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Religious Political Groups and Democracy in Tajikistan

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I. Introduction

Like other Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan also carries with it the legacy of pre-independence Soviet period. One of the most dominant features of this legacy is authoritarianism. Although the rhetoric to democratize the state, dominantly because of international pressures, remained a significant discourse while interacting with international community yet no substantial effort has been made in this regard. The democratic institutions like legislature are used as a rubberstamp by the President and his inner circle of non elected affiliates. Over the years regime had shown zero tolerance for opposition political parties and independent media groups and individuals. Judiciary also looks for the executive's advice for its rulings (www.bti-project.org). This authoritarian nature of the state, with a superficial commitment to democratic values, has deep implications for the Tajik society in its various social and political manifestations. This paper is primarily focused upon the analysis of state of human rights, with special reference to religious and political rights, as well as state of democracy in Tajikistan. It is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the state policy towards independence of religion and religious practices, the society's and religious' classes response to the policy and the resulting implications for the state and society. The second part probes into various political groups and their interaction with the ruling regime, especially the religious political parties and groups. The third part comprehensively discusses the difference between rhetoric and reality about democratization in Tajikistan. A synthesis of the whole debate concludes this article.

II. Religious Freedom: State verses Society

Tajikistan has a predominant Muslim Majority. Although majority of Tajikistanis belong to Sunni Hanafi sect yet there are good number of people belonging to other sects and religions. Among Muslims four percent are Ismai'li Shias, majority of whom, live in Badkhashan, Khatlon and the capital Dushanbe. Apart from Muslims there are Christians of Russian origin, Jews and Bahais as well. Almost every religion and sect has its own religious sanctuary for worship. There is no official state religion. Legally it is obligatory to register religious groups as well as their place of worship.

As for as the constitution of Tajikistan is concerned, it ensures freedom of religion to all segments of society, but like many other third world societies there is hell of difference between constitutional arrangements and their practical implementation. The government's policy is to discourage religious freedom. A number of religious groups were banned during the past decade either on their failure to complete registration requirements or by declaring them as extremists. There are also restriction on number of mosques where a formula is devised for mosque-population ratio; for example a five times mosque can be establish in an area where total number of Muslim residents is from 1000 to 5000, while a Friday mosque can function in an area with 30000 to 50000 of population. Another instance of state's control over religious affairs is that Imams of these mosques are selected by the state machinery working under the supervision of Ministry of Religious Affairs. Similarly ban on wearing Hijab for female students in schools and keeping beard prior to reaching age of 50 years are considered to be interference in the religious freedom of the people. There are regulations for the publication, import and distribution of religious literature. All religious literature, whether produced at home or imported from abroad, is strictly censored (http://www .state.gov/g/ drl/ rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.html).

Some of religious groups were banned after declaring them as extremist. The leading examples were Jama't e Tabligh, Salafia sect and a Christian organization Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2006 some 59 members of Jama't e Tabligh were sentenced for 3 to 8 years. According to a report the females wearing hijab find it difficult to have a job as state policy discourages this act. (http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/ appendices/index.html).

As it is evident from human history, that the task to suppress a value, so near to the sentiments of the people, is not easier one rather most of the time it had

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reverse implications. People, when they feel deprived of what they wish to practice from the core of their heart, look for opportunities to practice what they believe in with liberty. A similar situation has emerged in Tajikistan. Due to over-regulation of religious affairs there has emerged a deep rooted discontent among the people, on one hand, while, on the other religious classes have started to struggle for freedom from state control. One manifestation of this struggle is in the form of religious political groups.

III. Religious Political Groups: Organization, Objectives, and Social Acceptance

Religion and politics had a centuries old relation. Religion had been used for centuries to legitimize monarchies. Divine origin theories and Divine Right theories emerged in the same background. With the passage of time religious classes have changed their role according to the changing circumstances but their influence in the political affairs remained a social and political reality, especially in the third world societies. With the emergence of democratic setups and secularization of religion and politics in the Western world religious clergy had to face new challenges where they needed to transform their role according to the challenges posed to their survival. To a greater extent in West the role of religion was minimized in the course of 18th, 19th and 20th centuries but it had reemerged in the recent years with the revived role of church in Europe and Noe-Cons in United States of America. In other third world democratizing societies, religious clergy had found new ways and means to safeguard their interests and protect them from the secularization drive. They formed political parties to operate in a democratizing setup. Tajikistan is also a democratizing society, though the pace of democratization is very slow. Like other third world societies the religious clergy in Tajikistan had also opted for new roles to keep their significance intact. For this purpose Islamic Renaissance Party was established that represents religious class interests in the state.

Although religious classes faced severe persecutions during soviet period and religious activities were either banned or discouraged, yet in some peripheral parts of the state, religious sentiments and values were able to survive. With the independence from Soviet clutches these fragmented religious enclaves started reorganizing themselves. The political manifestation of this reorganization was IRP.

Islamic Renaissance Party was established in 1990. Its main objective is to enforce Sharia law and distribute the state resources according to Islamic principles. This movement has many influences on it, the most dominant of which is that of Basmachi movement. The significant aims and objectives of the party are as under: (www.asc-centralasia.edu.pk/Issues_67/06_adam_saud.html)

1. Struggle to ensure sovereignty of the state in the political and economic affairs.
2. An unending effort for the promulgation of Islamic law and providing citizens with the rights as enunciated by Sharia.
3. Establishment of youth organizations.
4. To reawaken the spirit of Islam among Tajikistani population by participating in religious-cultural, economic and political activities.
5. To systematically preach Islam to other communities of the republic.
6. To struggle for the democratization of the state where rule of law prevail.

Right after the establishment of IRP, it started its political activities. Despite of hurdles created in its ways it had carried on presenting its demands before the government. Its main demands included a ban on sale of pork and alcohol, renaming of streets in Tajikistan according to Islamic names, opening up of new mosques and ban on un-Islamic way of slaughtering cattle. Despite of these demands the government had paid no heed rather tried to outlaw the activities and organization of IRP. It was accused as a main responsible actor in the civil war from 1994 to 1997. It was subsequently banned. In 1999 ban was lifted from its activities and IRP started its struggle again. The agreement between the government and IRP weakened its support base as some circles of the IRP saw this agreement with suspicion. Despite of all these problems IRP is now running as a legal entity. (www.asc-centralasia.edu.pk/Issues_67/06_adam_saud.html).

As Tajikistan is an authoritarian state, therefore, access to information about the changing trends in mass population and their socio-political orientations is a difficult task. Regime's commitments to repressive policy for those who try to report independently make the task of analyzing social acceptability, of the religious as well as other political organizations, a much harder project to undertake. The only insight that can be borrowed for this purpose is from the resources available outside Tajikistan. Different reports published by international NGO's and United Nations to some extent reflect the social mood. The severity of civil war during 1990's is an evidence of widespread discontent in the different pockets of the country. Although IRP had chosen peaceful path for its future yet it is unable to attract voters in that majority to bring about systemic changes in the country. There are multiple reasons for it. In the following discussion these reasons are discussed with special reference to future of democracy and political parties in Tajikistan.

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IV. State of Democracy: Problems and Prospects

According to constitutional provisions Tajikistan is a democracy. It has democratic structures and a so called electoral process as well. It provides for multi-party polity where a total of eight registered parties enter into electoral process. Five out of these eight have representation in the parliament in the current term. These parties include:

1. The Agrarian Party (APT)
2. The Communist Party (CPT)
3. Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT)
4. Peoples Democratic Party (PDPT)
5. Party of Economic Reforms (PERT)

Among these five parties PDPT is the ruling party. It uses state machinery to consolidate its position and maneuver electoral results in its favor. Other political parties are weak and decaying. IRPT is the strongest opposition party. The regimes policies are discouraging to the entry of new political parties in the political arena. For example in 2012 the Justice Ministry refused the registration of National Movement of Tajikistan. The NMT pledged to reduce presidential powers as well as his term of office. It stood for increasing powers of the legislature. (www.crs.gov)

A part from these political parties there are interest groups in Tajikistan but these groups are least coordinated and weak. Over all political culture is very low and very restricted political discourse is allowed. Ruling party's monopoly over the media and state apparatus made the chances of dissent very dim. There are various tactics used to control media; for example financial pressures, increase in defamation suits and arbitrary arrests.

Voters' interest and understanding of the electoral process as well as its utility is very low. In a society where people have a widespread belief that they cannot bring change through their vote and electoral process only facilitates survival of status-quo, a parochial political culture is a natural outcome. Over the years, the dominance of one party and maneuvering of election results have strongly entrenched this belief in the majority of Tajikistan's mass population. Despite of these problems the Regime is able to facilitate some sort of democratic process in the form of presidential election and election for the legislative bodies.

In 2006 presidential elections were held in which five candidates ran for the presidential slot. The election campaign was dominated by the incumbent Rahmon. The other four candidates did not dare to criticize the policies of the Rahmon. The election debates remained limited and immature. According to independent observers the process and debates were little improved than 1999 presidential elections but it was not up to the standards as were expected in the modern democratic societies (www.crs.gov). It was an easy win for the incumbent Rahmon. The next election is scheduled to be in 2013.

Similarly the latest elections for the legislative body were held in 2010. Turn out on the Election Day was quite encouraging according to official sources. Approximately 87% of the registered voters came to polling stations to cast their votes. Peoples Democratic Party won 54 seats, while IRP, Communist Party, Agrarian Party, and Economic Reform Party won two seats each. One seat was won by an independent candidate. Independent observers reported that the election process lacked transparency. Ruling party did not provide a level playing field to all actors. Government officials influenced the campaign to the disadvantage of opposition parties, while election results were also maneuvered. There were irregularities observed at the polling stations also.

The score of the regime on human rights violation is very high. According to the State Department's Report (2012), harassment of journalists, repression of religious minorities, arbitrary arrests and lack of free trial in courts featured the year 2011 in Tajikistan. There are severe restrictions on freedom of speech. A criticism or defamation of president may result in a punishment of five year imprisonment.

There are number of NGO's operating in Tajikistan but only one to five percent of them take up the issues of human rights. These NGO's are mostly providers of services while very few focus on the mobilization sector. (www.bti-project.org).

V. Conclusion

Like other Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan also reflects a hybrid culture leading to a constant struggle among different actors to define the nature of political arrangement in the country. Under international obligations it is compelled to move towards democratization but dominance of pre-independence political elites had crippled the process to a greater extent. The only challenging force that emerged in the course of time is that of IRP, another political party more reactionary in nature than a democratic force. Thus, it can be concluded that future of democratization will heavily depend on the future developments in the whole Central Asian region as well as its interaction and nature of its relations with the western democratic world.

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