

THE ELECTIONS IN TADZHIKISTAN: A POSTSCRIPT

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If the August coup in Moscow brought about the final agony of the Soviet dinosaur, which culminated in its Yuletide demise, some of the dinosaur's sons among the republics are still being racked by convulsions. As we reported earlier ("Coup II: Tadjikistan's Havel Fights Back," *TNR* 10/14/91), the great standoff between the opposition forces and the retrenched Communist nomenklatura in Tadjikistan began within weeks of the August coup. The new President pro tem, Rakhmon Nabiev, hastily installed by the Communist-controlled Supreme Soviet of Tadjikistan, declared martial law on September 22 only to rescind it three weeks later. Even a died-in-the-wool apparatchik like Nabiev could see that, with the center in Moscow lying in shambles, strong-arm tactics in the republic had no future. The local units of the Soviet Army and the interior forces, which months earlier might have come to the defense of the old guard, had lost all interest in Tadjik politics. By the late September, they declared their complete neutrality.

The anti-Communist opposition turned out to be massive and -- thanks in large measure to the personality of its acknowledged leader, filmmaker Davlat Khudonazarov -- orderly and disciplined. For weeks the parliament building in Dushanbe was surrounded by a Hooverville-like tent city, with the demonstrators, some wearing the traditional Tadjik garb, challenging the legitimacy of the old Communist legislature -- all without a single serious incident. The old guard would not budge, the opposition would not yield, and the festive rally went on. The Presidential election, originally set for October 27, was postponed for a month. The stand-off continued throughout the campaign, with the nomenklatura using every trick to sidetrack Khudonazarov. In an act that had caused most damage to his prospects, they blocked his access to the local television. To circumvent them, Khudonazarov had to fly to Moscow to address his electorate in Russian from the central television

studios. Unfortunately, he could use but a few three-minute segments on the evening news, with the studio giving equal time to the Nabiev forces for a rebuttal.

The election was finally held on November 27. According to the pre-election polls, Khudonazarov's coalition, which included the Popular Front of Tadjikistan (*Rastokhez*), Tadjik Democratic Party, the Party of Islamic Revival, and the republic's Islamic clergy, could count on 42%. A secular politician, who is equally at home in the Tadjik and Russian culture, Khudonazarov also enjoyed substantial support among the republic's dwindling Russian population of teachers, doctors and technical specialists. Nabiev was expected to receive 45% of the vote coming largely from the Russians, Tadjiks and Uzbeks in the most populous Leninabad region of the republic, the long-time power base of the Tadjik Communist elite and the Russian bureaucratic establishment. The 7% were divided among the other six candidates. With neither of the principal contenders commanding the required majority, a runoff election was the most likely outcome. According to the official tally, out of the 86% of the electorate, who cast their votes, 57% went for Nabiev and 30% for Khudonazarov.

Khudonazarov challenged the results at once, citing such patriarchal election practices as allowing one member of a family to vote for the entire clan. There was also plenty of evidence of ballot box stuffing. The presses printing ballots must have worked overtime: in Dushanbe, at least, ballot forms became the wrapping paper of choice among the numerous *pirozhki* street vendors. Speaking on behalf of a group of independent observers from the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, Andrey Plotnikov suggested in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (12/4/91) that some 15% of the ballots must be considered invalid. But there was little chance that the Tadjik Supreme Soviet, which had appointed Nabiev President in the first place, would wish to take a close look at these violations. Still, the evidence was so

overwhelming that, following Khudonazarov's petition, supported by volumes of testimony, 3% of the ballots were declared void by the Central Election Commission. Interesting enough, Andrey Plotnikov had the impression that while "the Tadjik election officials may have committed irregularities out of ignorance, their Russian-speaking colleagues did so with premeditation." This observation sheds an ironic light on the Russian habit to attribute to the peoples of Central Asia a special propensity for corruption.

The announcement of the election results produced great outrage among the opposition. Many were ready to storm the Parliament building. It took a great effort on the part of Khudonazarov to calm them down. His principles, his temperament, and strategy are those of a conciliator, and he is prepared to risk much and concede a lot in order to minimize political polarization, especially, if it can lead to violence. Seeing that his efforts to expose fraud at the polls were leading nowhere, he called on his supporters to accept the results and concentrate on organizing the opposition. This admirable and rational stance is also good politics. As reports in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* and *Kommersant* suggest, Rakhmon Nabiev, with his unreconstructed Communist ways, may be his own worst enemy. In the wake of his victory, he declared his firm commitment to a "five-year plan" and its strict implementation. More recent reports indicate that he is not about to change his ways: at the first meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States, held in Alma-Ata this past December, Nabiev embarrassed other fellow-Presidents with a panegyric to massive hydro-electric power projects, those Egyptian pyramids of the defunct Soviet state. It is widely expected that the next presidential elections will take place well before the end of Nabiev's first term.

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A letter from Khudonazarov, dated December 10, reached me a few days ago. It is a fitting conclusion to the story about the first steps taken by the democratic movement in Tadjikistan:

The long, interminable day is behind me... All we have done was scratch the rocky soil of Tadjik democracy. I have gone through hundreds of meetings, hundreds of hours of speaking in a hoarse voice through a microphone (and without one), answering the same questions,

encountering people's attitudes -- Mistrust in some, Hope in others; and all of this is happening while I am surrounded by barefoot little girls and boys. It was seeing these children that gave me strength to wage battle against the feudal nomenklatura elite. They fought back with deception, rumors, libel, lies, bribery...

And yet, despite everything, I am a happy man. I have managed to awaken people, to see a multitude of faces, tens of thousand of them, to stand face to face with my country and my people. I am a happy man!

I have felt your sincere solidarity and have thought a lot about it, about the spiritual fraternity of good people. Thank you. Your support was important for me and for all those who have looked to me for Hope.

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