

Perspectives on the war and peace process

The Democratic Party

by **Abdunabi Sattorzoda**



DPT demonstrators, February 1992

Abdunabi Sattorzoda was Deputy Chair of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan Almaty platform between 1995 to 1999 and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 2000.

In the late 1980s, Tajikistanis began openly to articulate democratic ideas and to form political movements to achieve them. Among the new parties that emerged was the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), founded on 10 August 1990. It focused on critique of the Communist Party and Soviet officials who retained control over the country. The Communist leadership resisted the new political activists and restricted their rights. DPT supporters reacted by protesting in the streets and, with other opposition parties, the DPT organised peaceful rallies to pressure the government to resign.

The inter-Tajik conflict began in November 1991, when the Communist Party candidate Rakhmon Nabiev won the presidential elections, defeating the candidate jointly put forward by the DPT and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). The democratic opposition, which had little political experience, refused to consider cooperating with the Nabiev government, although it did not engage in serious analysis of the political, social, and economic implications of such an option. Instead it joined a 52-day opposition rally in April and May 1992. This demonstration became increasingly radical and government supporters reacted strongly against the protesters. President Nabiev, in an effort to reduce political tensions, agreed to form a coalition Government of National Reconciliation (GNR). This power-sharing arrangement soon broke down under external pressure from some of the regional elites and internal tensions. The different factions that comprised the GNR had difficulties cooperating, due in part to the lack of experience and radicalism of the opposition forces combined with the obstinacy of the old Communist leadership that relied on force to ensure its continued position. With the collapse of the GNR and the start of a new government under Emomali Rakhmonov's leadership, the DPT and most other opposition parties were declared illegal and most DPT activists dispersed into exile, primarily in CIS countries.

Despite its losses and defeats, the DPT remained a political party. The Coordination Centre of Democratic Forces of Tajikistan in CIS was formed in Moscow in October 1993. This enabled DPT activists to establish close working relations with other Tajik opposition groups. The Coordination Centre developed a strategy to address the conflict and on 7 December 1993 this was incorporated into a document entitled 'Suggestions for the peaceful regulation of the military-political conflict in the Republic of Tajikistan'. It formed the basis for the democratic opposition's participation in the inter-Tajik negotiations and acknowledged that there was a real danger of losing independent statehood altogether if the war continued.

The United Tajik Opposition (UTO) was a mechanism for the DPT to participate in the peace negotiations, yet it did carry a cost. When the opposition met to discuss who would participate in the talks, the DPT promoted two principles: (a) representation of all political parties and movements and (b) retention of the balance of political force. This meant that each opposition party or movement would be represented on the basis of its relative size and influence. Although the DPT was the most prominent of the secular opposition parties, with a large membership and substantial popular support, it did not claim a separate place at the negotiating table because it had no armed supporters. Therefore the DPT, together with other opposition parties and movements, joined with the IRP to form the UTO – an alliance that cost the party its unity.

From the start of the peace process, a split developed between the DPT Chair Shodmon Yusuf and his deputies, on one side, and the party's executive and its grassroots members, on the other. Yusuf did not participate directly in formulating the 'Suggestions' document or give it his approval. Soon after it was released, he announced his opposition to any negotiations and declared it impermissible for party members to reach understandings with the Rakhmonov government, saying that no DPT member had the right to "negotiate with this criminal and treacherous regime." The unity of the UTO was restored in mid-February 1994 when UN Special Envoy Ramiro Piriz-Ballon met with DPT leaders Abdunabi Sattorzoda, Shodmon Yusuf and Rahim Musulmoniyon to discuss the party's participation in the peace process. Yet consensus on the DPT's role and strategy was still lacking. By September 1994, Yusuf and his followers were actively distancing themselves from the UTO. They sought to undermine the opposition alliance by proclaiming that although it had agreed to negotiate, it had no intention of reaching an agreement.

The following December, the main body of the DPT held a congress in Almaty, Kazakhstan. It approved the DPT's participation in the UTO and criticized Yusuf's leadership of the party. Six months later, the next DPT congress removed Yusuf from his post and elected Jumaboi Niyozov as its new leader. This group became known as the DPT Almaty platform (DPTA). Soon after, Yusuf and some of his supporters based in Tehran formed the DPT Tehran platform (DPTT), which unexpectedly reversed its position by entering into direct talks with the Rakhmonov government and indicating its willingness to cooperate. In exchange the government allowed the DPTT to register in July 1995. The DPTA, which continued to participate in the peace talks through its membership in the UTO, remained under a ban.

The DPTA had three representatives out of nine in the UTO delegation to the inter-Tajik negotiations. During the first rounds of talks, the agenda was hotly debated. The DPTA promoted issues that the government wanted to exclude from the negotiation agenda: power-sharing, legalization of banned parties and movements, amendments to the constitution, and release of political prisoners. The government instead preferred to concentrate on achieving a permanent ceasefire and the return of refugees.

With pressure from the international mediators, the government eventually agreed to address political reform in the agreement itself. But these issues were once again put on the periphery during the transitional phase (1997-2000), when significantly greater attention was given to implementing the Protocol on Military Issues than to the Protocol on Political Issues. According to some critics, the resulting less-than-democratic political system and government institutions reflects the lack of political will to address governance.

The 1997 General Agreement was the result of a political consensus to stop the brutal contest of war. The DPT's participation in reconciliation efforts evolved within the limits of the political dynamics of the time. The DPT believes that the consolidation of peace can create conditions favourable for the development of institutions suited to truly democratic governance in Tajikistan.