

*Perspectives on the war and
peace process*

Abdullajanov and the 'third force'

by **Shahram Akbarzadeh**



Market in Khujand, Leninabad

Shahram Akbarzadeh is a lecturer in international relations at La Trobe University, Australia and editor of *Pacifica Review*. He has published widely on Tajikistan history and society.

More than three years of inter-Tajik negotiations between the government of President Emomali Rakhmonov and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) culminated in the signing of a General Agreement in June 1997. The international community hailed this as a momentous success. However, the political elite from the Leninabad region was not formally represented in the negotiations. Although the UN mandate focused on bringing about a negotiated settlement between the warring parties, the exclusion of this Leninabadi faction may undermine the future political stability of Tajikistan.

President Rakhmonov has pursued a course of action that many observers interpret as deliberate marginalization of the Leninabadi leadership and, indeed, of leaders from regions other than Kulob. The appointment of the present government, after Rakhmonov's re-election to a seven-year term at the end of 1999, appeared to confirm claims that Rakhmonov was staffing the cabinet with his Kulobi supporters. The four 'power ministries' (Internal Affairs, Defence, National Security and Foreign Affairs) and some others were reserved for Kulobis. This dominance reflects the military strength of Kulobi fighters during the civil war. President Rakhmonov is reported to have stated that it would be naive to expect the victor to share the spoils, even with former supporters and allies. This was taken as a serious affront by the Leninabadi elite, who dominated the politics of Tajikistan for nearly four decades and provided financial and logistical support to the Kulobi faction in the most intense period of the civil war in May-December 1992.

The push to exclude the Leninabadi leadership from positions of power in the central government is often linked to the removal of the influential Leninabadi, Abdumalik Abdullajanov, from his prime ministerial position in January 1994. (Abdullajanov had initially retained the position after Rakhmonov rose to power in November 1992.) Abdullajanov contested the November 1994 presidential elections and lost by a narrow margin to the incumbent president. Foreign observers reported serious cases of electoral misconduct and fraud. Abdullajanov's chances of returning to prominence were seriously hampered by charges of embezzlement brought against him in 1994, barring him from holding public office and from standing in the parliamentary elections of February 1995. He then moved to Moscow, where he tried to regain some leverage over the Rakhmonov leadership by forming the National Revival Movement (NRM), together with two other former Leninabadi prime ministers, Abduljalil Samadov and Jamshed Karimov. The NRM lobbied for inclusion in the inter-Tajik negotiations. Despite the positive response from some elements of the UTO, the government blocked its participation.

It appears that when it eventually signalled its willingness to accept NRM's inclusion in the peace talks and the allocation of a ministerial quota to Leninabadi leaders, the UTO was looking for an ally. This was an ironic reversal of the political divisions of 1992, when opposition forces that later united in the UTO directed their protests against conservative Leninabadi leaders who were bolstered by support from Kulob. Rakhmonov's opposition to the NRM's participation in the talks was based on similar calculations: it would have weakened his hand against the UTO. It would also have pushed aside the legal constraints on Abdullajanov by making him eligible for political amnesty and reviving him as a legitimate political contender. It appears that Rakhmonov deemed Abdullajanov too resourceful and popular to warrant that risk. He succeeded in blocking NRM's participation partly because the main international sponsors of peace talks (Russia, Iran and the UN) shied away from confrontation. They either lacked the resolve or feared a backlash and a complete breakdown of negotiations if they forced the issue.

Rakhmonov's antipathy towards Abdullajanov betrayed a degree of insecurity. It appears that the President was concerned that Abdullajanov wielded significant authority even in exile. In May 1996, the murder of a prominent Leninabadi businessman provoked large demonstrations in various Leninabadi cities. They soon grew into a political protest against the appointment of Kulobi administrators at district and provincial level in Leninabad. The wave of arrests that followed these demonstrations specifically targeted known friends and supporters of Abdullajanov. According to a Human Rights Watch report, a prison riot against deplorable living conditions that took place in April 1997 in Khujand, Leninabad's provincial capital, provided a pretext for the murder and mistreatment of leading Leninabadi figures and allies of Abdullajanov. Twenty-seven prisoners were killed. In the following month, Rakhmonov survived an assassination attempt while visiting Khujand. The Rakhmonov leadership interpreted these events as further proof of the questionable loyalty of the Leninabadi leadership. This impression was further boosted in the following year.

In November 1998, former Tajik army Colonel Mahmud Khudoiberdyev launched an incursion into Leninabad from Uzbekistan and challenged Rakhmonov's authority. It was Khudoiberdyev's third attempt to dislodge Rakhmonov from power. The choice of Leninabad as the scene of action, the suspected backing from Uzbekistan (denied by the Uzbek government), and his ethnic Uzbek maternal family connection were sufficient for the government to link Khudoiberdyev with Abdullajanov – who has also enjoyed support from the Uzbek

government. Tajikistan troops that included former UTO fighters suppressed this armed insurgency. The government then cracked down on suspected insurgents, arresting more than 150 people. In October 2000 four people were sentenced to death and 64 others received long prison terms for treason and terrorism.

Rakhmonov's uncompromising attitude towards Abdullajanov does not appear to be rooted in inter-regional antipathy. The Rakhmonov government has consistently appointed Leninabadis to the post of Prime Minister since November 1992 and the present government includes six Leninabadis, among them Prime Minister Akil Akilov. The issue, therefore, is one of personal loyalties and patronage. Rakhmonov has been careful to ensure the promotion of his allies and *protégés* at the expense of potential rivals, whatever their regional background.

This power play could adversely affect Tajikistan's future. The criterion of personal loyalty to Rakhmonov tends to encourage illicit patronage relations, at the expense of the ideal of government responsibility and responsiveness to the citizens of Tajikistan. Consequently, political dissent is likely to be organized along the familiar lines of personal patronage and mutual loyalty. This will entrench the culture of personal allegiance and informal reciprocity, leading to political mobilization through personal, family and clan patronage. Resentment at being excluded from power could precipitate political action along fault lines similar to those that led to civil war in 1992.