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**T**he collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the democratization process, as well as the starting point for numerous ethnic and inter-state conflicts, and human rights violations in the post-Soviet countries, including the Republic of Tajikistan. From 1992 to 1997, Tajikistan experienced a bloody civil war, which is often referred to as an inter-regional struggle for power and resources. The horrendous mass killings and gross violations of human rights later faded in 1997, as a result of the signing of a peace accord between the government and the armed opposition. In view of this accord, significant amounts of security eventually returned to the country. Other socio-economic problems such as extreme poverty, unemployment, labor migration, corruption, an inefficient public sector, and consequent violations of both human and economic rights became prevalent. Currently, Tajikistan is the poorest nation among the post-Soviet republics which is caused by the economic collapse accompanied by acquisition of independence in 1991 as well as disruption of trade and civil war. Although Tajikistan has achieved positive economic growth, the improvements have been very slow to translate into better conditions for the majority of the population. Poverty no doubt is the main cause of concern and this poses the real threat to Tajikistan's future economic development. Very low levels of civic awareness and civic education result in citizens' uncertainty about their freedoms and rights.

The purpose of this article is to explore the role of civil society organizations in the public policy process in Tajikistan. The analysis begins with an examination of the



emergence of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Tajikistan as a consequence of the government's inability to respond to citizens' needs, and its impact in resolving the socially significant problems in the post-conflict Tajikistan. This is followed by an exploration of the current political climate and the contextual policy environment in which CSOs must operate in order to survive. In sum, the article concludes with a discussion on the scope and level of CSOs' participation in Tajikistan's development and their role in the public policymaking process.

### **Exploration of the Current Political Environment for Civil Society**

Peter Frumkin argues that “acting as a tool of social coordination, associations can counteract the power of state [and] therefore viewed by nondemocratic governments as threats to be outlawed or severely restricted” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 11). Frumkin maintains that this trait is particularly observed in the developing countries where the political life is mainly dominated by the government and there is lack of genuine political opposition, because these groups are harshly suppressed by state agencies. According to him, nongovernmental organizations in these countries are the only alternative to opposition that could “challenge the government and hold it accountable” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 12).

The above mentioned characterization of the nongovernmental organizations, in terms of their activities, typifies the condition of civil society in Tajikistan. Although Article 8 of the Tajikistan Constitution ensures political and ideological pluralism in practice, the government curbs any attempts to establish oppositional political parties and other groups. The 2006 presidential elections were marked with the absence of real competition between the candidates. Several opposition parties that exist in Tajikistan decided not to contest the election thus leaving the voters with minimal choice (Election Observation Mission Report, 2007).

Furthermore, nongovernmental organizations are the only sector in Tajikistan society that sometimes confronts the government policy. Unfortunately, in the case of Tajikistan, the civil society is challenged by different circumstances that vary from unprofessional staff to distrust in government and the public. Previous studies on civil society in Tajikistan have tended to describe it as divided and weak. Some have even claimed that, “the civil society discourse is not a useful discourse through which to examine present day Tajikistan” (Akiner, 2002, p. 4). Akiner (2002) and Roy (2005) argue that while the emergence of nongovernmental organizations has often been evoked by the state failure to address the essential needs of its citizens, Tajikistan NGOs' role in socioeconomic development of the country is not very important. The Tajik civil society could be divided into nongovernmental organizations and local self-governmental institutions, where the latter always seem more loyal to the government and its policies, while the NGOs usually position themselves in opposition to the government (Friezer, 2002). Friezer argues that whereas the communal form of

civil society mostly includes traditional community groups; the neo-liberal form is best represented by the Western-type nongovernmental organizations. According to Freizer, the number of neo-liberal form of NGOs in the first decade of the independence increased dramatically due to substantial amount of international grants and donations from the Western countries. Thus the number of nongovernmental organizations increased from 300 organization registered in 1997 to slightly 2000 in 2012 (ICNL, 2012).

The vast majority of these organizations are established without a proper strategy or organizational portfolio and is rather project-oriented than its own mission, and therefore would not survive without a stable flow of funds from the international donors. These organizations are mainly involved in humanitarian and social development of the country, working on the basis of grant money. Some of these organizations could last only for the period of project implementation and will disappear once the donors' money is over. This issue is doubled with the donors' carelessness and lack of monitoring where the money goes and how it was spent. Nevertheless international development agencies provide wide range of educational programs as well as access to the broad NGO networks to ensure further sustainability of these organizations.

### **Color Revolutions and Policy Reforms**

Despite many successes of the new civil society entities in the region, in recent years, Central Asian governments including Tajikistan have become increasingly suspicious of the NGO activities in these countries. A special attention is paid to the so called Western-funded organizations. Whereas the Government of Tajikistan always welcome economic and business-oriented foreign organizations, it places too many obstacles for the organizations that promote nonmaterial concepts of openness, pluralism and free media, which government authorities feel can take away from their authority and provide the forum for the public to criticize their performance. Some government authorities even view such civil society projects as being conspiratorial in nature. Moreover, some Tajik authorities feel that Western funding of civil society groups has been instrumental in fomenting opposition among populations of post-Communist states (including the inducement of the so called “color revolutions”) with some assuming that similar activities are planned or could potentially take place in Tajikistan (Karimov, 2006; Heathershaw, 2007). It is true that many NGOs and some media outlets in Tajikistan are receiving foreign aid and funding from Western countries for various democracy initiative projects, though it is unlikely that this aid is meant for the purpose of the regime change or provocation of political disorders in Tajikistan. Nonetheless, the main purpose for most Western countries' involvement is to ensure stability in the region by allocating a huge sum of money for the country's development.



After the 2005 regime change in Kyrgyzstan, President Askar Akaev, a leader with increasingly autocratic tendencies was peacefully overthrown by crowds—in what has become known as a ‘colored’ revolution just like those in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively (Spector, 2004). The unrest and turmoil in northern Uzbekistan in May 2005 primarily in the City of Andijan, where the Uzbek government allegedly killed hundreds of anti-governmental demonstrators, the Tajik government decided to take certain measures in order to avoid similar events in Tajikistan. Although the possibilities are relatively low due to the fact that the population has a very vivid memory of the recent civil war, the government has not been taking any chances. These measures among other things included harsh control over the activities of both local and international NGOs, the mass media, the amendment and adoption of new laws and regulations on public and religious associations’ activities in the country.

As early as December 2004, while addressing a pro-governmental party congress, the president of the country had criticized foreign organizations, accusing the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute, which has had an office in Dushanbe for the past decade, for attempting to undermine the integrity of Tajikistan by supporting what he described as the subversive media, such as the radio station Varorud (Beyond the River) and newspapers Odamu Olam (Man and World) and Ruzi Nav (New Day). The goal of which, in the president’s words, was to “destroy” his administration (IRIN News Agency, 2005). In the Spring of 2005, Tajik authorities ordered for financial audits of various international nongovernment organizations active in Tajikistan, fearing potentially political harmful activities by local NGOs and media outlets. Also beginning in April of 2005, the Interior Ministry has required foreign embassies and international organizations to inform it of the dates and topics of any meetings with local NGOs, political parties and journalists (France Press Agency, 2005).

Moreover the government started to regulate all spheres of private life of its citizens through the 2007 Law on Observing National Traditions and Rituals that violates people’s abilities to conduct private events like weddings and funerals (Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, 2008). In the late 2006, the Tajik government started the process of drafting two new laws that regulate the freedom of association and freedom of beliefs. Surprisingly, none of the representatives of these two social groups was included in the process. This caused a burst of anger from the side of local and international nongovernmental and religious groups operating in Tajikistan. The two enacted laws were reviewed by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. Also, these laws were thoroughly examined during numerous roundtable discussions with participation of civil society groups, religious associations, representatives of different international organizations and diplomatic missions, as well as the government of Tajikistan.

The new Law on Public Association that was adopted on 12 May 2007 does not comply with the standards of the International Law which caused a huge wave of dissatisfaction from both local NGOs and the international community. This new law created a complicated process for all NGOs to reregister with the Ministry of Justice, which requires all existing public associations to reregister claiming that far too many of the registered organizations exist only on paper and do not function any more (US Department of State, 2009). Nonetheless, the government created various obstacles for these legitimate organizations. Some of the NGOs brought allegation against the Ministry of Justice for extorting bribes in the process of registration (Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, 2008).

As a result, only 1,000 of NGOs managed to register in 2008 out of the 3,500 that were registered in 2007. Some of the visible democracy buildings for international organizations like the US-based National Democratic Endowment, Freedom House, Internews Agency and others were refused to register. In view of this, both local and international personnel now face continuous harassment from the law enforcement agencies (US Department of State, 2009).

Government concerns about foreign influence resulted in restrictive measures against minority religious groups. The government continued its ban on Hizb-ut Tahrir, which it classified as an extremist Islamic political movement, and introduced restrictive measures against another Islamic group, the Salafis. The courts upheld the government's ban on activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses (Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, 2008).

Independent radio and television stations also continue to experience administrative harassment and bureaucratic delays. Individual journalists were also subjected to harassment and intimidation on occasion, sometimes perpetrated by government officials. Journalists reported that government officials limited their access to information or provided advice on what news should be covered. Editors and reporters frequently exercised self-censorship to avoid problems with the government officials, including reprisals, and the fear of violence like those committed against journalists during the civil war.

Generally, while one could argue that civil society organizations (CSOs) are the source of new ideas in Tajik society, they could hardly be described as political and/or aimed at any revolution. In fact, their presence changes the public perception of certain issues such as AIDS, family planning, human rights or how legal and economic reforms should be carried out. It also changes public perception of its rights to demand basic freedom and rights from its government. CSOs serve not only as democratic institutions, but they help in providing public awareness, educational programs, which help to bring about change in all post-Soviet nations.



## The Economic State of Tajikistan and Civil Society Organizations

The transition of Tajikistan from a country that was once propelled and dependent on the socialist politics and practices as a member of the Soviet Republic must cover many facets of the public interest in order to abridge the economic and social loss resulting from the dissipation of the Soviet Union and the civil war in Tajikistan that followed. The former traditions of the Soviet Republic with regards to policies implemented for the welfare of the public have been abandoned, and instead localities, also known as *Jamoats* have inherited these responsibilities. These results have led to more decentralized policies in various areas of civil society that in the past have existed under a more centralized authority, led by the Soviet Union. The affected venues include the healthcare, economic, and education sectors, which have heavily affected the lives of the Tajikistan people. The civil society organizations (CSOs) that emerged during the post civil-war were created with the intentions of mitigating the losses that individuals and communities have suffered through internationally-funded programs.

The rise of these CSOs are a result of the economic pandemonium as well as the government's shortcomings in responding to a variety of these problems, the most prevalent being the extreme state of poverty that the nation is in. One of the most concerned areas of CSOs is the health and medical sector, which receives the most aid to an over-populated impoverished population. The Health Reform Conception was developed in the early 2000s in order to create and implement an effective health reform as done in other Central Asian countries, but the current literature reveals that the mission has failed (Green et al., 2007). The problems in healthcare arose as a result of the Soviet era, because at that time Tajikistan possessed a centralized health system, but the country is now decentralized and, as a result, has inherited these healthcare responsibilities with lack of funding from the Tajik government. In 2001, the health expenditures for Tajikistan amounted to approximately 39 million (United States) dollars, and only twenty-six percent of this was derived from the government. Only forty-three percent come from donors, while the remaining portion came from the Tajikistan users themselves (Green et al., 2007, p. 5). Furthermore, the inability of the Tajikistan government to adequately coordinate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local health sectors is a dominant factor for the lack of strategy in enhancing healthcare systems in Tajikistan. NGOs, *Jamoats*, and individuals are ultimately ignored in the decision making process for health policies, and oftentimes the NGOs are not supported by the *jamoats* (Green et al., 2007). The Aid in Coordination Unit is an organization that acts as a liaison between local governments and the donors who contribute to combat the problems of healthcare funding.

Post Civil-War Tajikistan has residually left eighty percent of the Tajik population below poverty level (Green et al., 2007). One of the most important NGOs is those that



assist in alleviating poverty, especially child poverty. Sources show that forty-five percent of the population is aged between fifteen years old and under (Akiner, 2002). Tajikistan has one of the highest birth rates in the world, with a low mortality rate. From 1997 to 1999, the Pilot Poverty Alleviation Program provided three international NGOs with antipoverty crusades. One of those NGOs is called Save the Children organization, which was funded by Tajikistan Social Investment Fund, a World Bank project (Marcus, 2002). Among the goals of Save the Children organization is to strengthen the capacity of local organizations in providing social services. These organizations are known for furnishing residents with livestock, seeds, and/or training, but the recipients were expected to repay some of the gratuities received, and this requirement deterred many of them from participating due to their repayment concerns (Marcus, 2002).

Since agriculture is one of the most practiced and a viable form of economic development in Tajikistan, any step towards alleviating economic crises in the country must require the inclusion of agricultural improvement techniques. Beginning in 1997, the Mountain Societies Development Support Program established by the Aga Khan Foundation was designed to induce agricultural reform in the Rasht Valley (Guenther et al., 2006). The Foundation implemented the credit-based program described previously along with a training program, and the results improved irrigation, provided staple products, and promoted the Village Development Fund, which serves as the credit or grant for the communities' organized projects. NGO and community initiatives come together to develop a sense of responsibility and to combat the impoverished state that is the remnant of a once socialized country.

### **Human Rights Policy and the Need for Reform**

During the period when Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union, strict control was exercised over initiatives and most societal needs provided by the heads of state, and other nongovernmental activities were strongly discouraged if not prohibited (Falkingham, 2004). Moreover, multi-vector diplomacy prevented Tajikistan and several other countries from direct communication with the rest of the world, except through Russia. Tajikistan was ratified and acceded into the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights in January of 1999. This accession includes rights of individuals in the joining country in areas such as political, economic, social, cultural rights (United Nations, 2009). The introduction of this covenant indicates a progressive stride in the movement toward the prevalence of more democratized human rights. Jamoats and local NGOs are restricted to their respective districts and are subject to guidelines set forth by the Tajik government. Both Jamoats and local NGOs are responsible for promoting citizen participation in their local government, as part of their functional activities, and encouraging citizens to exercise their political rights. Despite the Tajik government's intentions, Jamoats have experienced much difficulty in doing





this as unofficial government actors due to lack of funding, resources, and an operating budget (Freizer, 2002).

In 2007, the Tajik government adopted a law that gives it the right to monitor all types of public associations, including NGOs, and imposed additional regulations on registration deadlines, which affected local and national NGOs (Human Rights Watch, 2008). The associations that are required to register every year by the previously mentioned law include media outlets, and this requirement limits the freedom of the press. New amendments excessively criminalize items that appear to be slander, libel, and false information ultimately deterring the freedom of expression. The limitations set forth by government regarding rights to expression can and will incapacitate these advocates for democracy in this sector of society, including the NGOs, mass media outlets, and radio stations.

The institutionalization of ombudsman has been on the rise in Central Asian nations, and serves as a facilitator of civil society, in which Tajikistan has not yet embraced (Karimov, 2006). Criticisms of the application of these rules and regulations presented by the government have sparked the call for more ombudsmen in the mist of many government policies. The ombudsman will serve as a liaison to ensure that due process, under the guidelines of these laws, is prevalent and will assist in the transparency of these processes. In fact, several NGOs expressed their interests in being part of a committee responsible for drafting a new law regarding ombudsman, but they were denied. Ironically enough, in 2007, President Emomali Rahmonov publicized his initiative to create the Ombudsman Institution, in order to alleviate ambiguity in the process—the law was adapted in April of 2008 (Human Rights Watch, 2008). At this stage, the ombudsman has yet to be appointed.

The Tajikistan women have been the group that is most negatively affected by the civil war. The war left 20,000 women as widows at its conclusion (Falkingham, 2000, p. 14). With a depressed economy and an ongoing transition from a socialist system into a market-based economy, it is hard to determine whether women are voluntarily taking on more leadership roles or are being cornered into these responsibilities. In 1995, a quasi-governmental assembly referred to as the Women in Development Bureau (WIDB) was created. A few of the major goals of WIDB are to promote economic empowerment, to provide policy and advocacy for women planning, and to train women in health and legal rights (Falkingham, 2000). NGOs are, perhaps, one of the most powerful catalysts for empowering women, and more than one-third are headed by women (Falkingham, 2000). A large number of the NGOs in Tajikistan are geared towards promoting gender equality. The quota system that was once in place was promoted by NGOs, suggesting that no more than seventy percent of positions in any structure be held by men. Also NGOs are involved in promoting the transition of women from traditional patriarchal system to democratic system and in strengthening their role in the new government. Furthermore, a state committee known as the Committee on Women and the Family (CWF) is now responsible for protecting women's rights through governmental

institutions. CWF was inherited from the Soviet Union and has many branches throughout the Tajik government. It is pertinent to note here that other NGOs are involved in women welfare. For instance, the Women in Development Bureau and the Union of Women joined forces to provide young girls with scholarships and provided small grant programs to increase the capacity of women's roles in NGOs (Falkingham, 2000). Ten percent of the NGOs are classified as women's organizations, thusly creating a breeding ground for the proliferation of women leaders and empowerment. Women NGOs tend to focus on areas such as employment, education, small business training, legal advice, human rights, and education on micro-credit. The inability to establish credit for micro-enterprises is one of the greatest stigmas that have slowed down the progress of women. To remedy this, a project in Kofarmihon was funded by WIDB to assist women in establishing small enterprises, and this program was later extended to other districts, such as Aini and Tursunzade.

## Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that civil society organizations, also known as nongovernmental organizations, emerged in Tajikistan due to the government's inability to solve socioeconomic problems of its citizens. Despite restrictions and new laws that affect their existence, CSOs not only advocate for new policies, they actively participate in the public policy process by mobilizing and involving citizens in civic engagement. In view of this, we recommend that the Tajikistan government should encourage CSOs' participation in its democratization process because they respond to various socioeconomic problems that are not easily remedied by the polity. The examples of roles being played by CSOs in this analysis show that these organizations not only serve in fulfilling the needs of the impoverished, but they participate as actors in the implementation of sustainable economic development programs.

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