Tajikistan on the Move

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Tajikistan on the Move

Statebuilding and Societal Transformations

Edited by Marlene Laruelle

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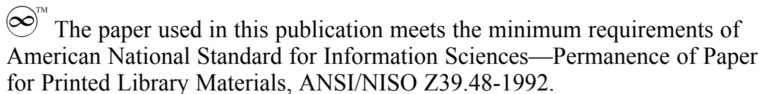
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Introduction

Marlene Laruelle

The southernmost and poorest state of the Eurasian space, Tajikistan collapsed immediately upon the fall of the Soviet Union and plunged into a bloody five-year civil war (1992–1997) that left more than 50,000 people dead and more than half a million displaced. After the 1997 Peace Agreements, Tajikistan stood out for being the only post-Soviet country to recognize an Islamic party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a key actor in the civil war but also in post-war reconstruction and democratization. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was unique to the region in that it was a democratic Islamic party that accepted the secular nature of the state and parliamentary representation. However, this recognition was short-lived: in 2015, the authorities accelerated the authoritarian move that had been set in motion several years earlier and decided to ban the Islamic Party on the—false—pretext of its links with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The IRPT ban raised little domestic backlash from Tajik society, confirming very low levels of social mobilization in favor of political actors.

Tajikistan's political stability has always been precarious. In the restive Rasht Valley and the autonomous region of Gorno-Badashkhan, situated in the Pamirs, tensions have regularly flared between local elites and Dushanbe. Labeled "Islamist" insurgencies by the authorities so as to receive international support and strengthen the government's domestic legitimacy, these insurgencies have involved several conflicts of interest within the shadow economy (mostly around the trafficking of drugs and cigarettes) as well as the rebalancing of influence between former warlords and central Dushanbe. As such, scholars continue to debate whether these events suggest state weakness or, on the contrary, success in recentralizing the polity around Rahmon, who has removed presidential term limits and looks set to establish a multigenerational dynasty by promoting his son Rustam Emomali as his successor.

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Tajikistan's linguistic and cultural proximity to Iran notwithstanding, the balance of external powers over the country remains fairly typical of Central Asia, with Russia as the major security provider—the Dushanbe military base is one of Russia's main bases abroad—and primary migration destination, while China is its principal investor—two-thirds of Tajikistan's public debt is now owned by Beijing. Thanks to its 1,400-kilometer (870-mile) border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan has been the subject of the international community's scrutiny and the recipient of support from many international programs—European, American, and Russian—designed to help the Tajik state reinforce its border, train its border guards and army, and fight against drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Tajikistan, like many Central American states, can be described as a narco-state, in the sense that a large part of its GDP is built on drug trafficking and the main criminal groups in charge of drug transportation are protected by the central authorities, including by members of the presidential family itself. In a unique regional context where Russia, China, Iran, and the United States meet, the inability of the international community to turn the Dushanbe regime against drug trafficking demonstrates the limits of foreign interference and the high resilience of local regimes.

Another specificity of Tajikistan is its massive labor migration flows toward Russia. The civil war displaced hundreds of thousands of people and triggered new forms of population mobility that rapidly transitioned from flows of refugees to flows of migrants looking for jobs and a better life. In the early 2000s, Tajik migrants became the first to arrive on the Russian job market; within a few years, they were followed by Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Today, out of a population of 8 million, about one million work abroad seasonally—one of the highest rates of departure in the world. Migration trends have impacted Tajikistan's economy and rent mechanisms: half of the country's GDP comes from migrant remittances, a higher share than anywhere else in the world. Yet the Tajik diaspora remains politically quite disorganized; no genuine and legitimate "opposition in exile" has emerged thus far. However, it is in the societal and cultural realms that migration has had the most transformative effect. In some regions of the country, the majority of working-age men stay abroad for several months a year, or for several years in a row, which dramatically impacts family structure, gender relations, youth education and schooling, and the relationship between the older and younger generations. Migrants' cultural and societal identities are on the move, with a growing role given to Islam as a normative tool for regulating the cultural shock of migration.

Tajikistan's evolution is therefore unique in the Central Asian region and has attracted the attention of the scholarly community. From the end of the

civil war to around 2013, the country opened up to international scholars and to partnerships between Western and local institutions. This enabled several research projects, making Tajik society one of the most studied in Central Asia, especially with regard to gender, the evolving place of Islam, and the transformation of agricultural regions into launch pads for labor migration. This openness came under threat from early 2010 and dramatically deteriorated in 2013–2014. Several local scholars were threatened; a Tajikistan-born PhD student at Toronto University was arrested for "spying" for Western countries and detained for several months. Since then, as in Karimov's Uzbekistan, many scholars have had to discontinue their research on the ground. Some have re-oriented their work toward studying Tajiks in migration, instead of at home, as a way to compensate for the closure of the country. The most innovative research on the country now comes in the field of migration study or in terms of developments among the Tajik diaspora.

Several books have been devoted to Tajikistan. In the field of political science, both John Heathershaw's classic work about the end of civil war in Tajikistan, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peace-Building and the Emergence of Legitimate Order* (London: Routledge, 2009), and his edited volume, along with Edmund Herzig, *The Transformation of Tajikistan* (London: Routledge, 2012), address the sources of Tajikistan's statehood. Tim Epkenhans's *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016) offers a unique in-depth study of this turning point in Tajikistan's history. Lawrence Markowitz compared elites in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013) and Jesse Driscoll the Tajik and Georgian elites in *Warlords & Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

In the field of anthropology, Sophie Roche's *Domesticating Youth: The Dynamics of Youth Bulge in Tajikistan* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014) explores the crucial issue of the country's youth and its future. Several scholars, including Michele Commercio, Kathleen Collins, Olivier Ferrando, Sophie Hohmann, and Alisher Latypov, have published articles devoted to transformations of the social fabric, as well as to issues concerning youth, women, and health. Another body of literature is devoted to agricultural transformations, in particular the failure of the privatization process to empower farmers, alleviate rural poverty, or counter the dominance of cotton-production (Brent Hierman and Hafiz Boboyorov). An associated body of literature is devoted to labor migration to Russia and the corresponding deep social, cultural, and religious changes (Sophie Roche, Manja Stefan-Emmrich, and Saodat Olimova, among others).

The first section of this volume investigates the critical question of the nature of the regime, its stability, legitimacy mechanisms, and patterns of centralization. Declared "founder of peace" and "leader of the nation," Rahmon has succeeded in making himself and his family the focal point of political power. In the first chapter, Jesse Driscoll advances the notion of *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism* to illuminate the roots of the broad-based social legitimacy Rahmon enjoys. Warlords, both rebel militia and pro-regime paramilitary commanders, progressively built a "warlord state" based on patronal mechanisms (the only pathway to economic security) that relied on kinship and regional rural identities. In the second chapter, John Heathershaw and Parviz Mullojonov question the dire predictions that Tajikistan will collapse into new chaos. They demonstrate that, on the contrary, the country's "authoritarian conflict management" has succeeded quite well in dealing with regional outbreaks of violence. Management of tensions in the Rasht Valley, as well as in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region, showed complex dynamics of bargaining, coercion, escalation, or accommodation by central authorities and regional insurgent leaders—all of whom were already *within* the state. Even if a growing trend toward hegemonic authoritarian practices and discourses was challenged by the 2012 Khorog riots, Tajikistan remains an example of inclusive authoritarian power-sharing achieving some forms of regime durability.

The Tajik regime cannot be understood without being linked to its regional environment. In Chapter 3, Edward Lemon builds upon the notion of extraterritorial authoritarian security governance to discuss how Tajikistan manages opposition not only at home but abroad, developing transborder security practices to protect itself. Since its main neighbors and migration destination countries share the same authoritarian security culture, Tajikistan has been able to target several categories of opponents living abroad, mostly in Russia and Turkey. It has, for instance, put 1,600 of its citizens on the Interpol wanted list. Its security organs have developed new transborder security practices, ranging from delegitimization, surveillance, and intimidation to detention, extraordinary rendition, and political killing. This opens a discussion on the partially *surrogate* nature of Tajikistan's regime and authoritarianism; even its security apparatus is powerful enough to track opponents. In the fourth chapter, Kirill Nourzhanov focuses on Tajikistan's foreign policy, a paradoxically understudied topic, stating that Rahmon's open-door drive has been compromised by Tajikistan's continued reliance on Russia for security and economic stability. China's massive investment presence is not enough to dethrone Russia, while Iran's role remains hampered by Tehran's complex international status and Afghanistan has not become the regional hub that U.S. pundits were hoping for at the end of the 2000s. Though Tajikistan has

yet to enter the Eurasian Economic Union, it will probably do so soon, a move that will likely be accelerated by the withdrawal of the U.S. presence from Central Asia—economic cooperation was always scant, and strategic rents from supplying NATO troops have now dried up—and the rise of anti-Western sentiment.

In the volume's second part, we move away from studying the state to delve into the societal fabric of Tajikistan, shaped by local rural specificities and social vulnerabilities. In Chapter 5, Brent Hierman examines the outcomes of land reform policies for rural life, stating that farm reorganization has been perverted by information and power asymmetries that empowered local authorities at the expense of farmers. Even the revalorization of food crops in the name of food security has not been enough to counterbalance the strategic preeminence of cotton, which has contributed to maintaining top-down dictates that do not take into account local contexts or conditions. Collective farm managers have become critical actors in the sector, since they are able to access needed inputs for agricultural production, while women have been the main losers from the transformation—female-headed farms still have lower levels of access to irrigation systems and are less likely to be able to purchase high-quality cotton seeds than are male-headed farms. In the following chapter, Suzanne Levi-Sanchez analyzes the structures that govern everyday rural life: lands and household plots are critical in determining a family's destiny, while the *mahalla* and powerful figures such as the mother-in-law, the *aksaqals* and the *mulloh* structure social links. Villagers' access to their leaders often depends on family standing, gender, and leadership style/*mahalla* type, meaning that power relationships vary in important ways depending on local conditions.

The Tajik social fabric has been deeply affected both by the violence of the civil war and by mass poverty. In 2013, the share of citizens living below the national poverty line rose to 68 percent, with 49 percent of the population below the US$2 line. Health care has been one of the most disturbed sectors: a large share of the population is no longer provided with basic vaccines nor has access to medical professionals. In Chapter 7, Sophie Hohmann studies the rise of injectable drug use, which constitutes one of the main risk factors for the transmission of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C infection. She discusses the ideological gaps between international donors and local actors in managing "rehabilitation centers" for drug users, confirming that the two lack a common perception of the problem, hampering donors' ability to capture local realities and interpretations.

Another major social evolution is the reorganization of gender relationships and the retraditionalization of the role attributed to women. In her chapter, Michele Commercio offers a unique analysis of the rise of polygamy

(polygyny), which is on its way to becoming a major feature of Tajik society, especially in rural areas and among elites, and is increasingly socially accepted. She looks at the agency of women who accept polygamy as a way to achieve marriage and motherhood, securing for themselves a certain social status and respectability as well as material stability.

The third section of the volume is devoted to identity narratives and changes. While the Tajik regime works hard to control the national narrative and the interpretation of the civil war, society is literally and figuratively on the move, as migration profoundly reshapes societal structures and cultural values. In Chapter 9, Tim Epkenhans addresses the state memory process of oblivion and the ambivalence of historical erasure around the perestroika years and the civil war, analyzing the various dynamics at work in the struggle over memory between the Rahmon regime and its main opponents (warlords as well as the IRPT). Yet much more than the civil war is at stake—this struggle is about the relevance of political Islamic activism that took shape against the Soviet regime as early as the 1970s and, therefore, the significance of Hanafi Sunni Islam in defining morality and collective identity.

This quite rigid reading of modern Tajikistan is unable to take into consideration the transformative dynamics at work in Tajik society through the migration process. The last two articles delve into a critical and forward-looking study of societal evolutions linked to migration. In his chapter, Hafiz Boboyorov addresses the question of securityscapes, i.e. socio-cognitive spaces that people build for existential security. Maintaining contacts with the homeland, the village of origin and the *mahalla*, as well as pursuing life-crisis rituals and creating labor teams, are all foundational elements of this securitization process while in migration. Another is the in-group support that migrants develop while in Russia, protecting each other from undesired encounters, sharing information, and using trusted mediators. Yet Islam, and especially a globalized fundamentalist pietist movement, appears as the rising element of Tajik migrants' securityscape: it regulates both physical and moral security in workplace and other settings and brings migrants together to make their interactions meaningful and socio-politically relevant. It offers a new social prestige to those who work in an environment seen as threatening their identity.

Sophie Roche follows by offering us a fascinating study of Islamic piety among Tajik migrants at Moscow's Cherkiz bazaar. While working in a bazaar is not a prestigious job, it allows for wealth accumulation. Low status and the feeling of insecurity in a chaotic environment such as the bazaar—where the border between state-initiated activities, legal measures, and criminal opportunities is difficult to delineate—is compensated for with Islamic piety. Migrants who die in Russia during migration are increasingly

considered martyrs (*shahid*). As Tajiks occupy the lowest rung on Russia's ethnic hierarchy, turning to Islam to exhibit religious maturity and therefore gain social respect among both Tajiks and Russians has emerged as a critical fundament of today's Tajik society.

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