

*Perspectives on the war and
peace process*

The Tajikistan government

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President Rakhmonov with supporters, 1995

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The emergence of President Emomali Rakhmonov's government in late 1992 marked a turning point in the Tajik civil war. At first, intensified fighting consolidated Rakhmonov's position as head of state, but then the peace process slowly took hold and led to the June 1997 General Agreement. Some might argue that this success was due to domestic and foreign players' need for a way out of a stalemate. Yet favourable conditions for reaching an agreement and sustaining it into post-war reconciliation are of little use if the country's leadership lacks the political will to build peace.

Rakhmonov came to power at a time of crisis in governance. Opposition activists had mounted prolonged demonstrations in Shahidon Square in Dushanbe in spring 1992 to protest against the Communist government of President Rakhmon Nabiev. Pro-Communist counter-demonstrators gathered in Ozodi Square and Nabiev distributed guns to his supporters. Violent clashes soon broke out and were stabilized only after the Russian army's 201st Division intervened. Under pressure from the opposition, Nabiev agreed to form a power-sharing coalition 'Government of National Reconciliation' (GNR) that soon proved unworkable. Armed opposition demonstrators from the Shahidon Square forced the Ozodi Square demonstrators out of Dushanbe. Although many pro-Communist demonstrators returned their weapons and went home, a faction from Kulob took their arms home with them and formed the nucleus of the Kulobi-based Popular Front militia that fought against perceived opposition supporters. The arena of armed conflict shifted south and rapidly escalated into open warfare. The GNR retaliated by blockading Kulob. In an effort to end the fighting, more than eighty political party representatives and informal leaders met in the south-eastern city of Khorugh, where they formulated a peace agreement. But the resulting ceasefire soon broke down.

After intense fighting that autumn and the start of international involvement in the conflict, Tajiks from different factions made one more attempt to resolve the conflict without external help. On 18 November 1992 they held a sixteenth session of the Tajik Supreme Soviet (in effect, the parliament) in the northern city of Khujand, which was untouched by the violence. The meeting was attended by deputies, the military commanders of the warring factions, party representatives, delegates from ethnic communities, and foreign observers. They sought to agree on a legitimate government. The military success of the Popular Front against opposition forces in the south determined the outcome. Nabiev, who had been forced to resign in September, was initially nominated for the leadership position but asked for retirement. This created the opportunity for Rakhmonov – at that time a mid-level official who had recently become head of the Kulob Soviet of People's Deputies – to be elected as head of the Supreme Soviet, and hence acting head of state and government.

The government Rakhmonov inherited was burdened by a ruined economy, a destroyed administration and a highly fragmented society. Thus the challenge to his presidency was to launch state-building in a way that would support the peace process. The problem was compounded by the need to establish Tajikistan's status and political orientation in the world system: to signal the type of state it would be and to choose between guiding principles of communism, Islamicism, and democracy. Many in Tajikistan, particularly among government supporters, favoured a destructive and ultimately deadlocked option of 'fighting to victory' against the Islamicist opposition. On the other hand, many opposition supporters adamantly opposed communism and advocated armed struggle to establish an Islamic order. Rakhmonov's government chose to distance itself from both communists and militant Islamicists. It advocated democratic development so as to retain popular support among a moderate majority at home and to develop good relations with CIS countries and other neighbours. This strategy secured domestic and international support.

Rakhmonov's government realized that continued war would only deepen inter-regional strife, lead to bankruptcy, and undermine the country's future. These internal incentives combined with pressure from international partners. Almost all the CIS governments wanted the government to make peace with the opposition. Russian and Iranian geopolitical interests converged in promoting an end to the civil war and the efficacy of the UN-sponsored process secured the success of the inter-Tajik negotiations.

A ceasefire was agreed comparatively swiftly through the participation of delegates who controlled armed forces and possessed the political power needed to stop the fighting. It was more difficult, however, to reach a political arrangement settling the underlying conflict. Disputes about power-sharing principles dominated the agenda. For the government, the problem was not how many positions the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) would have in a transitional government but about the fundamental problem of constitutional consistency. Could the government sacrifice the principle of secularism favoured by most Tajikistanis to accommodate Islamicist demands for a share of state power? Although the UTO did not openly question the constitutional principle of secularism, the ghost of an Islamic state hovered over the negotiations.

To avoid a stalemate or even collapse of the talks, the future legal status of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was made conditional on its implementation of the Protocol on Military Issues and its adherence to the (secular) laws of the country. The notion of an Islamic state was not disputed directly or addressed explicitly in the documents adopted by the negotiating teams. It was instead tacitly postponed and became a central feature of

the work of the Commission on National Reconciliation between 1997 and 1999. Here, too, the government and opposition parties showed flexibility and, with support from the agreement's external guarantors, the problem was finally addressed through a compromise. The IRP was legalized, while secularism remained central to Tajikistan's constitution. Yet in the long-term, the important dilemma of secularism versus Islamicism remains unresolved.

Another issue, often highlighted by outside observers, is that a 'third force' – customarily personified by Abdumalik Abdullajanov, the former prime minister from Leninabad province – was excluded from the peace process. During the first rounds of negotiations, the UTO demanded that a governing State Council of National Reconciliation be formed with half the seats allocated to the opposition. In 1996 Abdullajanov proposed that his party join the negotiations and advocated a 40/40/20 power-sharing formula, allocating his group 20 per cent of seats in the proposed State Council. Despite some support from the UTO, the government rejected this proposal because it would leave them in a minority position. After some consultation, so did the mediators, whose mandate was to reach agreement between the warring factions.

Ultimately a 70/30 power-sharing ratio was agreed, with the government retaining 70 per cent of positions and the UTO allocated the rest. The Abdullajanov faction was not represented in this arrangement but the agreement reflected the balance of power resulting from the war. Neither Abdullajanov's 'third force' nor Leninabad as a region had the political and military force to stake a claim to power equal to that of factions based in the south and east. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between Abdullajanov's Leninabadi-based faction and Leninabadis in general. The government tried to include people from all regions and all communities in its delegation to the peace negotiations. Most Leninabadis, like people from other regions, supported the outcome of the negotiations; without this, peacebuilding would have been impossible.

With the implementation of the 1997 General Agreement, Rakhmonov has sought both to consolidate his presidency and to build a broad-based Movement for National Unity and Revival involving people from all around the country. In so doing, he has sought to overcome the traditional clientelist and regional networks that have dominated Tajik political life and thus to counterbalance the potential for fragmentation. The signing of the General Agreement does not mean that peace has now come to Tajikistan forever, or that democratic institutions are fully operative. At the start of the twenty-first century, it is possible to talk only about the foundation for a democratic dispensation, yet the Tajik government remains convinced that only democracy can ensure a peaceful future.