

Book Reviews

Politics of Compromise: the Tajikistan Peace Process edited by Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes. Conciliation Resources, London, 2001, 100 pp. (Accord no. 10). £15.00/\$25.00.

Within months of the appearance of this collection of essays, Tajikistan was caught up in renewed conflict, though this time not of its own making – the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, which saw this impoverished Central Asian state playing host to forces militarily engaged in neighbouring Afghanistan. For the outside world, Tajikistan was a useful base close to the action. Renewed interest in the country did little to help the instability and poverty persisting within Tajikistan in the aftermath of its own civil war which raged from summer 1992 to the peace agreement signed between the government and the opposition in Moscow in June 1997.

This useful collection – with background essays by historians and actors in the conflict and its resolution, maps, documents (including the main points of the 1997 peace agreement), a chronology, profiles of key actors and political parties, and internet and book resources for further reading – is aimed at clarifying the issues that caused the war and at helping their resolution. Conciliation Resources, a London-based peace-building NGO, hopes the book will renew interest in the legacy of a forgotten conflict among policy-makers, politicians, activists and ordinary people and will help ‘draw lessons that could be used elsewhere’.

Of all the wars which broke out as the Soviet Union disintegrated, Tajikistan’s civil war was unique: it was the only nationwide conflict between different factions which had diverging ideological and religious views of how the state should be structured. Although, as Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes point out, regional affiliations played a part in causing the civil war, most of the new opposition parties and their armed supporters ‘identified themselves by ideology’, whether promoting ‘democracy’ or ‘Islamic values’ or a revitalised ‘Tajik nation’. The largest such party was the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), with its stronghold in south-western Tajikistan among those who had been forcibly relocated during the Soviet period to the cotton fields of the Vakhsh valley. The IRP – led by Muhammadsharif Himatzoda, though he barely rates a mention in this collection – soon allied itself with the Dushanbe-based intellectuals of the *Rastokhez* popular movement promoting national identity and the *Lali Badakhshan* party, mainly Ismaili Muslim Pamiris advocating greater autonomy for their eastern mountainous region. These groups later joined the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the main resistance – both armed and peaceful – to the government.

Akiner and Barnes report that the Islamic-inspired opposition had its roots in the underground mosques which sprang up around the heartland of Qurghonteppa in the

1970s and which shunned the state-controlled structures. 'This underground movement began to develop a political agenda that took root among marginalised urban youth, as well as in some of the traditional village-based community networks.' By the early 1990s the IRP had crystallised around the leader of the 'radicals' (and Soviet-era religious prisoner) Said Abdullo Nuri, and what was then the official religious 'establishment', led by Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda.

A brief but perceptive profile of the IRP by Saodat Olimova and Muzaffar Olimov, both of the Sharq analytical centre in Dushanbe, examines the militarisation of the party and the 'unlikely' alliance with the 'democratic' parties. 'Islamicists explain the resort to military force as a response to the hostility displayed by the communist regime,' they write. 'Some pro-communists used the slogan "down with Islam" in their rallies, thus making them objects of a jihad holy war.' However, the IRP soon turned to negotiation, realising that 'most Tajikistanis preferred secular political ideologies and resisted Islamicism'. Party leaders were also concerned that other post-Soviet republics would isolate Tajikistan amid fears of an 'Islamic threat'.

In the run-up to the 1997 peace agreement, UTO chairman Nuri was strong enough to persuade its fighters to withdraw, despite 'deep frustration' among IRP members about his compromises with the regime of President Imomali Rakhmonov. 'Trust in their religious leaders eventually prevailed over their resistance', Olimova and Olimov report.

As the profile of UTO deputy chairman Turajonzoda makes clear, he was initially sceptical about the growth of the IRP, 'in part because it advocated a different path to Muslim revival'. 'Also, by implicitly promoting a political party as the vehicle for revival, it challenged his authority as head of the qaziyat.' Nevertheless, he made an alliance with the IRP in 1992 and by the end of the year had been forced to flee the country. His next few years were spent in a variety of Muslim capitals, with trips around the world to drum up support for the UTO. He later participated in the peace negotiations which led to the 1997 peace agreement, though he soon parted ways with the IRP after he backed Rakhmonov's successful presidential reelection campaign in 1999.

With most of the UTO's allocation of government seats being taken by the IRP in the post-1997 power-sharing set-up, the IRP had become one of the country's 'most powerful parties', Olimova and Olimov note, and one now dedicated to 'peaceful and legal' political methods. 'The IRP is unique in the region as an Islamicist movement participating peacefully in the political life of a secular state.' Indeed, the IRP is the only legal Islamic party in a region where religious political parties are banned. However, some in Tajikistan question the concept of an 'Islamic party' and, despite a greater geographic spread, the party has not overcome the fact that its base is in the south-west of the country.

Problems over the role of religion remain. The state has some difficulty maintaining its strict ban on explicitly political activities in religious institutions. 'Some IRP members, contrary to the law on political parties, have used mosques and madrasas for political activities', Olimova and Olimov report. 'The government realises that it is difficult to maintain a complete separation between politics and other social issues and is generally tolerant of preaching that touches on politics.' Iskandar Asadullayev, director of the presidential Centre for Strategic Research in Dushanbe, maintains that although the principle of secularism was recognised by both sides in the negotiations after the 1997 agreement, 'in the long-term, the important dilemma of secularism versus Islamicism remains unresolved'. Rashid Abdullo of the United Nations Tajikistan Office for Peacekeeping notes the emergence of 'new opposition

interests and the political forces that claim to represent them', including the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). He argues that using 'suppression' to tackle the newly-emerging opposition groups 'could stimulate resistance and risk political destabilisation'.

The contributions to this collection range more widely than these religious/political themes, looking also at the role of international organisations, NGOs and civil society in developing the peace process, the legal processes behind the amnesty for former fighters through the Commission on National Reconciliation, and constitutional changes. However, the collection – a special issue of Conciliation Resources' journal *Accord* which is also available on-line – brings into sharp focus the strength of Islamic sentiment behind the UTO and its limits.

'A major achievement of the Tajik peace process is that it facilitated the peaceful incorporation of Islamicist movements into the constitutional political process', Olimova and Olimov write. 'It has created a system that can accommodate the political interests of different social groups professing divergent and even contradictory approaches to religion and the state.'

Although not perfect, the peace process has achieved the transition 'from war to politics', as the editors put it. As other Central Asian states – especially Uzbekistan – face challenges from their own Islamicist movements, Tajikistan has shown one model of how such movements can be brought back from violence into the political process. This balanced, well-presented and lucid collection helps to illuminate the causes of Tajikistan's troubled recent past.

STEPHEN TURNER

In Quest for God and Freedom: the Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the Northern Caucasus by Anna Zelkina. Hurst, London, 2000, xiii+265 pp.

Anna Zelkina is concerned with the ideological aspect of Russian penetration into the Northern Caucasus. The response of the local peoples to Russian colonial expansion took the form of a powerful Islamic protest movement under the aegis of the Naqshbandi *tariqa*, and this eventually led to a new political order in the North Caucasus in the first half of the nineteenth century: the imamate of Shamil, which united the peoples of Chechnya and the mountainous part of Dagestan.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Zelkina's book is that she is the first to analyse in detail the sources and course of the Islamic wave which swept the Northern Caucasus in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries and to bring together the findings of those who have looked at the various different aspects of this process. She briefly recounts the early history of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* and shows how it succeeded in penetrating Dagestan and Chechnya. With her thorough knowledge of the subject she explains how it was that the *tariqa*, basically a mystical movement, was able to impress itself on the political and ethnic complexities of the region. Gradually a society fragmented along antagonistic clan lines was restructured by the Naqshbandi brotherhood, mainly by bringing Islamic *shariah* law to prevail over local customs (*adat*). The greatest credit for this achievement undoubtedly goes to the third and most famous imam of Dagestan and Chechnya, Shamil. His political subdivisions of the region were even retained by the

tsarist Russian rulers after the fall of the imamate.

We must surely agree with Zelkina's conclusion that 'the Naqshbandi movement in the Northern Caucasus staged the first serious effort to modernise North Caucasian society' (p. 238). This is particularly true of the Shamil period. As leader for over 20 years he concentrated on building a strong state on an authoritarian basis, energetically suppressing the interests of the clans.

This book is of course very relevant today in the light of the continuing conflict in Chechnya, and particularly chapter 9, which deals with the movement led by the Chechen sheikh Mansur, the first prominent Naqshbandi in the region (1785–87). In this context Zelkina notes the failure of the Russian administration to open talks with the Muslim leaders (on Mansur's suggestion) or to cooperate with them. As she correctly observes, the Russians 'came to see Islam and the Muslim religious leaders as the main enemies of and major threat to Russian domination in the area (the attitude which, with some modifications, shaped Russian and later Soviet policy towards Islam)' (p. 66). The truth of this observation is amply borne out in the current Chechen campaign. Another interesting point is that the tactics used by Mansur – letting the Russian troops invade unhindered, then suddenly attacking them from fortified positions and forcing them to flee – were regularly used by the Chechens in the first of the recent wars (1994–96).

Of course a study of this complexity contains and number of inaccuracies. Zelkina says (p. 11) that the Bagulaly were classed as Avars; but they were never fully integrated with the latter, and their language is not Avar but belongs to an Avar-Andy-Tsez linguistic subgroup. Meanwhile the Lak language is quite distinctive and does not belong to a (non-existent) 'Dargho-Lak group'.

A few such inaccuracies do not however detract from the value of this book as a description of the interaction between the Russians and the peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya during the period of the latter's subjugation. What is very important is the stress on the religious aspect of this interaction, an aspect that was obviously underestimated and even ignored by Soviet authors. Memories of the 'Golden Age' of Shamil are still very much alive in the minds of the people of the North Caucasus, as the recent jihad in the mountains of Dagestan (August 1999) eloquently testifies.

MIKHAIL ROSHCIN

(Translated from the Russian by Philip Walters)