

DIALECTICS OF THE EMERGENCE OF A CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE SUPPORT OF NGOS IN TAJIKISTAN

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A civil society and democracy in Tajikistan are being cultivated on local soil—they are not “alien transplants.” The republic is ready to embrace the great transformation already going on, and the new phenomena have not weakened society’s immunity: we are all eyewitnesses to the birth of a new statehood and stronger national identity that will determine cultural development in the broadest sense of the word. But we must keep in mind that cultural development is impossible without mutual integration of this new statehood and stronger national identity in the spirit of genuine democratization.

However, from the dialectical viewpoint, the process is far from simple: a civil society ruled by law is coming into being by way of many contradictions, difficulties, meandering, and backtracking. As the road leading to a civil society ruled by law, democratization can be visualized as the sum total of numerous development vectors: some of them at times slow down the process, while others tend to miss certain seemingly logical stages by speeding things up.

Talking of speeding up, it should be noted that Tajikistan, as a country at the crossroads between the secular and Oriental religion-intensive civilizations, has moved a long way along one of the vectors of the dialectical continuum. I have in mind the fact that a party of political Islam is functioning successfully in the legal context and is equally successfully integrating into the country’s legal field. This part of the dialectics of the emergence of a civil society ruled by law has far outstripped all similar processes taking place in similar spheres in Tajikistan’s Central Asian neighbors. There is the opinion that political parties do not belong to a civil society, yet the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan is not limited to its party structure—its impact on the civil consciousness sector and NGOs that represent the structures and norms of civil society is obvious and tangible.

On the other hand, the establishment and functioning of the institution of ombudsman as a civil society phenomenon present in the Central Asian states (which are not considered democratic enough), but absent in Tajikistan, speak of the erratic nature of the process’s manifestations in the country.

There is an ideological-psychological barrier of sorts that interferes with the acceptance of democratic norms and civil society’s constructive democratic opposition to the state’s spreading influence. This is caused by the emergence of a new statehood in Tajikistan, a process that is still underway, and the specific conditions of the current development stage, which is sometimes described as a “concentration of power.” The barrier can be overcome; to do this we should first fill the vacuum in the consciousness of society and the entities of public and political action with the realization that a civil society and NGOs are the key factors in the sphere of democracy. We should cultivate the idea that pluralism—political and non-political alike—is the cornerstone of democratization in the nation’s life.

We should bear in mind that the ideas of “concentration of power” and “excessive centralization,” which interfere with the more effective development of civil society’s institutions, have not been deliberately elaborated in Tajikistan as a systemic state ideology and theory. These ideas, which belong to everyday political thought, regrettably have a much stronger impact than the declared democratic ideas about the need to develop a civil society. “Concentration of power” is one of the most important processes taking place in the country, which is recovering from the paralysis of armed confrontation. After overcoming this paralysis, “concentration of power” came down with the illness of “excessiveness” in state development caused by a mentality that took several decades to form.

When talking of opposition to the “excessive centralization” process, we should bear in mind the following: there are different centralizations. Centralization and “concentration of power” are absolutely necessary in a country trying to overcome the chaos of civil war and secession (not only ethno-regional, but also institutional). This is a constructive process which re-established the state according to new principles. Here “excessive centralization” means that the civil sector is squeezed out of its sphere to be turned into a functional appendix to central power. In this case, too, we should bear in mind Tajikistan’s specific historical postwar conditions. What forms of opposition to “excessive centralization” of the second type are possible and effective in Tajikistan?

First, as in all developed countries, the right to rallies and strikes for different reasons should be ensured. This right is one of the key democratic elements and a manifestation of civil society. Normally, experts interpret the absence of this form of civil activity as the absence of democracy and a developed civil society.

We should never forget that the civil war syndrome is still alive and that various population groups and the state have acquired specific attitudes to these forms of civil activity. The nation as a whole is apprehensive of rallies and demonstrations as a potential prelude to another civil war. People are not at all sure that individual protesters and members of the power-related bodies are mature enough to avoid violence. The “color revolutions,” a very contradictory innovation indeed, created a context in which any type of foreign activity around Tajikistan is taken as the threat of an “orange revolution” or another civil war. This adds urgency to other forms of civil activities.

Hence the question: is it possible to oppose “excessive centralization” in Tajikistan under these conditions? It is possible, and it is, in fact, taking place.

The already large number of NGOs financially independent of the state should be regarded as an important civil sector in which people have freed themselves from the monopoly of the government and bureaucracy felt outside the civil structures, but completely absent inside them. While the government exerts pressure from the outside, the civil structures are busy building a space that lives according to the new norms and values accepted by a civil society. In other words, an enlarging civil society implies, even hypothetically, a certain amount of personal independence of the members of NGOs and other civil structures. This is a form of opposition to “excessive centralization” of power.

We should not forget that the NGOs are not merely a certain number of structures—they have a specific structural quality with stable contacts, relationships, and forms of activity. This means that they represent a particular stable social structure closely connected with, yet not limited by the state: in other words, it is not the state’s functional appendix.

The dialectics of what is going on in Tajikistan is attracting attention to the creative function of the form of civil spirit that helps mold a new personality type as part of a civil society prepared to accept its values and norms. We should bear in mind that in a civil society the distancing of the individual from the state does not mean that the individual is engaged in anti-state activities, something which the over-eager “pseudo-advocates of a strong state” assert. The individual remains within the system of state relationships and is also part of a civil society as a non-state system.

To be an advocate of a strong state (to pursue a genuine policy of statehood in Tajikistan under current conditions) means to accept democratization with an open heart as the main task of the reviving state. There is no more effective alternative to the country's revival and development.

In the final analysis, a weak state or the worsened position of its agencies can disorganize a civil society. A strong legitimate state by definition should promote dynamic development of NGOs and profit from this. The state should be aware of the potential of a pluralist state consisting of a network of governmental and nongovernmental organizations and use the latter to strengthen accountability, legality, and social justice.

Members of society and the state should agree on the "rules of the game" (the Constitution, laws, taxes, and rights). A civil society should prevent violation of these rules. In fact, society and the state are not merely facing the task of building a civil society and NGOs—forming a new type of individual and culture is an even more pressing task. I mean a civil culture, the culture of a civil society, without which a civil society cannot function and develop successfully. In a certain sense, NGOs are not only the answer to the new challenges of our time (a civil society as the most important task of democratization), they can also help the reviving new statehood in all spheres—health protection, restoration of private housing and farm holdings, peace building, culture and education, etc.

Most of the political activists in the future political parties became political entities within the budding nongovernmental informal structures, some of which were not even legally registered. In this sector, a human environment was created that later developed into various combinations of citizen alliances and associations and, still later, into political parties. Such was the dialectics of Tajikistan's internal progress.

It stands to reason that the key institutions of a civil society cannot develop without socially active people and their voluntary initiative associations called either the third sector or the noncommercial nongovernmental organizations. This fully applies to the development of a state ruled by law. In recent years, the number of NGOs in Tajikistan engaged in helping people and protecting their rights has risen dramatically. Their higher quality is even more important.

Between 1991 and 1 July, 2000, there were 843 registered NGOs in the republic, by 1 July, 2005, their number reached 2,671 and continued to grow. On 1 July, 2006, there were over 2,800 registered NGOs in the country. They maintain contacts with society and its members and are present in all spheres of life: social insurance, education, health protection, the environment, gender equality, and security, as well as human rights. Today, individuals depend on the NGOs for their further development and realization of their potential.

Social partnership between the state and public structures in Tajikistan is ensured by the fact that the country is facing socially important tasks and there is a shared desire to address them successfully. This cooperation allows the sides to use the material basis of state structures, on the one hand, and to attract more people and money to cope with social problems and improve the forms and methods of work by involving public organizations in this effort, on the other. In 1994, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan issued a decree that set up a new structure under the presidential administration—state advisor on public associations and ethnic relations—designed to improve cooperation and coordination with the NGOs; similar structures appeared in the local administration structures, the *khukumats*.

To create the best possible conditions for the NGOs and their involvement, together with the state, in addressing social problems, the state elaborated, with the help of NGOs, and adopted new laws designed to help people realize their rights in the sphere of social relations rather than to introduce more bans and restrictions.

The state and its institutions are doing their best to arrive at a specific democratization model that will take into account the political and economic realities as well as Tajikistan's cultural specifics. It is in the state's interest to develop the third sector, even though not all bureaucrats share this

conviction. NGOs help realize democratic principles such as freedom of speech and assembly; they promote pluralism of opinions; involve the ordinary people in the social transformation process; help to maintain social stability in the country and attract more resources to cope with social problems.

In fact, the NGOs are effective because they address specific tasks, waste no time, and employ new approaches. It is no wonder that in many countries NGOs that work dynamically, operate on small budgets in the absence of bureaucratic procedures, and employ highly skilled specialists have developed into an effective tool of constructive cooperation between society and the government. Ignoring NGOs or trying to put pressure on them is a shortsighted policy that will deprive the state of the chance to enter into a dialog with society, develop mutual responsibility, and seek and find ways and means to deal with social problems in a manner approved of by society.

The development of the third sector in Tajikistan was not an easy process; public associations needed money—this was the most acute problem. At no time did the funding issue retreat beyond second place among the most urgent problems: this was what the repeated opinion polls conducted among NGO heads demonstrated. Today, smoothly functioning NGOs get their money from international charities or even from foreign governments. In fact, all the public organizations of Tajikistan were formed on foreign money and developed thanks to the financial support of foreign funds. The money was used to buy office equipment, pay for communication lines, and acquire financial management skills. Nearly all of them paid for the rented premises with foreign money. Once the public sector got going, foreign funds were gradually withdrawn from Tajikistan. What is in store for the NGOs?

Nongovernmental noncommercial organizations find it hard to operate in the absence of financial support mechanisms, which the state could realize in the form of grants and social orders, as well as tax privileges for businesses and individuals engaged in charities. The law on public associations says that state structures should support public organizations. What form of support can be described as best?

The time has come to adopt laws that will guarantee the state funding of public organizations. These laws should not only guarantee the fulfillment of state orders, but also ensure that public organizations can realize their own projects in full accordance with their charters. Public organizations suggested that the NGOs receive money from the local budgets (in the form of municipal grants) to carry out their socially useful activities on the basis of tenders. The NGOs could use other forms of support: local self-administration structures can help by renting out offices on easy terms and using local budgets to set up all kinds of clubs and centers. This calls for well-considered decisions and laws that should be adopted as soon as possible.

Legal acts, transferring some functions related to the social support of the people from the public to the nongovernmental sector (for instance, laws On the State Social Order, On State Grants, and On Voluntary Work) and creating a system of tax privileges, would undoubtedly help to deal with many of the social evils. The easy loans and capital base indispensable for NGOs to take off should acquire a legal form: so far many of the public organizations that help the socially vulnerable population groups are operating as voluntary structures. It should also be said that state policies in the sphere of funding—money is indispensable for the sustainable development of a civil society's institutions—would remove the problem of foreign funding. Indeed, if Tajik citizens start spending more on charities, NGOs will need no money from abroad. The state, which wants to use this institution effectively, should create the most favorable conditions possible for those who want to perform socially useful work and thus promote development of an effective civil society in Tajikistan.

There are many problems that remain unresolved: NGOs still receive money from the foreign funds, international organizations, and embassies functioning in the republic. This is mainly European and American (partly Japanese) money—a fact that local bureaucrats treat with apprehension. There is the opinion that foreign money leads to “color revolutions” and creates instability, which means that the third sector, as well as the opposition parties, might play a geopolitical role.

It seems that this calls for a discussion and serious consideration. This aspect cannot be ignored since every misunderstanding between the state and the civil sector develops into wider problems.

Foreign funding may give rise to the fear of potential “geopolitical disruption” between the state and the third sector in critical situations. There is the opinion among the bureaucratic class that this may also cause dissent in the country. I am convinced that this is impossible in principle in our country. This wrong opinion arises from Cold War memories, and it is especially true of our republic.

Today, we are all witnessing unavoidable global tendencies: Russia is inevitably moving closer to the Atlantic countries, therefore the CIS is moving closer to the West. There is the opinion that the SCO (it supposedly unites over half of the planet’s population) was set up as an alternative to NATO, yet facts point to the opposite. Russia has obviously developed an Eastern vector in its foreign policy (which is to be expected because of the wide diversity of Russia’s eastern neighbors), yet today the East, Russia, China, and Central Asia cannot successfully develop without integrating with the Atlantic states and the Western world (this is true of the Atlantic states in relation to the East). To successfully integrate with the rest of the world, we must remove the main obstacle—the negative attitude toward private property we inherited from the past. On the one hand, all the post-Soviet expanse has embraced the market economy, while on the other, similar changes have taken place in China, which recognized private property as a creative force (contrary to what was asserted earlier in the country’s orthodox ideological past).

I have devoted much attention to this aspect because economies play an important role in the civilizations’ mutual attraction or mutual repulsion. Today, there is no chance, no matter how small, that an ideological paradigm could disunite civilizations; there are certain geopolitical distinctions that, in the final analysis, boil down to economic principles, the main being “the highest productivity of each one and joint development in continuous contact with each other” (irrespective of whether we have in mind the CIS or EU, China or America, Russia or Central Asia).

Even though individual leaders do influence the “planetary situation” to a great extent, geopolitics will not be able to divide the world into West and East, as it was in the last century. Indeed, Europe and Russia are mutually dependent on energy supplies. The world is still arming itself, there is no doubt about this—yet there are powerful barriers within the countries for preventing catastrophic opposition among states and imposing a separate development pattern on them. There appears to be no need to expect any global confrontations.

Today Tajikistan is using the integrating opportunity that has presented itself to develop in the eastern and western directions. We are building tunnels, bridges, hydropower stations, dams, plants, and highways. This is brought about by integration into the world economy in every sphere—something that is making us stronger.

As for the “color revolutions,” I should say that there is a profound truth ignored by those who try to frighten us with the specter of instability: undesirable events are not always brought about by realized threats—more often than not a potential victim acting sporadically sets the ball rolling.

Tajikistan has already gone through fire and water; its elite has gained enough political experience for managing and settling conflicts for the sake of stronger stability. During the years of independence the country has learned how to strengthen its statehood and preserve stability. The events in Kyrgyzstan speak not of the third sector’s imagined role in the revolutionary events—some Tajik bureaucrats hastened to heap the blame on the third sector—but of the shortsightedness of the Kyrgyz bureaucrats, who failed to employ factors indispensable for the state’s stability.

We should carefully analyze the “color revolution” phenomenon to avoid any one-sided conclusions. At the same time, we should never forget that our country differs from its neighbors, which were restructuring their statehoods through reforms, being convinced that a new statehood built in this way would be stable enough. As a result, the public failed to acquire a new consciousness, while the political class failed to acquire a political culture that prohibits destabilizing and rash steps. I am

convinced that Tajikistan has outstripped its Central Asian neighbors in the democratization sphere: it has a legally functioning political religious party, freedom of speech and other fundamental freedoms, and, what is more important, a political culture—the result of tragic events. This kind of experience is not something we would wish any other nation. The newly acquired political culture does not permit instability: it is not fear of the state and its punitive structures that prompt people to avoid destabilization, but their own negative experience, the backbone of a political culture.

Under our conditions, people are refraining from “street democracy” not because of centralization of state power, or even its “excessive centralization”: mass rallies are avoided not because of the political system, but because people have recognized their own vulnerability to provocations followed by bloodshed.

Therefore I have every reason to say that the absence of these democratic forms in our country testifies that we have acquired a political culture and that Tajikistan is not a police state (even though its ruling regime is authoritarian). The democratism we have acquired does not permit certain bureaucrats to impose the principles of a military-political system on the nation. Among other things, the very fact that people have acquired a political culture prevents instability. I regret to say that certain “overly solicitous” bureaucrats prefer to ignore this very important stability factor. Hence the fears of easily impressionable people who failed to properly sort things out.

Tajikistan is experiencing a shift toward a civil society in the “state and its subjects” system. This is a contradictory and far from easy process, which is nevertheless steadily moving ahead. The situation in the world, region, and country is conducive to such developments. Democratic processes have become the leading trends in mankind’s development the world over; a system of regional security was set up in the last decade that adds to regional stability (the republic participates in the CIS, OSCE, SCO, OIC, etc.); Tajikistan has not only announced that it is moving toward a democratic society ruled by law, but is realizing this intention by overcoming all difficulties and barriers.

We are all aware of the faults and problems, but we must recognize that the country has moved far along the road toward democracy. We should likewise be aware that there are many difficult tasks, problems, and barriers in store for us: it is too early to rest on our laurels.

We must keep putting one foot in front of the other.