

Inter-regional dynamics of war

by Olivier Roy

Regional identities were closely linked to political affiliations during the Tajik civil war. Tajikistan is a predominantly rural country. Even in urban areas many retain connections to their family villages and neighbourhoods are often inhabited by people from the same region. Tajik society retains strong traditional networks of solidarity (commonly referred to as 'clans') built on these family and local community ties. These networks have commonly been used to maximize access to and control over resources and they were translated into the political and administrative structures of the Soviet Union. The one-party system, instead of bypassing these networks, gave them an arena to compete for access to positions and goods. Centralization meant that there were few legal opportunities for social promotion or economic prosperity other than through connections with the party elite. The Communist Party structure was based on administrative territorial divisions and grouped around district, province and republic level committees. To enhance their positions, local party *apparatchiks* needed connections with those higher up. Traditional networks fused with party connections and became the basis for political factionalism, although there was rarely anything ideological in their differences. Solidarity and power struggles were organized along these regional administrative divisions, thus giving them a political reality. This generated inter-regional antagonisms in the struggle for access to power, goods, and other benefits.

In Tajikistan this system tended to privilege an elite from the Leninabad province. Leninabad as a whole profited from industrial growth and comparatively high educational levels. It thus had considerable economic and social influence, which was underscored by political privilege. Although representatives from other regions – particularly Gharms, Pamiris, and ethnic Russians – held powerful positions throughout the Soviet period, all the first secretaries of the Tajik Communist Party from 1946 to 1991 were Leninabadis. They were consequently able to bring benefits to their networks. One of the notable effects of the war is that a Kulobi elite, previously almost unrepresented in positions of state power, has supplanted the Leninabadi group in control of the government.

Regional factionalism exacerbated by intra-party competition existed in all the Central Asian republics. In Tajikistan, however, it also combined with inter-group antagonisms originating in Soviet policies of forcibly moving people to meet labour needs. Several large population transfers occurred in the 1930s, early 1950s, and as late as 1968. The policy involved transferring whole groups (an entire village or several 'clans') from one region – generally the mountainous areas of central and eastern Tajikistan – to another region where a labour force was needed. These groups were generally relocated in a single collective farm, or *kolkhoz*. Even if they were incorporated into a mixed *kolkhoz*, they generally had their own brigades and settlements. This had the effect of maintaining distinct group identities.

This juxtaposition of peoples from different regions tended to crystallise what had previously been loose regional affiliations into a more fixed group identity based on regional origin. In the 1970s and 1980s, inter-group antagonisms in the southern agrarian regions became more common as increasing scarcity caused by demographic pressure and limited agricultural inputs forced many communities to compete for land and resources. Tensions were especially high in the Vakhsh valley of Qurghonteppa, where Gharmi and Pamiri communities bordered indigenous Kulobi and Uzbek settlements. For example, local Uzbeks and resettled Gharmi communities disputed control over land and water during the 1960s. It was in these southern regions that some of the most fierce and brutal fighting of the war occurred in 1992. Kulobi-based militias expelled much of the non-Kulobi population during the winter of 1992-93 and many of the latter fled to Afghanistan. This localized pattern of conflict demonstrates that in the Tajik civil war, as in wars elsewhere, in some places conflicts generated by antagonistic localized rivalries intersected with the broader national conflict generated through political competition.

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