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Dying Dreams in Tajikistan’s Global Borderland

TILL MOSTOWLANSKY

On May 16, 2022, security forces moved into Khorog, the capital of Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, to violently subdue anti-government protests. In the following weeks, Tajik soldiers killed dozens of civilians as well as the local leader Mamadboqir Mamadboqirov. The government’s crackdown came as no surprise; similar operations had been ordered several times by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon since 2012. Nevertheless, the latest targeted violence against civilians was the worst since the 1992–97 Tajik civil war ended twenty-five years ago. Internet services in the region were suspended, and the Tajik government developed a narrative of a Western conspiracy that had led to the violence. There were arrests of members of the opposition and civil society activists across Tajikistan.

In the late 1990s, the end of the civil war brought hopes of development and prosperity to Gorno-Badakhshan, often called “the Pamirs” in reference to its prominent mountain range. The end of the Soviet supply system to this strategic border region next to China and Afghanistan had devastated the economy and impoverished its people. Along with the civil war’s end, factors including the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, China’s steep economic rise in the early 2000s, and increasing international development funding could have led to favorable economic prospects. But most hopes of improvement never materialized for the majority of inhabitants. After a quarter-century and hundreds of millions of dollars in development and security assistance to Tajikistan, the

region is isolated, international borders are closed, and dependency on remittances from precarious labor migration to Russia remains high.

In her 2019 book *Global Borderlands*, on Subic Bay in the Philippines, sociologist Victoria Reyes characterizes such areas as sites that have inequalities written into their very fabric and in which meanings, identities, and sovereignty are contingent. Global borderlands exist in a state of exception in which empire and imperialism have thrived and continue to take hold. The larger High Asian borderland of which the Pamirs are part—including areas in Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan—has long been marked by such processes and constellations of power.

In the twentieth century, the region’s colonial frontiers transformed into Cold War borders, and nation-states sought to pull these borderlands’ ethnically and religiously diverse populations ever closer into their orbits. The latest violence in the Pamirs is part of this longer history, in which fraught relations with the state, war, and economic marginalization, as well as oppression based on language, ethnicity, and religion, have encountered transient dreams of globalization.

WHO IS THE STATE?

The legacy of the civil war continues to influence politics in Tajikistan. Rahmon, who came to power during the war, has been on a long quest to quell the opposition to which he had to make concessions in the 1997 peace agreement. Armed groups from the Pamirs had been part of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was guaranteed 30 percent of government posts after the war. In 2015, however, the Tajik government banned a former UTO member, the Islamic

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Renaissance Party, citing trumped-up terrorism charges. The increasingly violent suppression of dissent in the Pamirs can be seen as part of the Tajik government's larger project of eradicating opposition throughout the country.

It is doubtful whether silencing critical voices in the Pamirs will be possible in the long term. People in the region receive very little assistance from Dushanbe, the capital, and they endure economic and political marginalization, not to mention the religious and linguistic discrimination that many face as Shia Ismaili Muslims and speakers of distinct Pamir languages. The Tajik state has had a fragmented presence in the region since the end of the civil war, investing minimally in trade and infrastructure projects while leaving most aspects of social and material development to international providers of funding.

In this regard, the institutions of the Aga Khan Development Network, chaired by the imam and leader of the global community of Ismaili Muslims, have been of utmost importance. During the civil war, they provided humanitarian aid essential to survival in the Pamirs. Since the war, these institutions have overseen an array of development projects in areas from agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and banking to education and health. But at the time of writing in July 2022, the government began to signal that it was trying to squeeze Ismaili institutions out of Tajikistan.

The vast majority of Gorno-Badakhshan's more than 220,000 inhabitants are Ismailis. Nearby areas in Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan also have sizable Ismaili populations. The Aga Khan IV and his institutions are hugely influential in some of these areas. However, Ismaili organizations have sought to avoid direct political engagement, as is their practice in other development contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Many people in the Pamirs have come to rely on Ismaili institutions to deliver services that previously, in the Soviet era, were provided by the state. As a result, the question of who exactly represents and personifies the state in the Pamirs has no straightforward answer. For over a decade, Rahmon has sought to reduce this ambivalence about the state's role by violent means. The Tajik government could have encouraged loyalty and calmed dissent through policies of redistribution and improving people's living conditions. Instead,

the authorities continue to squeeze the Pamirs, long seen as an extractive frontier rich in resources and providing access to the Chinese market.

This extractive relationship fundamentally differs from the one the Soviet state sought to promote among its citizens in the Pamirs. During much of the Soviet era, they were treated as a border population that required close integration into the broader framework of the country. These policies were based on self-interest related to border security, and should be seen in the context of parallel Soviet policies of displacing and resettling people from the Pamirs by force.

In the last three decades of the Soviet Union, many of the remaining inhabitants received various benefits based on the fact that they lived in a strategically important borderland. Neither the Tajik state nor Ismaili institutions could subsequently live up to this centralized and economically unsustainable approach to borderland welfare. Today, state agencies are too impoverished for such investments, while a considerable

concentration of wealth is in the hands of the president's family. Meanwhile, the Aga Khan Development Network follows the decentralized logic of international development and often engages in

project funding, but it lacks the comprehensiveness of Soviet-driven development.

Nevertheless, both government and Ismaili approaches to development and statecraft operate with sweeping assumptions about wider connectivity. Having emerged from a post-World War II Western development agenda, Ismaili institutions promote strong beliefs in economic liberalism and globalization, free trade, and entrepreneurship. The Tajik government, driven largely by the presidential family and its close allies in Dushanbe, models itself on the oligarchic kleptocracies whose practices of hiding wealth in offshore havens have been revealed by the Panama Papers and similar recent leaks. This system relies on domestic policies of extraction, exclusion, and the policing of access to resources, while labor migrants toil abroad to sustain their families back in Tajikistan.

THE ROAD TO CHINA

The end of the civil war was an important step in the development of closer relations between Tajikistan and China. First, a border conflict had to be resolved—it dated back to the colonial

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period, when Russia unilaterally delimited its boundaries. Tajikistan agreed to cede land to China, albeit much less than China had claimed historically. Soon afterward, a road link was established between the old Soviet road system in the Pamirs and the Chinese border at the Kulma Pass. In 2004, the border crossing was opened, and trade began between Xinjiang and the Pamirs.

People living along the road initially had high hopes for cross-border trade, but these expectations never materialized. Chinese visa regulations for Tajik citizens and restrictions on Tajik vehicles in China turned small-scale trade into an unprofitable endeavor. Members of the presidential family have kept transport companies under their control and managed to evade taxes and tariffs. This renders competition with the elite in Dushanbe effectively impossible, leaving local people with poorly paid jobs as day laborers.

The road to China changed the economy in the Pamirs dramatically. Not only did trade with China reaffirm that the seat of political and economic power was now located in Dushanbe, but the opening of the Kulma road also resulted in the abandonment of previous routes. The major Soviet supply route to the Pamirs had run from Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan to Khorog at the Afghan border. Soviet engineers began to build this high-altitude road in the 1930s. Over the decades, it became the region's central economic artery. Even during the Tajik civil war, Ismaili institutions employed this road—the Pamir Highway—to deliver large quantities of humanitarian aid through the former Soviet supply system.

With the opening of the road link to China in 2004, the connection to Osh lost its economic importance from the perspective of state institutions. The road from Kyrgyzstan to the Pamirs began to decay; maintenance has been minimal over the past decade. Even though people in the eastern Pamirs still heavily rely on access to southern Kyrgyzstan for economic and family reasons, state abandonment as well as the growing hostility between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have rendered this international connection increasingly precarious.

Many of the China-related economic and infrastructure projects in the Pamirs predate China's global Belt and Road Initiative, which, since its launching in 2013, has become a predominant way of framing relations with Tajikistan's eastern neighbor. Many people in the Pamirs are therefore accustomed to the Chinese presence in the area; in

recent years, it has also manifested in a Chinese military base in the eastern Pamirs. This presence has had only minimal impact on people's daily lives, however. Neither the pre-2013 projects nor the Belt and Road Initiative have created local jobs or substantially increased people's mobility to China.

The major transnational engagement of young Pamiris remains labor migration to Russia as well as to other Central Asian states. In 2020, almost 27 percent of Tajikistan's gross domestic product consisted of remittances sent from abroad. This figure has declined from 40 percent ten years ago, but it remains high in global comparison and against the backdrop of Russia's persisting, and worsening, economic crisis. As a result of these strong ties to Russia, people from the Pamirs have built and organized diasporic communities and institutions in major Russian cities.

In addition, after almost thirty years of direct engagement with Ismaili institutions, many people from the Pamirs have made use of the educational and institutional pathways offered by programs of the Aga Khan Development Network. Over the years, these programs have brought Ismailis from the Pamirs to universities and cities in Europe and North America.

ISMAILI PATHWAYS

Khorog, a city of around 30,000, has gone through substantial changes over the past few decades. For a small city far removed from Central Asia's economic and political centers, Khorog was well equipped in the Soviet era. The city had a university, a hospital, a mix of apartment blocks and private houses, and an airport that provided inhabitants with a flight connection to Dushanbe. Since the end of the civil war, new urban planning—based on the activities of Ismaili institutions rather than state-driven development—has transformed Khorog. Although the government scrapped flights altogether, the city now has an Aga Khan-built international university, a new park, a kindergarten, a high school, and a tourism center. Health facilities have been greatly improved, including an Aga Khan pharmacy. NGO-built infrastructure extends to energy, transport, and trade.

The most visible materialization of the Ismaili presence is the main Jamatkhana of Khorog, a large communal hall used for religious services, cultural events, and other gatherings. The Jamatkhana, opened in 2018, was designed by a Canada-based architect, and marks the transformation of

Khorog's urban space. The Jamatkhana is not only a representation of Ismaili visions of a modern city, but also showcases the transnational connections that Ismaili institutions have brought to the Pamirs. The institution of the Jamatkhana—which did not exist in the Pamirs before the 1990s, but is now omnipresent in the region—embodies a version of Ismaili modernity that is rooted in the diasporic South Asian Ismaili communities of Europe and North America.

Connectivity among people in the Pamirs, religious and development institutions, and Ismailis far beyond the region has taken various forms over the past two decades. While the Aga Khan Development Network has brought funds, projects, and personnel to the Pamirs, people from the Pamirs have also traveled and lived abroad, often in the context of school and university education, professional training, or business trips. These stays abroad have familiarized people from the Pamirs with foreign places and languages to a much greater degree than other citizens of Tajikistan. In the course of these journeys, they have also been able to engage with diverse Ismailis from around the globe. Diasporic Pamiri communities are linked to fellow Ismailis from South Asia, East Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East.

The promotion of globalization is not solely the domain of Ismaili institutions that seek to improve education and foster economic growth. Mobility and connectivity are also important aspects of the communal Ismaili globalization that the Aga Khan encourages in his religious messages. In this framework, development and interaction across borders are deeply interlinked with Islamic ethics and visions of a desirable society. The Aga Khan delivers such messages in the form of edicts (*farman*) to his followers in the Pamirs through his religious administration, most prominently the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board. In these edicts, global concerns of the Ismaili community come together with local issues; guidance on religious practice intertwines with broader political and economic goals.

In the Pamirs, connectivity to Ismailis in neighboring countries is a central concern. In the borderland of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and China, as well as just a few kilometers farther south in northern Pakistan, Ismailis constitute a majority of the

population. This is a unique situation—in all other parts of the world, Ismailis form minority communities. In the Ismaili institutional imagination, this broader cross-border area plays a prominent role—not only because of the population density of Ismailis, but also due to widespread poverty, political neglect, and economic marginalization.

The areas at the western tip of Xinjiang in China, where the state prevents the integration of Ismailis into the global framework, remain inaccessible. Since the 1980s, northern Pakistan has been an important developmental laboratory for Ismaili institutions, from which many concepts and ideas have subsequently been transplanted to the Pamirs. Their main focus with respect to the Pamirs, however, has been the establishment of deeper connections between places and people along the Tajik-Afghan border river, the Panj, which marked the southern border of the Soviet Union for many decades.

DESERTED BRIDGES

During the Soviet period, the border with Afghanistan was heavily guarded. Yet even under these circumstances, connections across the river existed in the Pamirs. The Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–89) brought a high degree of interaction. In the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow stretch of Afghan territory between Tajikistan and Pakistan, remnants of this interaction can be found even today.

The Wakhan Corridor is a legacy of nineteenth-century colonial border agreements between the Russian and British empires. The Soviet army built bridges in the Wakhan to reach strategic positions. These bridges are still in use. During the decade of the Soviet occupation, people in the Afghan Wakhan received humanitarian aid across the Panj. Later, during the Tajik civil war, weapons, fighters, and drugs began to cross the border. In the same period, Ismaili institutions sought to establish a physical presence among the Ismaili communities on the Afghan side. For this presence to materialize in official, bilateral frameworks, they had to wait until the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the increasing international support for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan.

In the early 2000s, the Aga Khan Development Network built several bridges across the Panj with the support of foreign governments and NGOs. Some of these bridges included border markets

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to which traders and customers from both sides had visa-free access. The goal of improving the local cross-border economy was an important impetus for the bridge construction. At the same time, the bridges were supposed to serve much broader ideas of globalization and trans-regional connectivity, deriving from the assumption that economic exchange would ensure peace and stability.

In 2006, the Aga Khan, together with Rahmon and then-Afghan Second Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili, opened the bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan at Ishkashim. At the gateway to the Wakhan Corridor, Ishkashim was envisaged as providing a crucial road connection between Central and South Asia. In his opening speech, the Aga Khan emphasized this aspect, describing the bridges as inspiring progress and hope: trade could now emerge between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. But in addition to their economic value, he stressed that the bridges across the Panj would also stand for connection, cooperation, and harmony.

For a while, there was considerable optimism regarding the future of Afghanistan and its relations with Tajikistan. Yet this sentiment proved to be short-lived. Even though tourists, researchers, and NGO workers began to use the border crossing at Ishkashim to travel to the Afghan Wakhan, most people in the Pamirs had little incentive to do so. Over decades, many had learned to fear Afghanistan as a place of war and danger. More importantly, the security situation beyond Ishkashim, on the road to the Afghan urban centers of Faizabad or Kabul, remained far too unpredictable to sustain trade. There were frequent border closures due to nearby fighting and opaque government policies. The border markets remained closed most days of the year. Eventually, it became clear that the hope for harmony and connectivity expressed in the Aga Khan's opening speech reflected a world of development dreams far removed from day-to-day life.

Meanwhile, a few years before the fall of the Western-backed government in Kabul in the summer of 2021, Afghanistan began to pursue its own project of connectivity with China. Funded by the Afghan government, a Kabul-based construction company began to build a road in the high-altitude parts of the Wakhan. On my last visit to Afghanistan in 2019, the road builders had made substantial progress on the way to the high plateau leading up to the Chinese border. But construction

came to a halt when the Taliban returned to power last year and Afghanistan's assets were frozen abroad.

Although the project created some locally important connections between villages and high pastures, the Afghan road to China through the Wakhan has also turned out to be a mirage. Last year, Ismaili institutions, which had been highly active in the Wakhan, reduced their public visibility in the Afghan part of this borderland. The border along the Panj between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has once again become a space of erratic interaction consisting of trade in illicit goods and unstable mobile phone signals that reach from the Pamirs across to the otherwise disconnected Afghan Wakhan.

CONFLICT AND BLOCKADE

For several years, starting in the late 2000s, I conducted research in the eastern parts of the Pamirs. Inhabited by a diverse group of people—including Kyrgyz, speakers of Pamir languages, and Tajiks—this is a region of interest to the central government for reasons related to the economy and territorial integrity. Its people, however, are a low priority; their well-being is not on the political agenda. If Khorog is seen from Dushanbe as a distant, mountainous site of opposition, Murghab, the largest settlement in the east, appears as a remote, exotic location even to many people in the Pamirs. Geographical distance, the high-altitude environment, and cultural differences all have a role to play in this perception.

Yet this remoteness, which seemed like a major disadvantage to life in Murghab, also had its own appeal until a few years ago. The decade-long war in Afghanistan went on frightfully close to settlements in the western Pamirs, but remained far away from Murghab. The shockwaves of the Tajik government's military incursions into Khorog were also much softer up in the east. And during violent clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Xinjiang in 2009, people in Murghab could rest assured that such events were unlikely to happen in their remote area.

Although ensuing political instability put temporary pressure on food supplies and trade in the region, such problems were usually resolved within the span of a few months. This changed first with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then as simmering border tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated into an armed conflict in the summer of 2021. Since then, the border between

the two countries has been closed unpredictably, severely disrupting the supply of goods from Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, the center of economic activity for people in Murghab.

Over the past decade, Gorno-Badakhshan has gone from being a supposedly autonomous region at the margins of Tajikistan to a zone under blockade. In this regard, it shares some similarities with territories across the border in Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan. To be sure, border closures and political instability are nothing new to people in the Pamirs. Policies of integration in the Soviet Union ruthlessly deprived them of connections to kin and economic resources across international borders. Later, the Tajik civil war brought the region to the brink of catastrophic famine.

Yet this is the first time since the early 1990s that the political and economic situation in the Pamirs is truly desperate. Squeezed by border closures and military and economic pressure from their own government, the Pamirs' diverse population is suffering a blockade from all sides. In the long run, this blockade might prove to be worse for the region than the civil war period.

People in the Pamirs have long lived in relations of patronage with powerful political actors. Colonial relations in the Russian Empire fed into Soviet policies that aimed to transform the Pamirs into

a loyal borderland. Ismaili institutions delivered high levels of aid and services during the civil war and in its aftermath. These forms of patronage now belong to the past. With most of Gorno-Badakhshan's civil war commanders gone, the population is left vulnerable to the government's exploitation and abuse.

Diasporic communities from the Pamirs have grown in Russia and a few Western countries over the past two decades. They have the potential to be a lifeline for people in the region and could advocate on its behalf. But with most migrants located in Russia, these connections have become precarious.

Tajikistan is a close ally of Russia and continues to maintain this relationship even through the current war in Ukraine and international sanctions on Russia. In return, the Russian government has extradited Tajik civil society activists and opposition members to Tajikistan. To prevent substantial interaction between people in the Pamirs and their family and friends abroad, ordinary travelers returning to Tajikistan have been arrested at the airport in Dushanbe. Under these conditions, the dreams of an interconnected borderland serving as a hub for tourism, trade, and cross-border mobility—so eagerly invoked by development planners and politicians—have evaporated into thin air. ■