

Introduction

After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 the former Soviet Central Asian republics became, suddenly and involuntarily, independent. Without previous independent statehood experience these republics found themselves immersed in a process of political and economic instability.¹ Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union many politicians, academics and international relations scholars suggested that Central Asian democratization was forthcoming. However, the internal and particular dynamics of these regimes suggested a very different pattern of development. Elements such as forced political modernization, enforced (Soviet designed – Soviet alchemy) political communities, no natural state formation process, clan-based politics (*klannovayapolitika*), authoritarian practices, lack self-government experience and unfamiliarity with democratic ideals seem to have thwarted the possibility of a democratization trend in the region.

Almost immediately after gaining its independence, Tajikistan slid into factional struggle and rapidly lapsed into severe disorder that led to a bloody civil war. The outbreak of violence in Tajikistan represents the worst of the scenarios described by Kathleen Collins as the three divergent trajectories that the Central Asian countries took throughout the early 1990s and was the opposite of the short lived Kyrgyz democratic trajectory.² Without the direct Russian political tutelage, that somehow forced the Tajik political establishment through the Soviet experience, and with no transitional pact

¹ Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts and Politics in Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no.3 (2002): 137.

² Kyrgyzstan experienced democratization. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan saw a renewal of authoritarianism, meanwhile Tajikistan slid into failed statehood and a bloody civil war. Collins, “Clans, Pacts and Politics in Central Asia,” 138. Throughout this dissertation the term Central Asia is used to refer exclusively to the former soviet republics.

between major clans, Tajikistan proved to be unable to maintain its political *status quo* falling, hastily, into a human butchery as a result of different regional clans fighting around the access to the same scarce resources.

At the beginning of the 1990s, democracy promoters and optimists construed the fall of the Soviet Union as the triumph of Western liberal democratic capitalism over the communist political system; and, too readily assumed that communist regimes would be replaced by democratic polities.³ The former Soviet republics were hastily included in the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratization.⁴ However, close analysis of the political situation of each of these republics would have showed that reality was far from being conducive to democracy.⁵ Even when some pre- or basic democratic developments seemed to be attained, the formal political institutions, informal social organizations and practices, and cultural patterns that were the legacy of the old regime remained intact.

This thesis will demonstrate that Tajikistan’s plight has been misinterpreted when analyzed as if democracy was the possible outcome of the end of Soviet communist rule. It will show that there were conditioning constraints inherent to the Tajik clanic structure –which found its origin in the Soviet distributive system– that impeded negotiations toward the formulation of a transitional pact between regional networks. It will clarify that the causes that led this Central Asian nation to civil war are not found through the analysis of formal post-communist politics but rather that these causes are embedded in Soviet dynamics of the last years of the communist era. This thesis will also demonstrate

³ Graeme Gill, *Democracy and Post-Communism: Political Change in the Post-Communist World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁴ The ‘third wave’ was a sweep of global political change, considered as part of the ‘worldwide democratic revolution’ that, as Graeme argued, began in southern Europe in the early-mid 1970s, extending into Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, east Asia in the 1980s and the communist world in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁵ Graeme Gill, *Democracy and Post-Communism*, 1-17.

that when analyzing Central Asian republics it is most accurate to focus on informal rather than formal politics: the impossibility to generate a transitional pact to survive the fall of the Soviet Union is, as has been suggested above, located within the informal clan power-relations structure.

As Kathleen Collins points out, Gorbachev's reforms resulted in the purges of the high ranking communist *nomenklatura* in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan, and their replacement by Russian cadres. This situation caused unrest throughout these Central Asian republics as the traditional form of distribution, mainly developed under the Soviet structure, was being seriously threatened. This unpleasant situation forced local underground organizations and power networks to coalesce and negotiate to promote wide support for indigenous leadership. As a result of these negotiations the clans of these republics laid a common ground which served as a transitional pact when the Soviet Union passed away. However, in the case of Tajikistan the indigenous elite was spared from any purge due to strategic reasons of an Islamic contention policy. Consequently, as the dominant clan of Tajikistan felt safe it did not feel the need to negotiate with any other local group to widen its base of support: the Tajik elite was not in risk of being replaced by Russian cadres and, therefore, felt secure in its position. Thus, it is possible to argue that the Soviet *Modus Operandi* ironically tied the hands of Khujandi leaders. This proved to be catastrophic for the Khujandi once the Soviet Union disintegrated. With its Islamic contention policy the Soviet leadership hindered the possibility to create a transitional pact: once the need for a pact was evident there was neither time nor will to arrange it. In view of this, instability and the following civil war were, as Kathleen Collins accurately points, accidents waiting to happen.

In a sociopolitical context severely affected by the Soviet decision to back one clan instead of another of fairly equal power, based on regional strategic considerations; it is not difficult to understand why, at the end of communism, the Khujandi clan was in an extremely vulnerable position. As Tajik clans (regional networks) are not traditionally rooted and their recruitment and loyalty are not strictly kin-based, as in other Central Asian cases, there was not a historical pattern on which to model the bases of a new distribution beyond the Soviet form. With all the doors closed, and the main opportunities lost, the accident happened. By August 1991 the Soviet Union broke down leaving the Tajik ruling elite without its main source of support. In such a difficult context and with an electoral process scheduled for November that year, there was no alternative to civil war.

In the 1980s political effervescence was particularly intense in Tajikistan and a plethora of political parties emerged. These political parties were the result of reform policies undertaken by Moscow which were seemingly ready to contest the scheduled elections in a new context. However, it must be noted that these supposed 'political parties' were not the result of a democratic political party system evolution and in most cases were regional groupings advocating the interests of their patronage networks. By those days clans did not look at each other as competitors; rather they regarded other regional networks as enemies in the fight for the dominant position. The game was fought between regional networks in the informal arena, where real power lies in Tajikistan. Therefore, it is not that the Tajik government did not want to lock in the opposition after the fall of the Soviet Union: it was unable to do so; the opposition (in the case of Tajikistan a democratic euphemism for struggling factions) itself was not looking for

accommodation. An informal approach on Tajik politics would have suggested that it was not possible to include opposition parties within the government as political parties were regionally-based, thus clan-based.

Literature on *klannovayapolitika* has allowed us to analyze politics in Central Asia far beyond the formal political institutions. Collins tries to explain why Tajikistan broke into war: there was no transitional pact; however, she leaves it there and fails to assert the reasons for this. The reason for the inability to generate a transitional accord that could have set Tajikistan into the path of peaceful transition *is the main question that this thesis tries to answer.*

Thus, the main hypothesis of this thesis is that *in Tajikistan the transitional pact was not forthcoming due to the absence of a truly dominant clan and to the ruling elite assumption that while being backed by Moscow there was no need to negotiate with other regional networks. Moreover, as Tajikistan clans were mainly created and shaped by the Soviet distributive system there was no historical pattern on which to fall back to work out accommodation.* Therefore the inability to generate a transitional pact that could have helped to avoid bloodshed was twofold: based on Soviet *modus operandi* and linked to the absence of a historical-traditional pattern, perhaps dating back to the pre-Soviet period, of interaction between clans or regional networks.

The thesis will provide sufficient evidence to support the assumption that Tajik clans are different from their Turkic counterparts due to: i) Tajik pre-Soviet social structure which mainly relied on dispersed non-related communities throughout a complicated geography precluded intraregional interaction; and, ii) the emergence of regionally-based (non-kin-based) groups organized around the Soviet distributive system

resulted in a process of artificial formation of ‘clan identities’ in which affiliation and loyalty mainly depended on economic matters. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that communism fostered the development of regional networks but never allowed any particular network to acquire a dominant position over the rest. Without a dominant clan, the possibility of generating a pact decreases because the absence of a powerful hegemonic pole stimulates other regional networks to try to become dominant.

After the Soviet collapse in 1991, Collins explains, “neither scholars nor policy makers had anticipated the rise of a primarily informal, clan-based politics throughout Central Asia.”⁶ The emergence of this type of political system and the consolidation process that will be addressed in this thesis render the discussion about the democratization of Tajikistan unnecessary. There were never real elements to consider that Tajikistan was in the path toward democratization. The optimists that believed it to be so did not pay attention to the informal level of Central Asian politics. According to Collins “[c]lan politics creates an informal regime, an arrangement of power and rules in which clans are the dominant social actors and political players; they transform the political system.”⁷ Therefore it is important to regard the formal space of politics as a reflection of informal tensions. As clans ‘transform the political system’ they also tend to have a distorting effect on formal regimes, especially on democratic institutions⁸ while they manage to exercise real power within informal organizations.

After having described what is to be demonstrated in this thesis it is necessary to make a brief description of how the main argument is going to be followed.

⁶ Kathleen Collins, *The Logic of Clan Politics in Central Asia: Its Impact on Regime Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷ Kathleen Collins, *The Logic of Clan Politics in Central Asia*, 12.

⁸ Collins, “Clans, Pacts and Politics in Central Asia,” 138.

In **Chapter I**, I will present basic information about the population and geography offering a first rapprochement to clan politics in Central Asia and the elements that determined clan formation in Tajikistan. A brief historical review from pre-modern forms of social organization to the arrival of the Russian empire will be presented. Moreover, a section will be dedicated to analyze education in Tajikistan as to understand the processes undertaken by the communists to create Soviet infrastructure and to try to eradicate what they considered as primitive and ritual practices. With the intention to shed light on obstacles that the Soviet endeavor found in its way, a detailed account on how Central Asians remained attached to their Islamic identity will be elaborated with the objective of grasping the main elements from the religious factor that fostered the persistence of other nested identities within the communist framework. Finally, a conceptual framework to understand the level of economic reform implemented in Tajikistan will be elaborated mainly based on the typology given by Holger C. Wolf that classify Tajikistan as a 'laggard' reformer. Furthermore, the extremely fragile and unstable political situation of the Ferghana valley will be analyzed in order to provide a better understanding of the context of national and international conflicts in the Central Asian region.

In **Chapter II** an overview of Tajik political development starting from the pre-Russian times throughout the czarist domination and the Soviet period will be offered, emphasizing the particular characteristics that, after independence, were unfavorable to a democratic political development and, consequently, laid the ground for the conflict that exploded into civil war. A deep analysis of the relations established between clans and between clans and the state will be presented with the objective of clarifying how elements of the Soviet political system later affected the outcomes of the transitional as

well as the post-independent period. The formal and informal consolidation of social and political structures under the shelter of Soviet administration will be described emphasizing the development of an ‘unofficial second level autonomy’ that allowed the emergence and strengthening of different regional networks of fairly equal force. Moreover, the rise of political activism and social tension throughout the 1980s decade will be revised. Consequently, the political scenario immediately after independence and the steps that precluded a transitional pact among the powerful clans are the main stakes of this chapter. A brief account of the civil war and the reconciliation process will be given.

In **Chapter III**, the political situation after the civil war will be analyzed emphasizing the subsequent power allocations between the old regime leaders and the opposition. The incapacity of the peace agreement to provide a stable path for the political development of the country will be exposed emphasizing the measures undertaken by Rakhmonov’s administration to curtail political opposition and further concentrate power. This chapter will describe and analyze how the attempt to construct a new hegemonic (intended to be durable) balance within the state is working. In doing so I will concentrate on how the Tajik ruling elite and its patronage networks have penetrated existing political institutions. In consequence, the political evolution of the ruling clan by means of concentrating power in the figure of the executive and its relation toward the formation of a civil society will be analyzed. International efforts to organize civil society in a context where the clanic structure does everything but foster civic developments will be addressed. In order to give a proper account of the way in which clan hegemony is being constructed I will divide this chapter into five main sections: Political Evolution,

Civil Society and Media; Party System and Electoral Process; Constitutional Framework;
Governance, Corruption and Poverty; and, International Arena.