

Local Political Structures and a Reflection on Field Research in Tajikistan

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My Background

In 2002 I graduated from the European University of St. Petersburg with a Master's in Russian Studies. In my Master's thesis I focused on the emergence of violent conflict in Tajikistan. Since April 2003 I have been part of the research project „Accounting for State-Building, Stability & Violent Conflict: The Institutional Framework of Caucasian and Central Asian Transitional Societies“ and working on my PhD in political science at the Free University of Berlin. Since 1 September 2003 I have been doing field research in Tajikistan and for four months I worked as an assistant for the „German Organization for Technical Cooperation“ (GTZ) writing an „Analysis of Peace and Conflict Potential in Tajikistan“. The overall goal of my research is to find out more about the role of local institutions in the process of stabilization in Tajikistan. I have almost three years experience of studying and working in the former Soviet Union, in Russia and Tajikistan. Among other articles I have published a „Country Report Tajikistan“ in the „Near and Middle East Economy Handbook“ 2004–2006 and a documentation on „The Relations Between the EU and the Central Asian States“ for the German Institute for International Politics and Security (SWP).

Part I: The Role of Local Institutions in the Process of Stabilization in Tajikistan

Introduction

Many times I have been asked why I picked Tajikistan as a site to conduct field research. For a long time I had studied political structures and conflict in both the (former) Soviet Union and in the Islamic world. Studying Tajikistan offered me a synthesis of both and gave me the chance to get to know a fascinating new culture, a blend of both Persian and Soviet elements.

Tajikistan is to many an unknown country. It is located in Central Asia surrounded by China in the East, Afghanistan in the South, Uzbekistan in the West and Kyrgyzstan in the North. Most people in the world have not heard of the Tajik Civil War which started in 1992, raged intensively for two years and only ended with a peace agreement in 1997 with the help of the UN and other mediating forces.

Assuming a connection between conflict and poverty, the extreme poverty in Tajikistan may have been one of the reasons why the struggle for access to scarce resources escalated into a violent conflict. Tajikistan is the poorest republic of the former Soviet Union and it is one of the poorest countries in the world. The majority of the people live at subsistence level and of the money work migrants

earn primarily in Russia and send home to their families. The total sum of such remittances is estimated to be about as high as the entire GDP of Tajikistan. The country is also very dependent on international aid. Tajikistan has a small amount of industry (such as aluminium production) and earns some income from the processing of natural resources (e.g. cotton production and electricity production from water power).

Tajikistan's crippling economic condition is very much connected to the extremely difficult geographical conditions in Tajikistan. It is doubly landlocked, its infrastructure is in very bad condition, and Tajikistan does not maintain good relationships with any of its neighboring countries, impeding its access to the world markets.

Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Tajik Civil War the state has found itself in a process of decay. Officially, 40% of Tajikistan's economy (though I believe that in reality the figure was even higher) was dependent on subsidies from Moscow during Soviet times. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union these subsidies stopped abruptly. Since then the level of education has decreased rapidly and the provision of healthcare is deteriorating significantly, while at the same time the birth rate is extremely high (with an average of 5 children). Politically, Tajikistan is still predominantly marked by legacies from its Soviet past. Cadres have not been replaced to a large extent, the administrative structures have mainly remained the same, and Tajikistan is still structured by the features of a planned economy. Nevertheless, Tajikistan has overcome its civil war and has with the help of international organizations and to a small extent from the state engaged in a process of stabilization.

In my dissertation I am analyzing the role of formal and informal local institutions in the process of stabilization in Tajikistan. My level of analysis is the local level (from the village level up the district level). I am looking at how the state and the society interact on the local level and whether this interaction has a stabilizing impact on the Tajik state and society in the long run or not.

For my dissertation I have chosen three regions as case studies: the Rasht Valley, a conservative region and stronghold of the *United Tajik Opposition* (UTO)¹ during the civil war, the Shuroobad district on the border with Afghanistan in the eastern part of the Khatlon region, and the Shugnan, Roushan and Darvaz districts in the autonomous region of „Kuhistoni Badakhshan“ (Gorno-Badakhshan) in the Pamir mountains.

I have been interviewing peasants, leaders of village organizations and women's groups (village organizations

and women's groups are a form of community mobilization introduced by the „Mountain Societies Development Support Program“ (MSDSP) which is part of the „Aga Khan Development Network“ (AKDN) – an Ismaili² organization and the most active international organization in Tajikistan. Their conception includes establishing democratic procedures in the villages, creating a village fund which hands out credit and grants to the local population and helps them to take their own initiatives in order to improve their livelihood. I have also been interviewing heads of farmers' associations (these so-called associations are in economic terms the functional heirs of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhозes*, whose main function is to rent out land to peasants), heads of *hukumat* (district administration), representatives of political parties, journalists, representatives of international organizations etc.

In this article I would like to focus on my experiences and preliminary results from the Rasht Valley, northeast of the capital, Dushanbe, concentrating on two major issues: the distribution of land and the local power structures (the state versus former warlords). Finally, I will conclude with a section of reflections on my fieldwork in Tajikistan.

Formal and Informal Local Institutions in the Rasht Valley: The State versus Former Fighters and Warlords

The Rasht valley is an agrarian region (mainly used for potato production). More than any other region it is dependent on subsistence farming and remittances from work migrants due to the fact that since the civil war people from the Rasht Valley do not have access to the labor market in Dushanbe. According to a survey carried out by

MSDSP in the Rasht Valley in 2003, 50% of the population does not have any access to land whatsoever.

During my last research stay in the Rasht Valley in February and March 2004 I focused primarily on formal institutions – the *hukumats* – and their role in the process of stabilization. In the course of my research I also learned about the informal structures and about how important the former warlords still are in the Rasht Valley.

What the seven districts of the Rasht valley have in common and what actually distinguishes them from the other two regions of my project is the fact that the local political structures are still very much influenced by warlords from the civil war. The Rasht Valley was the part of Tajikistan hit hardest by the civil war.

Up until now the formal local institutions of state administration on the village, *jamoat* (sub-district) and *rayon* (district) level have not functioned properly due in part to the lack of financial resources and the fact that the rule of law has not been re-instated. Consequently, the formal structures on the district level and below do not have a stabilizing influence on the Tajik state.

In fact, informal structures, the „local cocktails“ consisting of former warlords and combatants, religious authorities and other local big men (e.g. former directors of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhозes*), are more instrumental in structuring relations at the local level.

Nevertheless many respondents I talked to (mainly the heads of the districts but also representatives from international organizations) in various districts of the Rasht Valley said that there was a trend of increasing influence of the state on the local level and that the state was gradually establishing rule of law. Judging from my observations



The part marked in blue is the Rasht Valley. [Note: „Leninabad“ – today Sogd]

during the fieldwork and after reading ongoing debates between the government and the opposition³ in newspapers one should not underestimate the influence of former fighters and warlords from the civil war in the Rasht Valley.

The peace agreement following the civil war stipulated that government forces and the UTO would share posts on all levels of the state administration. The opposition was supposed to get 30% of posts on all levels. This was never totally implemented and lately as President Emomali Rakhmonov has increasingly been trying to get more of „his own people“ into power, he has replaced opposition representatives with „his own people“.

However, the opposition does not simply tolerate this violation of the agreement. Two of the greatest warlords (Salamsho Mukhabatov and Makhmadrozi Iskandarov) who had lately been staying in Jirgatal – the district in the Rasht Valley furthest from the capital and less subject to state control – went to Bishkek to see Hairiddin (a major former warlord who is said to control drug-trafficking into Bishkek) and they were said to be preparing a political act in order to increase their power.

Rakhmonov has to accomplish a difficult balancing act between his own people and representatives of the former opposition and simultaneously between the various regional groupings. A respondent⁴ said that the opposition is waiting for another war to start. So far the situation is calm and president Rakhmonov is presiding over peace. Since the civil war political constellations have changed and today the strongest opposition and the one Rakhmonov fears most is that from Kulyab, the president's home region. Currently, a new party, *Hisbi Taraqqiyot* (Party of Development), is trying to register and its leader is from the same region as the president. Even though the party has collected enough members in order to register, the president has not yet given a green light because he is afraid of this competition and its leader.

Recently, Rakhmanov has been shifting some people from one position to another within the government. For instance Mr. Mirzoev, the head of the presidential guard, was removed from his post and offered a low profile position instead. Following that, many people went to Kulyab to a protest and a respondent from Gharm said that even people from Gharm attended. About 3,000 people were said to have taken part in the protest. Even though social mobilization is generally low in Tajikistan today, this incident shows that people are ready to mobilize in support of particular issues.

Evaluations of the security situation in the Rasht Valley today are contradictory. On one hand there are said to be no more armed groups active in this region. On the other hand, a member of the *Social-Democratic Party* (SDPT) and the initiator of two NGOs in the Rasht Valley in February characterized the situation in the region as critical due to the fact that not even one factory is working in the Rasht Valley and that the majority of young people work abroad.

Due to the fact that people do not trust local government (Russian: *mestnaja vlast'*), they prefer to turn to *mullahs* (local religious authorities) with their problems. Unfortunately, these are often not very educated people and offer outdated solutions for conflicts. Conflicts in the Rasht Valley are mainly about access to scarce resources (e.g. land, water). There are conflicts about the distribution of water (for drinking and irrigation), access to gas and electricity, lack of school buildings (education as a very important resource), and finally infrastructure (e.g. bridges and roads). Many people I talked to in the Rasht Valley seemed to see a direct connection between poverty and conflict and therefore saw poverty reduction as the key to conflict prevention and resolution.

What actually interests me is the extent to which local informal institutions are capable of processing conflict in a non-violent way. People's opinions on the capacity of local informal institutions to solve small-scale conflicts within communities vary. Some respondents said that there are absolutely no informal or traditional mechanisms available in the communities in order to solve conflicts. Others like Daler, a local who works for an international organization in the sphere of community mobilization in Gharm, listed several institutions capable of solving small-scale conflicts within the communities: spiritual leaders like the *mullah*, *aksakal* (elected wise elder), the council of elders and the *mahalla* (a traditional living quarter which has its own procedures for solving conflicts).

In terms of the overall process of stabilization of the Tajik state I found that a big problem is that there is not much interaction between informal and formal institutions – between the state and the society – on the local level. So far the two systems are basically detached from one another and even within society districts and villages are very much detached from one another. As international organizations try to mobilize communities there is increasingly a danger of these entities becoming even more mutually detached.

At least the local population does not perceive the state as a threat as they might in neighboring Uzbekistan. People simply do not expect anything from the state anymore. Only a low percentage of the population receives an income from the state and those who do receive so little that they have to find additional sources of income.

The people in the local communities are rarely involved in political processes. Their involvement might increase with the new law on local government which has been drafted and will hopefully be passed this year. The main problem of the Tajik local administration is that organs of local administration answer to several higher levels of state administration (known as double subordination). Functions of the *rayon* (district) and *jamoat* (sub-district) level are not clearly divided and everybody is responsible for everything. The *jamoats* are financially dependent on the *rayon* due to the fact that they receive their budget through that level. The new *jamoat* law foresees that the head of the *jamoat* will be elected. The *jamoat* will have its own

budget and responsibilities such as garbage removal, sewage, maintenance of roads, and cemeteries.

Last but not least some former war commanders are increasingly becoming politically active and engage in social mobilization. As I mentioned earlier many of them believe that they did not get their share. Makhmadrozi Iskandarov for example – one of the most well-known war commanders in the region and the head of the Democratic Party – is preparing a campaign for his party and together with the Social-Democratic Party and the Islamic Renaissance Party he founded a political bloc in order to monitor the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005.

The Land Issue

The former war commanders also play an important role concerning land because in many districts of the Rasht Valley the distribution of land took place during the civil war, when the rules of the game were unclear and those with the most supporters, influence, and best weapons received the biggest shares of land. The other big land owners are usually the heads of the formal institutions who as a rule are the former heads of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhозes*. In the agricultural sphere there has not actually been a change in cadres since the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Certainly, these two kinds of big landowners do not act as neutral mediators in the conflict over distribution of land. They have personal interests as well and are therefore not interested in re-distribution of land.

The Rasht Valley has for a long time been a region focused on agriculture and livestock breeding. The land is relatively good and the main crop that grows is potato, an important cash crop. The potato trade from the Rasht valley to Dushanbe used to be dominated by one businessman from Jirgatal (his nickname is Shoh – Tajik for king)⁵ who used to be the commander of the border troops on the border with Kyrgyzstan in Jirgatal. He controls the drug-trafficking through the entire Rasht Valley and also the tobacco, vodka and coal trade within the region. Shoh was recently removed from his position as the commander of the border troops and is now the commander of troops in the Sogd region in the north of Tajikistan (in Uro-Teppe). His domination of those trade sectors depends on how well-established his network is.

Further connected with the unequal distribution of land is the fact that many young men go to Russia or other CIS countries for work migration. The patterns of migration vary due to geographical factors: the districts that are situated closer to Dushanbe (especially Faizabad and Roghun) are very much oriented towards Dushanbe. They have the opportunity to do trade and sell a lot of products (milk products, meat, fruits, and vegetables) to the markets in Dushanbe. Districts that are further away from the capital have fewer opportunities. Jirgatal, which is situated close to the Kyrgyz border, seems to be more oriented towards Kyrgyz markets (mainly to Osh). Therefore the work migration rate from the districts in the Rasht Valley rises

with the distance from Dushanbe. Work migration thus functions as a way of avoiding conflict. Russia is increasingly trying to fight illegal labor and has started to deport illegal workers to their home countries. This puts pressures onto the local communities which are highly dependent on remittances from work migrants.

Part II: Reflections on the Fieldwork

Difficulties and Positive Surprises

Fieldwork in the regions of Tajikistan is challenging due to infrastructural problems such as how to find transport from one place to another, frequent electricity cuts, etc. It is advisable to have an affiliation with some kind of organization. During my time in Tajikistan I have been affiliated with MSDSP, which has field offices all over the regions I worked in. They allowed me to use their offices⁶ and transport. In addition to that the people who work for MSDSP have been extremely open towards my research and have helped me to link up with respondents and find accommodation during my stays in the various districts. I do not know how I would have organized the fieldwork without the help of MSDSP. Tajik people's hospitality and their desire to do everything for the „guest“ to feel as comfortable as possible have also helped in this regard.

Starting fieldwork is always difficult and before I did not have any experience with it. Consequently, I was afraid to start the fieldwork on my own. I was also afraid of the conditions in the regions. Now I can say that one can get used to many things (only once a week having the opportunity to take a shower, not using internet or telephone for weeks, using an outside toilet, eating all kinds of weird things etc.).

The most significant problem in the beginning is probably to find the right entry points. Concerning this I was extremely lucky because I got the chance to work as an assistant for a consultant for the „German Organization for Technical Cooperation“ (GTZ) doing research for a conflict study on the local level for three months last year. Through this work I found many contacts and had something to build on in the phases of fieldwork.

One of the positive surprises besides Tajik hospitality was the fact that the so-called snow-balling strategy actually turned out to work very well. Interviewing a person and asking that person to recommend further respondents turned out to be extremely helpful, especially in a post-war country where people still have to learn to trust each other again.

Another very helpful method turned out to be to cross-check respondents; that is, to ask people what they thought about the *raisi hukumat* (head of the district), for example, in order to check whether the information he gave was „correct“ or at least intersubjectively shared by several people.

Doing field work for the first time I was sometimes afraid to touch sensitive issues. A scary situation for me was, for

example, when I went to see the deputy of the *raisi hukumat* (head of the district) in Tajikabad (one of the areas which was very much hit by the war) and I was accompanied by the MSDSP manager of Tajikabad, a former commander, and it was clear that these two had been opponents during the Tajik Civil War. When I asked the deputy of the head of the district how many political parties there were in the district, he replied that there was only the *Democratic Peoples' Party*, the party of the president. When we had just left the *hukumat* building, the MSDSP manager told me that he hated this attitude and that certainly there was only one party because the *hukumat* did not allow any other political parties to be active in the district.

It also turned out to be good advice to collect all information in the beginning and only later on to select. Sometimes information did not really seem to be useful in the beginning, but by the time I had found out more about the political power structures in the region, it turned out to be useful.

The Gender Issue

I have been thinking a lot of whether it is advantageous or disadvantageous to be a (young) woman while doing research in rural areas of Tajikistan. All in all I have come to the conclusion that it is better to be a woman due to the fact that around 80% of my respondents have been men and I doubt that they would have been as supportive, open and helpful towards a man as they were towards me. Maybe in fact they do not take me as seriously as they would take a man, but this does not harm the extent to which they reveal information to me. They rather feel that they have to support me, even though they probably think back in their minds that I should rather get married and have children, instead of travelling around Tajikistan, doing research and collecting material for a PhD.

Taking interviews from women was also a very good experience because the women developed women's solidarity towards me. They were very curious and wanted to find out what this woman from the „West“ came for and share their daily problems with me.

Doing research in the framework of a research group and to exchange experiences during the period of research gave me a lot of support. The members of the group have been sharing preliminary results, giving each other advice and I am very thankful for that.

Knowledge of Languages

It turned out to be incredibly helpful not only to know Russian, but also Tajik. Especially in rural areas of Tajikistan, this was a gate-opener because people felt honored by the fact that I knew some Tajik. Also especially women in rural areas often did not know enough Russian in order to communicate.

Especially in the Rasht valley, the region of the former opposition where many think that the Russians are responsible for the war, it was extremely good to be able to

do interviews in Tajik and to avoid Russian – “the language of the enemy“.

Irrational Factors

Sometimes it is amazing what positive influence irrational factors can have on one's fieldwork. In the Tajik context being German helps. Many times people emphasized our common background of being Indo-Europeans which is extremely important for them as they are the only „Persians“ in Central Asia and perceive being surrounded almost exclusively by Turkic *ethnies* (Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uigurs, etc.) as a threat.

In Badakhshan it helped because the people would always say that they like Germany very much because their highest religious leader, the Imam (Aga Khan) is married to a German. My eventual aim with the research is to shed light on state-society relations on the local level in Tajikistan. I want to find out to what extent the Tajik state penetrates society and to what extent agents of state administration are embedded in the local communities they work in. Finally, I would like to be able to forecast prospects for the process of stabilization in Tajikistan.

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¹ In short, during the Tajik Civil War „democratic“ forces allied with „Islamist“ forces and formed the „United Tajik Opposition“ (UTO). These forces were mainly from the Rasht Valley and Gorno-Badakhshan. On the other side were government forces representing an alliance between people from the northern Sogd and the southern Khatlon regions.

² Ismaili Islam is a branch of Shiite Islam. Most of the people living in Gorno-Badakhshan are Ismaili Muslims; Ismaili Islam is generally more liberal than the Sunnite Islam practiced in other parts of Tajikistan. The religious leader of the Ismailis is the Aga Khan, he is at the same time the head of the „Aga Khan Development Network“ (AKDN), which was the first international organization to become active in Gorno-Badakhshan in 1993.

³ Some representatives from the UTO active during the civil war are involved in politics today. Makhmadrozi Iskandarov for example, a commander from the Rasht Valley, is the head of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT).

⁴ This respondent is the nephew of Makhmadrozi Iskandarov. His father was Tajikistan's Ambassador to Kabul during the Tajik Civil War. The UTO was supported by forces from Afghanistan (with arms and ideology) during the war and the father of this respondent was probably associated .

⁵ Shoh is kin to Makhmadrozi Iskandarov.

⁷ This turned out to be extremely helpful due to the fact that during winter time the people in the regions only have an average three hours of electricity and it would have been difficult to work through and structure the collected material otherwise.