. Radical parties are growing in support, but they do not necessarily pay attention to economic or social issues. If the Islamic Revival Party can present itself as both the party of moderate Islam, and also of social reform and modernisation it will be the ideal party for many in the younger generation. People don't want

a radical group along the lines of Al Qaeda. We want to build an Islamic society like Malaysia or Turkey, that is, Islam coupled with respect for government institutions, an open society and rule of law, not a Middle Eastern model of Islamic society and authoritarian government.

How is the changing situation in Afghanistan impacting on Tajikistan?

The civil war pushed radical groups into Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan directly impacts on Central Asia. We may see a situation in which the Taliban returns to power in some form as part of the government. The Taliban never presented a political threat in the past, and do not do so currently. The biggest threat to Tajikistan is regional instability, which creates a good environment for drug producers and traffickers.