

## Power sharing in Tajikistan: political compromise and regional instability

Gregory Gleason

All wars end but the residual effects may linger for decades, complicating relations between former warring parties. There is good reason to believe that the sooner a post-conflict environment is 'normalised', the more likely it is that peace will be genuine and enduring. Donor organisations are keen to see negotiation replace conflict as quickly as possible, so they often condition their assistance on the adoption of political arrangements intended to distance the belligerents and incline them towards forms of government that stress co-operation, inclusion, participation, representation and interdependence. In practical terms, such a strategy usually implies a power-sharing formula, typically involving a specific contractual agreement with the objective of distributing access to, and control over, government authority. The aim is to ensure that no single party or group can take unilateral decisions on key issues affecting national development.

In accordance with the United Nations (UN)-brokered peace accord of 1997, the warring sides in Tajikistan's civil war—the government and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO)—agreed to re-incorporate opposition leaders into the central administration. This power-sharing arrangement was adopted with a robust sense of realism and an appreciation that the principle of inclusion would bring together disputants that could find many reasons not to co-operate. As the UN Secretary-

**Gregory Gleason** teaches international politics and public administration at the University of New Mexico, US. His research focuses on the adoption of international standards of governance within the post-communist countries of Eurasia and Central Asia. He has carried out consultancy work on regional co-operation for the United States Agency for International Development and the Asian Development Bank.

General Kofi Annan pointed out: 'It will be up to the Government of Tajikistan and [the] UTO to fill the General Agreement with life, to bring all segments of society into the process of reconciliation and, together with them, to reform and strengthen the country's institutions so that they will withstand the stresses and strains to be expected after years of turbulence and upheaval'.<sup>1</sup> Although this power-sharing arrangement was heralded as a critical turning point in stabilising the country, it also institutionalised a political contract that allowed some civil war-era battle commanders to become ensconced as self-sufficient regional leaders. Some soon began to exercise political authority that was beyond the control of the central government.

Formulae for post-conflict reintegration programmes must be viewed critically and with a great deal of sensitivity to local and regional circumstances so as to avoid working at cross-purposes with other goals. Standard approaches to post-conflict reconstruction sometimes promote decentralisation, for example, as a means of enhancing public participation through greater inclusion of regional leaders. Intending to encourage 'ownership' of post-conflict arrangements, donor solutions often seek to enfranchise regional leaders and important sector constituencies. Post-conflict stabilisation programmes that do not enfranchise local officials can be easily subverted through opposition, indirection, or, sometimes, simply neglect. Given the immense challenges and hard realities that confront the international community in establishing a new system of rule in Afghanistan over the coming months, the power-sharing experiment in Tajikistan provides a timely, relevant and extremely insightful case study.

### *The course of the civil war*

Tajikistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 coincided with the contraction of commercial relations with the former superpower and the discontinuation of Soviet-era subsidies. Price liberalisation, structural reform and the adoption of hard budget constraints took place as Tajikistan entered a period of national dissension and civil conflict. The economy was further compressed by the interruption of trade and communication that resulted from the outbreak of war in 1992. Fighting led to the loss of some 20,000 lives, displaced around 600,000 people, isolated the country, and traumatised Tajikistan's multinational population.<sup>2</sup> In a short period of time, Tajikistan went from being a low- to middle-income country to being one of the world's poorest states.<sup>3</sup>

As the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in autumn 1991, the former First Secretary of the Tajikistan Communist Party, Rakhmon Nabiev, assumed control of the government. Opponents to the communist regime, representing ideological positions ranging from 'democrats' to 'Islamic revivalists', challenged his rule. While the contest appeared to be ideologically based, in reality the fault lines were just as much regional in nature. Leaders from the eastern areas of Tajikistan, particularly the Garm Valley, aligned with their counterparts in Badakhshan and Kurgan-Tyube in an attempt to unseat the coalition from the Kulyab and Hujand regions which backed Nabiev.

In early 1992, it became clear that Russia did not intend to intervene to prevent the transition to independent government. Tajikistan thus became caught in a wave of escalating tension that resulted in political demonstrations that paralysed the capital, Dushanbe. Political protests soon gave way to violence, as opposition groups seized power from the standing parliament in May 1992. In mid-September 1992, Nabiev, a native of Tajikistan's northern Leninabad region, was forced to resign—as he was boarding a plane from Dushanbe to return to the northern part of the country—by an armed group claiming allegiance to the Islamic Renaissance Party. The latter declared control over the country.

The Kulyab–Hujand coalition regrouped and civil war erupted. With help from Russia and Uzbekistan, the forces of the Kulyab–Hujand alliance attacked rebel units in the southern part of Tajikistan. On 24 October 1992, they recaptured Dushanbe, killing thousands of civilians and soldiers in the process, and forcing thousands of people in rural regions to the south and west of the capital to flee their homes.<sup>4</sup> A hastily organised parliament appointed Emomali Rahmonov leader of the country.

Tajikistan's neighbours, particularly Russia and Uzbekistan, continued to exert significant influence over internal decision-making in Tajikistan. The Russian 201st Motorised Rifle Division—which was already deployed in Tajikistan prior to independence—transformed itself into what was described as a peacekeeping mission. Russia assumed primary responsibility for Tajik military operations and border protection. Then Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev expressed support for maintaining a major military commitment in the country, arguing that Russia had a long-term interest in Tajikistan.<sup>5</sup> Since independence, Russia has continued to station between 15,000 and 25,000 troops in Tajikistan, gradually turning the state into what Lena Jonson has called a 'Russian protectorate'.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian government's official position with regard to Tajikistan's domestic matters officially was one of neutrality. In practice, however, the preservation of stability was oriented towards favouring the communist-era political élite. Moscow was delicately balancing the goals of peacekeeping and stability with its long-term objective of keeping an outpost in the sensitive mountain passes of Inner Asia. Russia had little of commercial value to gain from its commitment to Tajikistan; and it had little interest in Tajikistan's mineral and agricultural resources. Even before the civil war broke out, furthermore, most ethnic Russians had left the region for Russia or other republics. Its continuing commitment to Tajikistan was thus out of proportion with any simple utilitarian calculation of its interests in the region.<sup>7</sup>

### *National reconciliation and power sharing*

The Tajikistan authorities sought to re-establish normal governmental and political functions in the country. Government and opposition representatives entered into political dialogue—the so-called 'Inter-Tajik Talks'—mediated by the UN, and reached agreement on a ceasefire in September 1994. Then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali sent a fact-finding team to the country from 4–12 October 1994 to assess the possibility of establishing a United Nations Observer Mission in Tajikistan (UNMOT). In the course of October 1994, a 15-member military observer mission—later expanded to 40 officers—took up office in Dushanbe and three other southern Tajik cities (Garm, Kurgan-Tyube and Pyanj).

UN organisations were instrumental in bringing together the warring sides. Under the auspices of the UN, Rahmonov, representing the Tajikistan government, and Said Abdullah Nuri, representing the UTO (the formal organisation of the former armed opposition), concluded, on 17 August 1995, a protocol on principles for achieving national reconciliation. In December 1996, Rahmonov and Nuri signed a permanent ceasefire accord. The two sides agreed to form a joint commission to monitor compliance with the agreement, and asked the UN to deploy a team of military observers to assist in this task. The agreement noted: 'the collective peacekeeping forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Russian troops in Tajikistan shall carry out their duties in keeping with the principle of neutrality . . . and shall co-operate with United Nations military observers'.

In June 1997, the Tajikistan government and the UTO signed a peace deal. Under the accord, both sides agreed to observe a reasonable timeframe for reductions in

their war-fighting capacities. The agreement consisted of military and political protocols. The military protocol was based on the idea that incremental and contemporaneous reductions in armaments could foster greater trust and confidence. In part, it was intended to address the possibility that the 'prospect of peace' might encourage some of the vanquished to abandon the idea of reconciliation and undertake individual campaigns in search of the booty of war. The military protocol provided for the designation of 10 assembly areas for UTO troops, the registration of fighters and weapons, and for medical examination of ex-combatants.

The political protocol, meanwhile, included provisions designed to reintegrate the opposition into the government in order to give the former fighters a stake in the peace process. According to the plan, the peace process was scheduled to end officially on 27 March 2000 at a joint session of the two newly elected houses of parliament—at which time the temporary National Reconciliation Commission would be dissolved. The protocol established a Central Election Commission, with 25% UTO participation, to oversee all polls and referenda until the new parliament was installed. The sides pledged to reform the Tajikistan government, incorporating UTO representatives in government departments—30% of ministerial posts were to be filled by UTO appointees—local government and judicial and law-enforcement bodies on the basis of a quota system.

The accord was implemented in stages and with some setbacks. Opposition leaders did return to the country, and the opposition military was permitted to establish a presence in the capital. A timeline was established for demobilisation and the decommissioning of weapons. But the formula for UTO personnel occupying 30% of ministerial posts was not gracefully implemented, as continual disputes took place over which positions they should hold. In addition, hostage taking, political assassinations and other types of potentially destabilising renegade action periodically threatened to derail the peace process.

Nevertheless, the public expressed broad support for the new power-sharing arrangement in a September 1999 referendum. And in the November 1999 presidential contest, Rahmonov was elected to a seven-year term of office. The reconciliation process was officially regarded as complete when the newly elected houses of parliament voted to dissolve the National Reconciliation Committee in March 2000. In May 2000, UNMOT was formally withdrawn from the country, and Tajikistan's power-sharing arrangement was left to its own devices in countering the threat of regional insurgency.

## *Regional dynamics*

Although the peace deal led to the consolidation of the Tajikistan government's control over the capital, it did not solve the country's regional problems nor did it succeed in retiring the military capacity and erasing the agenda of the civil-war period. Hence, conflict erupted again in autumn 1998, when former commander Makhmud Khudaiberdiev and 700 rebel troops took control of Hujand with the intention of establishing a revolutionary government. The city was soon recaptured by troops loyal to the Tajik government, but the incident dramatised the willingness of the political extremists to use force to overthrow the central administration.

Hujand is physically located in the northern part of Tajikistan in a region that has historically been under the control of Uzbeks. Much of its population continues to be Uzbek speaking and tied by traditions and family associations with Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley. Khudaiberdiev's forces consisted primarily of Uzbeks, many of whom had taken part in the Tajikistan civil war on the side of the opposition.

Three months later, a series of terrorist explosions in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, killed 16 people and narrowly failed to claim the life of President Islam Karimov. The revolutionary group that took credit for the bombings, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), appeared to be operating from inside Tajikistan.

In summer 1999, armed irregular units with allegiance to IMU leader Juma Namangani moved from mountain redoubts in northern Tajikistan into staging areas in Kyrgyzstan in preparation for a major assault on Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley. As they moved down through the mountain passes of the Altaisky range into the border areas of Kyrgyzstan, the rebels captured a number of Kyrgyzstan villages, taking hostage villagers and a group of Japanese scientists who were in the area at the time. The foreign detainees were eventually released after the rebels had received a ransom and safe passage through Tajikistan to the border of Afghanistan. In summer 2000, they returned to the region, travelling through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan en route to Uzbekistan. The rebels attacked and occupied villages in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, advancing to within 100 kilometres of Tashkent in August 2000. In early 2001, reports circulated that the rebels had established a staging area in the inaccessible Tavildara region of central Tajikistan.<sup>8</sup> The Tajikistan government denied the reports, but the tone of the denials gave credence to the idea that members of the former UTO were secretly aiding the rebels. Throughout spring 2001, Central Asian chancelleries were anxiously developing plans for a co-ordinated inter-state programme to repulse new terrorist attacks.

The revolutionaries claim that their objective is to sweep away the Central Asian governments that they regard as illegitimate remnants of the Soviet-era and establish an Islamic Caliphate uniting the Muslim faithful throughout the region.<sup>9</sup> Their call to jihad—a Muslim holy war—is in large part an outgrowth of the civil wars in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The issues involved in their revolutionary programme have expanded far beyond competition between winners and losers in those conflicts. What is at stake is a competition for hearts and minds throughout the Central Asian Islamic crescent, from Chechnya in the west to Xinjiang in the east.<sup>10</sup>

Alarmed by the growing drug trade<sup>11</sup> and the increasingly well-organised terrorist threat, the Tajik, Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments banded together to confront the growing insurgency in the region by adopting increasingly severe counterinsurgency measures. International organisations and major governments recognised the close linkage between illegal revenue and terrorism and broadly supported the anti-extremist efforts in Uzbekistan.<sup>12</sup> In June 2000, for instance, the us government responded to a request for support from the Uzbek government in its struggle against terrorism by officially condemning the IMU as a terrorist organisation.<sup>13</sup>

Critics of the Central Asian governments' heavy-handed approach to counter-terrorism have argued that the counterinsurgency campaigns have cast a wide net, extending beyond the regimes' opponents in ways that violate the rights of innocent citizens. In November 2000, the us House of Representatives expressed concern over the use of terrorism as a pretext for political repression. A House of Representatives resolution urged the Uzbekistan government, which was 'engaged in military campaigns against violent insurgents, to observe international law regulating such actions, to keep civilians and other noncombatants from harm, and not to use such campaigns to justify further crackdowns on political opposition or violations of human rights commitments under [the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe].'<sup>14</sup> In June 2001, the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) published a report referring to a serious escalation of violations of basic human rights in three Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>15</sup>

The situation was transformed, however, by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, and the subsequent formation of an international alliance against terrorism in Central Asia. In his national address on 20 September, us President George W. Bush expressly identified the IMU as an important wing of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organisation. Unconfirmed reports imply that the principal figures of, and most of the fighters with, the IMU

were killed in the Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz battles in northern Afghanistan in November 2001. If so, the most notorious of the armed opposition in Tajikistan may have been eliminated.

## *Conclusion*

Power-sharing arrangements may indeed provide a vital mechanism for inducing former combatants to come to the negotiating table. But donor organisations should view them critically and treat them as tactical rather than strategic instruments. When successful, power sharing enhances national-level loyalty, reinforces legitimacy and justice, and may be a crucial element in setting ex-combatants on the road to a just and durable peace. Successful arrangements bring the more moderate of the former opponents into a union of convenience and, in the process, isolate extremist factions that may act as spoilers or may continue to press non-negotiable demands.

But every situation is different. There is a danger in relying on fixed formulae that are promoted by external actors without a robust understanding of the internal political dynamics. In addition, they may be championed primarily for the convenience of the donor agency bureaucracy, or worst of all, they may actually be designed to achieve the foreign-policy goals of outside actors. Charles Fairbanks, for example, has argued that: 'The Russian government forced its local allies into a fragile power-sharing agreement with Islamist guerrilla fighters'.<sup>16</sup>

The donor community is now moving very quickly towards consensus that the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan must be one whose qualities genuinely reflect the richness and complexity of the population. The natural tendency will be to develop some form of consociational government based on proportional representation so that the Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek populations in the north, the Hazaras in the north central regions and the Pushtun majority in the centre and south may interact in a natural political community. Avoiding de facto partition under these circumstances may be difficult. Power-sharing arrangements that lock political actors into untenable coalitions may lead to enduring and invidious divisions within a country.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Tajikistan', UN document S/1997/686, 4 September 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Tajikistan's population of roughly 6.1 million is concentrated in the Western half of the country. Population figures are approximate (a new census was underway in early 2000) but a reliable index appears to be that the population is 65% Tajik, 25% Uzbek and 10% Slavic and other. Around 70% of the population lives in rural areas. The official language of Tajikistan is Tajik, a dialect of Persian similar to Farsi and Dari. Many Tajikistan citizens are bilingual or trilingual, speaking Tajik, Russian and Uzbek, as well as other languages. Roughly 80% of the population speaks the Tajik language. Some 40% of the population in the Leninobod and Kulyob regions speaks the Uzbek language, while approximately 40% of the population and most businesspersons and government officials speak or understand the Russian language.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2001*, placed Tajikistan at 184 in a list of 207 countries ranked in terms of gross national income per capita in 1999. *World Development Indicators 2001*, (Washington, DC: World Bank publications, 2001). Also available at [www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2001/worldview.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2001/worldview.htm), section 1.1, 'Size of the Economy'.

<sup>4</sup> A UN study estimated that the fighting led to the exile of approximately 100,000 persons in neighbouring countries and the internal displacement of some 600,000 Tajikistan citizens. 'UNHCR report on Tajikistan, January 1993–March 1996', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, May 1996, p. 4; 'Return to Tajikistan, Continued Regional and Ethnic Tensions', Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, May 1995, vol. 7, no. 9, pp. 4 and 7.

<sup>5</sup> Kozyrev, A., *Izvestiia*, 4 August 1993, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Jonson, L., *The Tajik War: A Challenge to Russian Policy*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Gleason, G., 'Why Russia is in Tajikistan', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2001, pp. 77–89.

<sup>8</sup> The Moscow-based newspaper, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, reported on 10 January 2001 that IMU troops under the direction of Juma Namangani, who had just months before been escorted out of Tajikistan as a result of the deal to release the hostages, had returned to Tajikistan and were ensconced in the Tavildara valley east of Dushanbe. On 17 January, however, then Tajik Defence Minister Sherali Khairullaev denied foreign news reports that Juma Namangani and his rebels had returned to Tajikistan, saying that a special government commission dispatched two weeks earlier to the Tavildara region had established that no members of the banned IMU had taken refuge there. On 30 January, the Moscow newspaper, *Kommersant-Daily*, reported that the Tajik Ministry for Emergency Situations, headed by former UTO field commander Mirzo Zieev, had flown some 250 IMU members and Juma Namangani out of the country. See *RFE/RL Newslines*, 11, 17 and 31 January 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The Caliphate refers to the state established under successors of the Prophet Mohammed. In the early Islamic period, the Caliphate united all Muslim lands under a single Caliph (or Khalifa, literally, 'successor' to the Prophet).

<sup>10</sup> Dryer, J.T., 'The PLA and Regionalism: Xinjiang', in Yang, R.H. et al. (ed), *Chinese Regionalism: The Security Dimension*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 249–276; Chang, F.K., 'China's Central Asian Power and Problems', *Orbis*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1997, pp. 401–425.

<sup>11</sup> The insurgency movements were sustained from revenues derived from lucrative drug and weapons sales in the region. Afghanistan emerged as the world's major producer of opium in the 1990s, reaching a production peak in 1999 that amounted for 75% of the world's opium output. (See United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, *World Drug Report 2000*, (New York: United Nations Publication Office, 2001), p. 27.) The primary transportation routes for Afghan opium production were through Iran and Pakistan, but an area of increasing cultivation in the late 1990s was the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan, adjacent to Tajikistan.

<sup>12</sup> The IMU was outlawed in Uzbekistan in 1997, but continued to operate in Tajikistan until early 2001.

<sup>13</sup> The US Department of State designated the IMU a foreign terrorist organisation in September 2000. Press statement by Richard Boucher, US Department of State, 15 September 2000.

<sup>14</sup> House of Representatives Congressional Resolution 397, 106th Congress of the United States, 1 November 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See the 'Report of the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) Mission to Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), 7–16 June 2001', (New York: International Helsinki Federation, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Fairbanks, C.H., 'Disillusionment in the Caucasus and Central Asia', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2001, p. 49.