



The Struggle For Identity In Post-Soviet Tajikistan

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All new nations face a struggle in constructing a national identity for themselves. This article examines Tajikistan as a particularly interesting case of this issue. The task of nation-building in Tajikistan involves wrestling with factors such as religion, ethnicity, linguistic heritage, and regional loyalties, in a particularly difficult regional context. The author discusses the current celebration of the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid empire as a national celebration of Tajik identity representing important policy choices in solving the dilemmas facing the Tajik nation.

THE MULTI-CULTURAL DILEMMA FOR NEW NATIONS

As Lloyd Fallers observed more than two decades ago in "The Anthropology of the Nation State," the greatest national challenges revolve neither around economics, nor politics, nor defense; they are often challenges concerning intangible symbols. All successful nations possess core symbolic elements that serve as touchstones for their citizens. These symbolic elements inspire loyalty, concretize feelings of personal pride and honor, and underlie the moral basis for public participation in national defense, politics, and social and economic institutions. New nations must decide, consciously or unconsciously, what symbols best represent their feelings about themselves individually and collectively. New nations in the twentieth century have faced a great struggle in constructing national identities for themselves. The problem is particularly acute when a given nation encompasses more than one ethnic, religious or linguistic group. One can note the problems with new nations of Africa, some of which have dozens of groups with their own local loyalties that supersede their loyalty to the state.

Such nations do not choose to be multicultural. Rather, multiculturalism is

thrust upon them, and their citizens must make choices concerning the various elements that may be incorporated into public expressions of identity. Such expressions are wide ranging. Choices of cultural emphasis in public education, festivals, monuments, emblems and public display of symbols are examples. Every time a national leader makes a public remark, or supports a public event, he or she affects the public perception of this identity. It is a delicate matter, because groups that feel excluded are likely to grow alienated and hostile over time. Because new nations have a hard enough time maintaining basic services, this kind of social division is dangerous.

IDENTITY IN TAJIKISTAN

The new nations in the former Soviet Union (FSU) face many challenges in the near future of the kind mentioned above. No nation in the FSU has more symbolic resources, and more confusion about how to marshal them, than Tajikistan.

With this in mind, it is not this article's purpose to rehearse the political dynamics of Tajikistan, but rather to present the cultural dilemmas that the Tajik people face in trying to forge a new nation out of their former Soviet territory. Most of these

choices do not involve questions of the use of tangible resources, but rather decisions about symbolic resources. Moreover, these choices involve much more than simply choosing from a menu of identities and symbols. These intangible resources are still ambiguous and somewhat unformed. They will undergo manipulation and concretization in the next few years as Tajikistan creates itself.

The process of symbolic nation construction is already well underway in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. A national epic and hero in Kyrgyzstan, *Manas* has been incorporated into the constitution. Uzbekistan has decided (for better or worse) that Teymur Lang (Tammerlane) is a suitable national hero. The Kazaks are a bit more conflicted about their national identity but they have moved their capital closer to the center of the nation to split the geographical distance between the principal ethnic groups that make up their population. These nations have the admirable advantage of having financial resources to plan and build. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have potential oil wealth, and Kyrgyzstan substantial financial assistance from the United States and other Western nations.

The Republic of Tajikistan is the smallest and most isolated of the new nations of former Soviet Central Asia. With a population of around six million, and virtually no arable land, it is also the poorest of the new republics. Devoid of virtually all natural resources save hydroelectric power, the Tajiks have a very difficult economic future.

The ethnic composition of Tajikistan is approximately 55 percent Tajik, 23 percent Uzbek, 10 percent Ethnic Russian and two percent Other. Tajiks also live in neighboring nations, especially Uzbekistan in the largely Tajik cities of Samarkand and Bukhara and the areas surrounding them. The most notable fact about the ethnic composition of Tajikistan is that its

population is virtually an island of Aryans in a sea of Turks. That is, most of the Central Asian republics are Turkic. The nation thus has a greater cultural affinity with its Afghan and Pakistani neighbors to the south and with its Iranian neighbors to the west than with its immediate neighbors in the FSU.

Another serious geographical dilemma for the nation has to do with the mountains that split it into three parts that are for all intents culturally separate. One cannot travel between them by road for most of the year. In addition, one of the three regions, the Pamir or Gorno-Badakhshan region has a population which is 95 percent Ismai'li Muslim, a branch of Shi'a Islam owing allegiance to the Aga Khan. This is in sharp contrast to the rest of the nation where the inhabitants are Sunni Muslim, or atheists. The Badakhshan region was an autonomous oblast under the Soviet Union, and has retained this status in the new nation of Tajikistan. The residents of Badakhshan do not speak Tajik or Russian as their first language, but rather a variety of Indo-European languages—practically one for each of the isolated valleys of the region—that are largely mutually unintelligible.

Tajikistan has suffered under a civil conflict that has debilitated the nation for close to ten years. This conflict is puzzling for the outside world. It involves regional groups which, in the past, held power at different times. One rough gloss for the conflict would be “northern groups” versus “southern groups,” but because of complex alliances throughout the region, even this is not strictly accurate. The conflict erupted at the time of independence when groups that had been out of power since the establishment of Soviet authority over the region reemerged. These historical power groups won initial elections but were prevented from taking office by groups that had enjoyed power in the Soviet Union and (backed by Russia) wanted to maintain that

power. (1). The older power groups then formed an opposition that fomented the civil conflict. A settlement to the conflict in 1993 provided for a sharing of power between the “government” and the “opposition,” but fighting continued sporadically until last summer.

The conflict seems to now be over, or at least in abatement. On a recent visit to Tajikistan, the reduction in arms was noticeable. (2) The streets of the capital and other larger towns are now relatively safe. (3) The relative cessation of the conflict between the Taliban and opposition in Afghanistan has been an important factor contributing to peace in Tajikistan. The Afghan conflict had spilled over the border in many ways exacerbating the Tajik civil conflict.

NATION-BUILDING IDENTITY

With peace breaking out, the Tajiks can now turn seriously to the problem of nation building. In a sense, the Tajik nation is a step beyond Benedict Anderson’s notion of an imagined community—it is a community of necessity. (4) The Tajik situation in some ways resembles that of post-Colonial Africa. Tajiks have been given an impossible piece of territory with a disparate population and have been forced to make a nation out of it. Had Soviet leaders been more perspicacious and anticipated that the Tajiks would have to go it on their own, they might have dealt them a better hand, and allowed them the great cultural centers of their past—Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Marv—but it was not to be.

Still, the unification of the nation requires the use of some symbolic core. The Tajiks face a large range of choices in this matter. Consider the following dimensions from which they must choose:

A. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: ISLAMIC VS. SECULAR

The recent civil conflict actually had as its base regional rivalries that date back to the nineteenth century. However, the post-Soviet conflict has manifested itself as a rivalry between Islamic and secular forces. The accord between the secular government and the Islamic opposition in which the opposition assumes responsibility for about 30 percent of the rule of the nation is virtually unprecedented in the world today. The recent history of other nations that face this choice, notably Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, the Sudan, and Libya suggest that the sharing of power in this manner rarely succeeds. This leads to a reexamination of the Tajik rivalry itself. Given the regional roots of the conflict, the depth of the commitment of the Islamic representatives to sharing power remains an open question. There is no doubt that it has been advantageous for the opposition to espouse a strong Islamic stance; it has gained them financial support from other nations that have a commitment to Islamic government, and it has gained them adherents within Tajikistan that they otherwise might not have attracted. On the other hand, the secular government retains the support of many nominal Muslims.

B. ETHNIC COMMUNITY IDENTITY: TAJIK--RUSSIAN--(UZBEK)

The choice of an official language, and by extension a writing system, for Tajikistan is a serious question. National sentiment favors using Tajik as the official language of the nation. Political speeches by both government and opposition officials are given in Tajik. However practicality demands that Russian be retained as an official language, if only a secondary one. The difficulty is made clear when the instructional system is taken into consideration. In post-Soviet Tajikistan the government would like all school instruction

to take place in Tajik. There are several obstacles, however. One simple obstacle is that there are still a large number of people in the country who do not speak Tajik well enough to be educated in the language, whereas Russian is a lingua franca that nearly all adults understand. A second obstacle is that there are simply not enough instructional materials in Tajik to carry students through a full high-school curriculum, much less a college curriculum.

The use of Russian as an instructional medium also has difficulties. Since independence during the years of civil conflict students in rural areas have stopped learning Russian. Thus, a whole generation of young people is growing up without Russian skills. Most of these students have not yet reached high school or college, but the educational problem will be acute in a few years.

The public media is fully bilingual at this time. Newspapers appear in both Tajik and Russian, and Russian and Tajik television programs are available.

The question of the use of Uzbek poses a separate dilemma. Uzbek is primarily used in the Northern "Leninabad" region of the country in the Ferghana valley north of the Fan mountains. In this region, children are educated using Russian, Tajik and Uzbek. But, the financial and administrative strain of this effort is very great.

C. REGIONAL IDENTITY: PERSIAN-CENTRAL ASIAN

There is no question that Tajik culture is inextricably tied with what one might call "greater Iranian" culture. The question of how far and how deep these ties go is one of the most burning cultural issues in Tajikistan. Whereas the historical Iranian roots for the nation are acknowledged, revered and strong, there is tremendous

ambiguity about modern Iran, and in particular about post-revolutionary Iran.

In the ancient past, Tajikistan, northern Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and southern Uzbekistan were joined with northeastern Iran in a region glossed historically as Khorasan. The region was a unified cultural area from ancient pre-Islamic times. The pre-Islamic roots of the area are seen today in the extensive Now-ruz (New Year's) celebrations that are observed even among the Turkish populations of Central Asia at the spring equinox. Many scholars speculate that Zoroastrianism was founded and grew in this region, and others even claim that it was the original seat of ancient Indo-European culture.

Several important empires grew and flourished here from the tenth through the sixteenth centuries, and Khorasan remains today a somewhat unified cultural region. Residents of the area, whatever modern state they belong to, remain justly proud of the achievements of the poets, writers, and artists of the region, whose works constitute a large part of the canon of Persian cultural heritage. Indeed, Khorasan can claim to be the cradle of the modern Persian language, for the earliest poets writing in modern Persian, such as Rudaki, came from this region.

From the sixteenth through the nineteenth Centuries, Khorasan was included in larger Iranian empires, only to be divided and split off by Russian political movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The principal difficulty for Tajiks in identifying with modern Iran has to do with religion. From the sixteenth century on, the state religion of Iran was Ithna'-ashara (Twelver) Shi'ism. This branch of Shi'ism recognized twelve spiritual leaders after the Prophet Muhammad, culminating in Muhammad al-Mahdi, a mystic figure who disappeared into occultation and who it is said will return on the day of judgement.

Revolutionary Iran established the doctrine of the Velayat-e Faqih, or rule of the chief jurist, whereby the most respected religious leader of the nation would “rule” in place of the absent Mahdi. This controversial doctrine is questioned even in Iran, but it is a positive anathema in modern Tajikistan.

Thus, Tajiks acknowledge the close cultural connections with Iranian literature and art, but are uneasy with the religious and political orientation of modern Iran. Iranians have tried to make inroads in Tajikistan, only to be held at arm’s length by both the Tajik government and the opposition (who are Sunni Muslim). Eventually this ambiguity will have to be worked out for the Tajik people.

THE SAMANID CELEBRATION

Progress in working out these cultural ambiguities can be seen in the decision this year to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the Samanid dynasty in Tajikistan. The Samanids as symbolic figures solve a great number of cultural problems for the Tajiks.

The Samanid empire lasted only about 200 years from 819-992. It coexisted with the Abbasid empire in Baghdad, and was a source of Persian inspiration for the Islamic world. It was the source of support for many of the early Islamic poets and artists. Arguably without the Samanid influence later developments in Persian culture would have not taken place.

The Tajik government has decided to embrace the Samanids as a cultural symbol of Tajik civilization. Even though their true seat of government was Bukhara, now of course in Uzbekistan, the Tajiks feel confident in appropriating them.

The Samanids make ideal symbols. They were Sunni Muslims, predating the establishment of Shi’ism as a state religion in Iran. They are primarily known for their

cultural patronage rather than their religious beliefs, and their civilization spans the geographic region encompassing all of the territories Tajiks see as their cultural realm.

Throughout the country culturally significant structures are being rebuilt, such as fabulous tea houses in the northern Ferghana Valley city of Esfarah. The opposition is reconstructing historic mosques for the celebration, and scholarly conferences are planned.

Left out of the cultural equation in the Samanid celebration are the troublesome symbolic elements that pull at Tajik identity. Russian culture is, of course, absent, but so are modern Iranian elements. The recreation of the past thus contributes to a reformulation of modern Tajikistan.

CONCLUSION

We can expect that the process of cultural reformulation and juggling will continue for some time to come. If the current political coalition holds, the chances of seeing a stable symbolic identity in Tajikistan in time are great.

The most likely outcome for Tajikistan in the short term is the continuance of a secular state sensibility with some tolerance for religious activism. The possibility that Islamic forces will be able to carry out their agenda for a religious state remains remote so long as Tajikistan is dependent on Russia for economic and military support. In addition, Uzbekistan’s leaders are deathly afraid of religious revolutionaries and will do everything possible to isolate and strangle Tajikistan as long as they remain a threat. The Tajik language will continue to encroach on Russian as the language of everyday discourse, but at some point the Tajik people will have to realize that Russian is valuable as a lingua franca for regional commerce and communication. They will then need to take steps to preserve its use in education

and government. Tajikistan's uneasy relationship with its Iranian and Afghan neighbors will not be resolved until the governments in those countries cease to threaten Tajikistan's essentially secular orientation. The cultural ties will remain strong, however, to the point that Tajiks will continue to claim a formative role in the history of greater Iranian culture.

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NOTES

1) Bushkov, Valentin. *Anatomy of the Civil War in Tadjikistan*. (Moscow: Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science, 1997) and Roy, O. *The civil war in Tajikistan: Causes and implications*. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1993)

2) Author's personal observations based on a visit to Tajikistan in January 1999

3) Author's conclusion based on personal correspondence

4) Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. (London and New York: Verso Press, 1983)