

Tajikistan Civil War 1991-1997

Executive Summary

Tajikistan, a former Soviet republic, gained independence in 1991. The ensuing political struggle for power escalated into a civil war following the first elections to form a government. The Tajik Communist Party (CPT) won the presidential election, prompting opposition parties to denounce the elections as illegitimate. The two largest opposition parties, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and the nationalist Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) united with other opposition factions to form the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and engage in armed resistance against the government.¹

Leaders of both government and opposition factions were able to arm and mobilize local networks of fighters. The motivations and regional affiliations of individual fighters were diffuse, but elites united them through top-down mobilization. Militia leaders recruited fighters through coercion and whatever rhetoric was most appealing to the given audience. The UTO's objective was to remove the CPT-dominated central government and gain power at the national level. Though the largest two groups, the IRP and the DPT, had religious and nationalist ideologies respectively, they were united without a common ideology other than the objective of removing and reforming the government.² The presence of various criminal groups and local militias, combined with the absence of central control, aggravated the level of violence. The government forces of the communist party were mostly made up of privately organized militias but were supported by Russian troops and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeepers.³

In 1997 a peace agreement was signed guaranteeing 30 percent of parliamentary seats to the UTO under the presidency of communist Imomali Rakhmonov. The agreement also stipulated the integration of UTO forces into the national military. Estimates of those killed during the civil war vary, ranging from 10,000 to 100,000. Skirmishes continued after the peace agreement

¹ Akriner, Shirin and Barnes, Catherine. "The Tajik Civil War: Causes and Dynamics | Conciliation Resources." Conciliation Resources, April 2001. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/tajikistan/tajik-civil-war-causes-and-dynamics>.

² Kılavuz, İdil Tunçer. "The Role of Networks in Tajikistan's Civil War: Network Activation and Violence Specialists *." *Nationalities Papers* 37, no. 5 (September 2009): 693–717. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990903122909>.

³ Curtis, Glenn E, and Library Of Congress. Federal Research Division. *Kazakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan: country studies*. [Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., US GPO, 1997] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/97005110/>.

between UTO faction militia commanders and government forces, but they quickly resulted in government victories.⁴

Assessing the 5 Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a “nation”?

Yes, though there were ethnic and regional tensions, they were largely a result of the violence, not a cause.⁵ The factions involved were concerned with the national identity and future of Tajikistan. Around 70 percent of the population was Tajik, and 25 percent were Uzbek in 1998, and the majority of people were Muslim.⁶

2. Was the government seen by roughly 85 percent of the population as legitimately in power?

No, the government was nascent, and the rejection of its legitimacy was the cause of the civil war. The opposition candidate (representing the political face of the resulting armed opposition) received more than 30 percent of the vote in the 1991 election.⁷

3. Did the government in power at the start of the conflict maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the overall population of the country?

No, the UTO was able to recruit and mobilize from different population groups all over the country. The CPT's National Front was also able to arm and recruit from various regions. The evidence suggests that this ability to recruit was split among the population.⁸

4. Did the insurgents have external sanctuary to a militarily significant degree?

Yes, the UTO established bases in, and received training and support from, neighboring Afghanistan.⁹

5. Was there an army or armed constabulary/gendarmerie force in existence at the start of the conflict which was self-sustaining (salaries and equipment paid on a regular basis, etc) and which was reasonably competent?

No, the government's forces consisted of unofficial and private militias supported by Russian troops. The government put some troops that were previously Soviet command under Tajik command, but most remained under Russian command.^{10,11,12}

⁴ Uppsala Conflict Data Program. “UCDP: Government of Tajikistan - UTO.” Accessed June 16, 2021. <https://ucdp.uu.se/statebased/842>.

⁵ Kılavuz, “The Role of Networks.”

⁶ Akriner and Barnes, “The Tajik Civil War.”

⁷ Curtis and LOC, Tajikistan: country studies.

⁸ Kılavuz, “The Role of Networks.”

⁹ Akriner and Barnes, “The Tajik Civil War.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kılavuz, “The Role of Networks.”

¹² Curtis and LOC, Tajikistan: country studies.

Outcome

Government loss, though the CPT retained the presidency, the president at the start of the conflict was forced from power, and the eventual peace agreement forced the CPT to guarantee the opposition 30 percent of parliamentary seats. Rakhmon Nabiyev was president at the start of the conflict and was forced to resign at gunpoint.¹³ The eventual peace process was made possible by the convergence of interests between foreign peacemakers and Tajik elites on both sides (especially the threat that chaos posed to Tajik independence and the rising menace of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan).¹⁴ This case supports the five factor theory, as four out of the five criteria were in favor of the rebels.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Akriener and Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War."